



DARK ROMANCE IN DEEP SPACE

COLOSSAL

HEARTS WITH TEETH 1

ALEXANDRA NORTON

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BOOK 1

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CONTENTS

[Preface](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Chapter 54](#)

[Chapter 55](#)

[Chapter 56](#)

[Chapter 57](#)

[Chapter 58](#)

[Chapter 59](#)

[Chapter 60](#)

[Chapter 61](#)

[Chapter 62](#)

[Chapter 63](#)

[Chapter 64](#)

[Chapter 65](#)

Threxin

PREFACE

Colossal is the darkest story I've written so far. It is a science fiction romance that burns slow and deep. This is a story about finding hope in fear, pleasure in pain, and perseverance in dubious circumstances.

This book tackles topics of guilt, death, violence, family, and love. Always, *always* love.

Playlist:

<https://alexandranorton.com/colossal-playlist>

Alexandra

CHAPTER 1

ORION

Orion had been soaking sore muscles in the red mud pools of Crimson Spa deep beneath the planet's surface when the chime of an incoming transmission echoed in the private chamber. He flipped to his stomach in the viscous liquid, resting his chin on his forearms at the edge of the pool.

“Ignore.” He sighed, focusing on the heat soaking through his skin.

Bing.

The directionless chime sounded again.

“Block notification.” His stern voice slapped against the rock wall and then silenced in the humid air.

Bing.

Goddamn it.

Who was overriding his instructions?

“Fine. What the hell is it?”

A soothing artificial voice announced what it was: “Live transmission from Colony Ship *Colossal*. Priority Five.”

Orion groaned. What did she want now? He'd been left alone for the better part of the previous year and was half-hoping they'd forgotten about him. But even after ten years of banishment to Mars, he remained at the mercy of her fucking transmissions.

“Mother.”

“Orion. Are you somewhere private?” Mother's voice came clipped and businesslike as usual. He thought he heard a faint hoarse undercurrent in what was usually a steel-smooth inflection.

He clicked his tongue, giving the room an unnecessary glance. This was a private chamber of the spa, reserved only

for him.

“I’m alone.”

She wasted no time. “I’ve been informed that I have an advanced cancer which evaded detection for several years.”

Orion perked to attention, sitting up straight.

“What’s the treatment plan?”

“There is none. It’s incurable. They can stave it off for six months to a year Old Earth Standard. After that, I’m Uploading.”

Shit.

Orion was standing in the pool now, the mud coalescing around his upper thighs.

“You need to get back to the ship for handover.”

Orion ran a muddy hand through his hair, tugging at the roots. The dull pain in his scalp should have helped center his reeling mind. Alas, the reeling won out.

“But that’s too soon. You know I’m not ready. I got zero interest in—”

“Save it, Orion.” Her voice cut through his rambling like a brig door slamming shut. “You knew this would happen.”

“In a fucking couple hundred years, maybe! I thought you might have another kid by then, Mother.” Orion grasped at straws, though he didn’t believe his own words. His parents had fertility issues like everyone else. Colony commanders weren’t exempt.

“Trust me, this isn’t ideal for me either. I’d rather not have my lazy slacker son take control of the greatest colony ship in existence. But it seems neither of us get what we want.”

Orion took a steadying breath.

“Let me research treatments. For the cancer and the fertility. I’ll find something to prolong your time to Upload.”

Maybe she’d be touched, even just a little, with the prospect of him going out of his way to help her stay alive.

A hoarse laugh made him flinch. It was never a good sign when Mother laughed. Hearing it in that unfamiliar voice disturbed him all the more.

“The prodigal son finally finds some motivation. Who do you think you are, Orion? You think we haven’t already gone through all this? You think you can find a magical *cure* to get you out of your responsibilities that we haven’t already considered?”

There were several moments of ear-ringing silence before she spoke again.

“You are my only son, Orion. ‘The buck stops with you,’ as they used to say. Your genes are the only ones that will control and power the ship. You always knew this was your fate.”

Fate.

How he wished that word would fade away in the depths of space.

“And if I refuse?” Orion lifted his face to the cavern’s ceiling. Hot condensation dripped down to his skin in fat drops.

“I’ll cut you off. No allowance. Not even enough for a drop of water. How do you suppose you’ll do, working in the sand tunnels in Mars, cleaning up the natives’ waste? What do you suppose they’ll think of you, the thousands of colonists you’ve doomed on an empty husk of a once-glorious ship? How many will get off in time? No one will bat an eye at the death of another colony. No one will help them.”

Orion sank back into the mud. She was always good at that—the guilt trips.

“*Colossal* is passing by Sector Seven in a week for a rendezvous with the transport I’ve arranged for you. Bretton is picking you up tomorrow. If you aren’t here, you’re done. No excuses.”

“Transmission closed,” the soothing voice informed him, and Orion slumped back in the bath.

Well, shit.

He exited the mud pool hours later, skin raw from the heat and moisture. He sat naked on the warm metal bench in the exit alcove, where one of the scantily-clad attendants wiped the drying muck from his limbs with a soaked rag. The water wasn't pure, but it was purer than most people on Mars were drinking.

Orion barely registered the attendant as she struggled to hold up the weight of his arm by the wrist. She made a little huff with a fixed smile as she rubbed the rag from shoulder to hand.

“What’s wrong, Mr. Halen?” His attendant’s velvet voice was soft in his ear. “Is there anything I can help with?”

Orion focused on her then, studying the woman’s full, fleshy features. Lips he could sink his teeth into. “Help?”

A bead of sweat spilled over the ledge of her top lip. Down here, everyone had a constant sheen of perspiration in the heat. Authorities were constantly drumming on about the scarcity of water, and yet they had people down here dehydrating themselves for the benefit of those like him.

What a waste.

Orion brushed off the thought. He was paying for this. He brought himself back to the smooth face gazing up at him. Big golden eyes, fleshy cheeks, and white hair tied in a braid that was twisted into a bun atop her head. Slender wrists descended to wipe the remnants of mud from his torso.

He leaned his head against the hot wall, looking away from the offering. “Enough fat, but no muscle. Too suicidal for my tastes.”

The towel dragging along his skin paused just for a second before she resumed her work.

If it were another day, Orion might try her anyway. She was asking for it. But today, he had enough to deal with.

Commanding *Colossal* was the sole reason for his existence. The biomechanic design of the colony ships was

paired to a specific set of genes—in this case, his. Once his mother died, *Colossal* would respond to his blood only. No matter how shitty a commander he'd be, or how careless, or how fucking *bored*, simply turning down the job was not an option.

Well... it *was*. But was he prepared to make his way on his own, starting from scratch, a pariah for dooming thousands of colonists to their death with his refusal to pick up the mantle?

Orion realized the girl was done. She was sitting back on the floor before him, ass on her heels, hands on bare thighs. The bracelet on her left wrist was already glowing its orange beacon, indicating it was open for incoming transactions. Her eyes were downcast, trying to hide the frown contorting her otherwise smooth features. Was she crying?

“You must be new.” He held his wrist up to the bracelet, where his ID implant was embedded beneath his skin. He made his tip a minimal token of faux appreciation. As soon as she showed her displeasure at his rejection, she went beyond the scope of her job. The device flashed under his wrist. Her bracelet did the same, then turned green to confirm a completed transaction.

“Thank you, Mr. Halen.” The girl had regained her composure. She rose, holding the dripping rag with which she had cleaned him between a delicate thumb and forefinger. She sashayed to the corner of the alcove where she dropped it into a waste container. “Was there anything else?”

Fucking really? She's still gunning for it?

No extra tip was worth what he'd do to her.

He waved her off and rose. Bare feet slapped the floor as he donned a black robe hanging on the wall, tying it with the sash around his waist.

Orion transmitted a message to Boris as he took the lift back up to the residential quarters above ground, instructing him to meet there. He squinted a little as the bright rays of the artificial sun stung his eyes through the hallway.

He often felt like an ant in here. Ants were small six-legged insects he'd learned about when he was young back on *Colossal*. They worked in groups and lived underground, in elaborate mazes of their own making in service to their queen. That was Mars: an elaborate maze, partly underground and partly up on the surface. Only here, there was no queen. His *queen* was his mother, light years away in an anthill of her own, looking for fucking who knows what. Her New Earth. And now this queen demanded his presence.

Boris was already in Orion's quarters when he entered, lounging on the cushion filled with light plastic pellets, his favorite spot.

"She's here," he mouthed, throwing a glance at the shower cubicle positioned off the main room. As if on cue, the plastic door opened, revealing Ajsa with a fluffy towel on her head and another wrapped around her chest, barely covering her cunt.

Orion pinched the bridge of his nose, rubbing the spot between his eyes. Just as he extricated himself from one needy bitch, he was faced with another. She waltzed over to Orion and stood on her bare toes, twining her hands together behind his neck. The motion dragged the towel up her thighs, revealing rows of red welts winking out from underneath.

"What took you so long?" She purred in his ear as he was extricating himself from her grasp, fingers curling over fresh bruises to pry her arms away. Her split-second wince turned into a grin.

Ajsa was the opposite of the spa girl. Not enough fat, but plenty of muscle rippling under her skin. She was the genuine article—got off on the fight. They'd only fucked twice, and it was stupid. The risk of chemical dependency to his exorin was significant. An addicted pain-slut could be a major pain in his ass.

He shot a look at Boris behind her, who gave him a helpless shrug.

"How long have you been here?" Orion asked her.

“All day, babe. I thought you’d be back from the spa and we’d grab lunch together, but then...” She closed her eyes momentarily, lashes fluttering side to side. “It’s almost dinnertime. Shall I get dressed?”

“No,” he said flatly. He let his robe fall to the floor and approached the hydra station built into the side of the wall. He instructed it to produce a cup of hot water through the interface of his Neurosync. He grabbed a sachet of vegetable flavoring from the container on the side and poured it into the steaming cup, stirring with a synthwood spoon.

The pout on her face made him want to stick something in it, but he refrained. He was playing in dangerous territory. He’d kept her around too long. She was getting attached.

“I’m busy. You need to go.”

Ajsa gnawed the inside of her mouth, a habit Orion was angry at himself for having noticed. Her gaze, leveled on him, was a knowing one. Like the bitch had him all figured out. A moment later Ajsa was pulling on her dress and flats. He got a good view of the bruises lining the side of her tits when she bent over to pull the fabric over her hips, and wondered if she enjoyed seeing his fingerprints there as much as he did.

She worked the towel from her hair and ran long gold-tipped fingers through the wet waves.

“Figured.” Orion narrowed his eyes at the ice in her voice. He sipped his soup as she gathered her shit. Ajsa was not taking this like the others normally did. But then she wasn’t a fucking moron, and maybe that’s why he’d kept her around for so long.

“Well...” Ajsa shot him a wry smile, pausing at the door. “Nice while it lasted, gentlemen.”

She waltzed out of the room, granting Orion a last glimpse of her swaying hips before the door hissed shut behind her. Orion stared.

How dare she be so callous about being rejected? Just leave like that, like *she* was the one rejecting *him*? Like she didn’t even care.

Orion resisted the urge to follow, drag her back there, and teach her a goddamn lesson.

Boris was watching him closely, and Orion shook the thought from his head.

“My mother called.” Orion settled on a cushion across from Boris.

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

Orion got progressively more animated as he provided the gist of the conversation to the one man he would call a “friend” these days. Boris was a Martian, bred and born. They had met in the rec center five years ago, where Orion was hiding from his philosophy instructor by beating the shit out of a punching bag. They’d bonded over weight lifting and Boris’s uncanny ability to not want anything from Orion, and not judge him for his predispositions or his hatred of colony life. Others thought of him as a spoiled asshole. Not Boris. Well, if he did, he didn’t show it, and that was good enough.

After hearing the full story, Boris leaned forward, arms on his knees.

“So this doesn’t sound like something you can get out of...”

“Don’t tell me that,” Orion snapped. He didn’t need another person’s confirmation that he was fucked. There had to be a way out.

“But I’m not entirely sure what you’re so afraid of.”

Was he stupid? Orion had always considered Boris to be relatively intelligent, practical, and capable of deductive reasoning. Did this need to be spelled out for him?

Orion’s words came slow and strained as he laid out the situation.

“As the commander of a colony ship, I will have no life. I will have nothing except my duties. Just thousands of people depending on me to lead their ship wherever the fuck in search of whatever the fuck. There will be no spa. There will be no

peace. There will be no quiet. Certainly no pussy except the one or two I end up having to marry to produce more genes for the fucking ship, if they survive the ordeal. My life will never be my own again. How do you not get that, and why the fuck are you rolling your eyes?”

Orion wanted to punch something, feeling the familiar prickle against the roof of his mouth. He jabbed the point of his tongue into his cheek—a habit he’d learned early to bring himself down.

Boris leaned back.

“The ship needs your genes, but so what? You’ll need to be the one to confirm commands? Put your hand in some hole to change navigation coordinates? The real work can be done by someone else. Someone more interested in the job. I’d bet your mother has a whole team helping decide her every move. All you’ll need to do is lift a finger now and again, maybe provide some blood for the ‘critical’ decisions. You’ll be a commander—delegate! And the women? Who’s going to bother you if you decide to have some fun on the side? They *need* you, Orion. Nobody’s going to fire you or cut you off once you get the job because they can’t. Make your own rules and enjoy living in prosperity on your own ship.”

So many rebuttals screamed in Orion’s head as Boris spoke, but each caught on his tongue before he uttered it. Boris didn’t understand. He didn’t have the full picture. He was just a planet-born, with no idea of what it meant to live on a colony, much less run one.

But Orion had to admit that Boris wasn’t *entirely* wrong. Maybe the worst-case scenario wasn’t as tragic as he’d built it up in his head over the years. Maybe he didn’t need to live up to his mother’s expectations once he took over—she would already be Uploaded, partying it up in Heaven somewhere.

“When do you leave?”

Orion groaned. He’d been avoiding this part: checking the itinerary his mother would’ve no doubt already sent over to him.

“Later,” he said.

Boris raised an eyebrow. “And tonight?”

“Tonight we enjoy the beginning of the end of my freedom.”

Orion woke up on his couch the next morning to an incessant chiming that drove nails into his pounding, hungover head. He sat up and scrubbed his palms over his face, shoulders slumping. With a grunt, he closed his eyes and brought the message up against the blackness of his lids.

It was a trip itinerary, alerting him that his ship was leaving in half an hour.

Fuck!

Already? Was she really expecting him to get all his business in order and jump to it so quickly? Not that he had much business... *but still.*

He rose, skin constricting at the chill. He liked his quarters cold in the morning—as uninhabitable as possible for whoever spent the night, encouraging them to leave for the warmth of wherever the fuck they came from. Mostly though, his body just ran hot.

Orion stretched his arms over his head and arched his back, groaning at the satisfying pull of joints and muscles. He downed a hot shot of caffeine and bitter syrup topped with foamed pea extract. Most cabins on the station did not come with their own hydra taps, but this one did. Not only that, it could concoct any number of water-based mixtures.

Assured the caffeine was spreading through his system, Orion pulled on a black carbonsilk shirt and trousers, then stepped into a pair of leather boots. Genuine leather, farmed on an artificial satellite of Saturn. He was roaming around his quarters, stuffing whatever he would consider essentials into a pack, when the door slid open.

“Good, you’re ready.” Orion motioned Boris to the hydra station. “Drink?”

Boris shook his head, hovering in the open doorway.

“You’re letting the good air out.” Orion frowned.

“Since when do you care about wasting air?” But he entered and allowed the door to slip shut behind him.

“Where’s your pack? Ship leaves in...” Orion closed his eyes briefly, checking the countdown. “Five minutes. But don’t worry. It’ll wait.”

“I’m not going, Orion.”

“Hmm?” Orion had been zipping up the pack and slinging it over his shoulder.

“I’m not going.”

“What do you mean?”

Boris shrugged. “I’m not sure why you assumed I would.”

“Because why wouldn’t you?”

Boris shot him an incredulous look, one he rarely used with Orion. “Mars is my home. Why would I leave that behind?”

“Well... what will you do once I’m gone?”

Was that a flash of irritation on his face? “I’ll be an engineer, like I’ve always been. Do you think I just go into hibernation when I’m not with you? I have a job.”

Orion laughed. “You don’t need all that. You said it yourself—on *Colossal*, I can do whatever I want. You don’t need a fucking job. Come on... It’s the most prestigious ship in the known universe, at least since *Bali’s Bounty* disappeared. You won’t have to work a day in your life. And I’ll need an ally out there to convince me not to murder my parents.”

“No thank you,” Boris said flatly, and it was clear he was done.

“No thank you? That’s all you have to say?”

Boris stuffed his hands into his pockets. “You’ve been a good friend, Orion, but we always knew you’d have to go back. At least I did. I’m not ditching my life on Mars to follow you around. But hey, stop by whenever you’re around. We’ll raise some hell.”

Orion’s nostrils flared, just a little, not enough to notice unless you really knew him, like Boris did.

“Fine. Fuck off then. I’ve got packing to do.”

Boris gave him a knowing nod, as if he knew exactly how Orion would react. Just like fucking Ajsa.

Fuck him.

Orion didn’t watch as his only “friend” turned around and left the quarters.

CHAPTER 2

KAIA

“Good run today,” Kaia thought as her boots hit the ground of the docking bay.

She smacked the side of her ship, running her fingers along its familiar pockmarked surface and trying not to think about the repairs she knew she'd soon have to pay for. *Ahton's Take* had served her well over the years, despite her lack of reciprocation. She could count on one hand how many times she'd taken it in for a full checkup. As for a proper refurb... Forget it.

Kaia had gotten good at doing her own minor repairs.

“Good take?” One of the docksmen walked up to inspect her parking job. It was a formality. Kaia was shit at parking, and no one bothered correcting her anymore.

“Pretty good,” she said, smashing the heavy red button on the underside of the hull with a fist. The storage bay door swung down with shrill warning beeps. The door was slow, revealing scraps of bent metal, twisted carbon of burnt-out hulls, and a mass of fizzling electronics. She grabbed an inconspicuous black box from beneath a tangle of wires when it became reachable and stuffed it in her pack. That one she'd keep for herself.

As buyers rounded on the ship and began eyeing the goods, Kaia took the time to scan the bay. Loran's black retrofitted fighter was in its usual spot, expertly placed. Loran knew how to park.

His engine panel was coated in fresh condensation; he'd bounced from the site of the skirmish just an hour or so ago, leaving Kaia and a couple of others to pick up the scraps like vultures tailing a pack of lions. Some of the smaller unbranded gang ships sat scattered throughout the dock. They'd lost one today. Kaia wasn't sure who yet, but all of Loran's goons

looked the same to her, even though she was technically one of them.

The commotion on the other side of the dock caught her attention. She pressed the button to shut the storage, waving off prospective buyers who craned their head over the ascending door. “Be at the market tomorrow morning. See me then.”

She waited for the hold to finish closing at its excruciatingly slow pace, monitoring the buyers milling about to make sure none of them got handsy. Then she came closer to get a better view of the shiny craft.

Looked like a brand new needlefin. Fucking beautiful, and definitely not something you saw every day. Not around here. A bearded man in a pilot’s uniform was talking to a docksman, checking off forms, and Kaia’s eyes fell on the other man exiting the ship from the rear door. Kaia wasn’t in the habit of staring, but she took her time stripping off her flight suit, removing each bit of padding slowly and with great care—plenty of time to appraise the newcomers.

Kaia wouldn’t call the sleek black carbonsilk trousers and shirt that the man wore gaudy, but he was definitely not trying to hide his good fortune.

Guy must be loaded.

Then there was his height. Clearly almost seven feet, several heads over the pilot and docksman. His black brows were knotted in a frown, mouth curled down with displeasure. All the rich ones were always unhappy about something. He jerked a lock of black hair from his face and crossed the dock with long, pointed strides, ignoring the bustle of ships and people around him. Like he couldn’t wait to get out of there.

She wondered what Loran had planned for this one. He wouldn’t pass up an opportunity to milk a wealthy traveler for all he was worth. Kaia scooped up her gear and headed to her quarters.

Her cabin was nothing special, but it was hers and that was already a privilege. None of the living spaces on Riker 109 were anything to write home about, if one had a home. The waypoint station was on its last legs, run down and forgotten between the Milky Way and deep space in which colony ships roamed in their never-ending search for habitable worlds.

Kaia shut the door behind her and folded herself into her squeaky bunk. She spent a few minutes rubbing down her aching joints, twisting at the skin around her wrists and ankles. She'd been achy for as long as she could remember, but that was normal around here. Being crammed into her tiny ship for hours on end never helped.

Once the crude self-massage provided some relief, Kaia extracted the box she'd stashed earlier. She ran her black-dipped fingers over the smooth carbon. The darkness of her polish blended with the surface. It was about the length of her hand, and half that in width and height. She fingered along the edges, feeling for the telltale dip of a print reader. There it was, a thin imprint in the corner.

Kaia reached over to the crooked metal work desk next to her bunk and grabbed a small finger glove device. She pulled it over her index finger and pressed it to the reader. There was a low whirr while the reader inspected the print, as the glove tried to simulate a match. She was lucky she'd stumbled across this little thing in one of her hauls—more primitive print crackers might try to brute-force a print, triggering security measures in the device being cracked, but this one had never given her trouble. Small LED lights molded into the cracker flashed yellow as it worked. This was taking longer than she expected. Kaia's thumb twitched against the box impatiently.

Finally the LEDs glowed a merciful blue, and the box emitted a faint click as its lid cracked free. Kaia glanced at the door, double-checking the red lock was engaged before pushing the lid open.

For a moment she was disappointed. She'd hoped to find a chip store or something, but the box contained no such thing. Her eyes fell on pieces of metal wedged into a foam cushion.

Only it wasn't just any old metal.

"Fuck yes," she exhaled with a slow grin. Kaia extracted one ring from the foam and held it up, closing one eye. She rotated it between her fingers, looking for the stamp of gold content. Seven carats. She palmed the ring and ran her fingertips along the three others in the box. These would for sure fetch a pretty penny at the market.

Kaia jumped in her bunk as someone banged on her door three times. She stuffed the ring back into the container.

"What?" she yelled.

"Loran wants you. His quarters." The gruff voice was already fading by the time the lackey finished speaking, and Kaia breathed again.

Fuck me, I'm paranoid.

Nobody could have entered the cabin without her permitting it. Not even Loran, at least not without breaking the door down.

Kaia transported the rings to the small safe hidden beneath her bunk. What the fuck did he want her for anyway? He wouldn't have his half of the take until the market tomorrow. Which could only mean he wanted one thing. Kaia pressed her mouth into a thin line as she made the ten-minute walk through the metal habitat ring and stood at Loran's door. She flexed the fingers of both hands, preparing. Loran was not easy to argue with.

The door slid open before she could knock.

Kaia hesitated just outside, gauging the situation inside the cabin. Loran was running a frustrated hand through brown hair as he circled the woman in the middle of the space. The woman tapped a slippered foot in a displeased staccato. Her fleshy bare thigh, peeking from the folds of old silk in her skirt, was tense. Her fingers, painted a bright crimson to the second knuckle, were seductive even in their nervous smoothing of her barely-there shirt. Bare shoulders pulled back, the mounds of her full breasts shifted a little as she spoke up at Loran's snarling face.

“Heard about this guy, Loran, and I’m not fixin’ to get trapped—”

“Whether you’re *fixin’ to* or not isn’t up to you. I can make —” Loran’s amber eyes flicked to Kaia mid-rebuke. He already seemed furious, pacing like a jaguar around a defiant gazelle, but his expression darkened yet further when he looked her way. Kaia noted her shoulders folding in on themselves and rolled them back, forcing herself to stand up straight.

“You,” he pointed at Kaia. “In my office.”

She ran her tongue over her top teeth, fighting back a retort. Plastering on a neutral expression, she brushed past them and into the adjoining space, one that used to be a separate cabin before Loran took down the wall and turned the place into his own suite.

“You. Sit,” Loran barked behind her. Kaia registered the creak of Loran’s worn leather couch as the other woman plopped down on it.

The office door slid shut behind them. Kaia sank into the swivel chair next to Loran’s polished metal desk.

“What’s up?” Kaia hoped she sounded casual as Loran sat on the desk’s edge beside her, heels of his hands propped on either side of him. Too close for comfort. She planted her feet and rolled the chair back a few inches.

“How was the haul today, Scav?” He crossed his bulky arms over his barrel chest.

“It was fine.”

“Anything interesting you want to tell me?” He cocked his head.

Shit. What does he know?

Kaia pursed her lips, making a show of thinking. She resisted twisting nervous fingers through a lock of hair.

Act casual.

She shook her head slowly. “I don’t think so.”

In the next moment, Loran's callused hand had a tight grip on Kaia's face as he bent down to her level.

"Is that right?" He dragged her up from the chair by the force of his grip. The cabin narrowed around her. Her fingers strayed to the folded knife in the back pocket of her khaki trousers.

"None of that." Loran smacked her hand away. He pushed her backward, and she stumbled over the chair, tripping over her feet before finding her balance. "You've been skimming, Scav."

"What are you..." Loran's look shut her up, and she swallowed hard.

Fuck.

"And here I was, thinking we had a good thing going." Loran sounded almost disappointed, some of the sharp fury fading momentarily from his voice. Maybe she could work with this... Maybe he wouldn't space her.

"W-we did. I only took the box to keep it safe until the market—"

Her head cracked to the side with the force of the back of his hand slamming into her cheek. The room spun as she stumbled. She raised trembling fingers to the burning skin.

"I can't believe you're still lying through your teeth, you little bitch." He spat, hauling another step toward her. Kaia recoiled, but there was nowhere left to go. With her back against the cold wall of the cabin, all she could do was stare at a frayed thread in Loran's shirt inches away, waiting for the next strike.

"I've taught you well, haven't I?" His gravel voice was in her ear, his face close enough for her to feel the stubble against her smarting cheek, making her wince. The sweaty musk of him crowded her senses. "Tell me why, Kaia."

"I... I don't know."

The breath was knocked out of her as he drove his palm into her breastbone, slamming her harder against the metal.

“No more lying, Scav. Had enough of that. Tell me.”

“I need more... a lot more,” Kaia hissed, coughing. “There wasn’t time to do it by the book. I didn’t think... I only took a little.”

“Never took you for a greedy liar, Scav,” Loran spat. “Go on.”

For the past five years, Loran had let her follow his fleet around in her little ship, collecting the ruins of those he had destroyed once the battle was over. And Kaia had agreed to give him ninety percent of the take. She did it by the books the first year, but ten percent just wasn’t enough. Not for what she needed.

“It’s not for me. I promised someone else.”

“A debt?”

“Yeah.”

Kaia took a shuddering breath, tears prickling for the first time. All the years of keeping her secret, gone to shit. Even Loran seemed taken aback, brow furrowing. He never liked criers.

“Who?” he pressed.

Kaia dragged her eyes back to his, setting her jaw as she pulled herself together. She hated showing weakness to anyone, but especially to the warlord who ruled the run-down station—and her—with his iron fist.

“My brother.”

“Fucking family drama,” Loran rolled his eyes. “How much?”

“One million, seven hundred thousand, fifty-five hundred chips,” she muttered the number from memory.

Recognition flashed on his face, because of course it did. Everyone knew the current going rate to Heaven, even if they claimed no interest in it themselves.

Loran straightened, taking a step back.

“He dying?” he demanded.

“I am.”

Loran threw his weight into his chair, narrowed eyes pinging between Kaia’s own. “You’re not sick...”

“No.”

Now he knows I’m fucking crazy. Unhinged. Useless. I’m definitely getting spaced.

But Kaia wasn’t about to volunteer an explanation. She wasn’t giving him that—the *why*. She wouldn’t tell him about her little brother’s cancer, or that it had all been her fucking fault. Her parents had scraped together everything they had to send Ahton to Heaven when he died, and that was nowhere near enough. Kaia had no idea where they got the chips for it. The rest of her life revolved around saving what she needed to get to him, and each year it was getting harder to live with the guilt of what she’d done. Killed him, and then left him all alone in Heaven. She’d gotten impatient for her atonement, and that made her careless.

Thankfully Loran didn’t seem interested in all that. He was thinking. She saw it in his eyes, schemes ticking over. Loran was a lot of things, but stupid wasn’t one of them. She had the space now, but remained pinned to the wall. Was he calculating how much use he could get from her before tossing her out the airlock?

“You’re much more his type,” Loran muttered, snapping Kaia out of her reeling thoughts.

“Huh?”

He regarded her, eyes roaming down as though assessing her as a series of parts. Usually when he did that, there was this hungry undercurrent on his face. That was why she thought he sent for her in the first place. But now the gaze was impersonal, calculating. Kaia hugged her arms across her chest, even though no part of her was exposed. She was still wearing the long-sleeved base layer that went under her flight suit and fitted synth khaki trousers. Kaia turned her eyes to the toes of his boots.

“I can get you what you want, Scav.” Loran reclined in his seat. He put an ankle over his knee, thumb tapping against his calf. “And you can make up for this little *debacle* you’ve created.”

“H...” She swallowed the dry scratching in her throat. “How?”

There was still a chance. She may not get spaced after all. She may get a chance to do it on her own terms, with enough chips to join Ahton.

“Heard of *Colossal*?”

“The colony?”

For a moment Kaia recalled playing on Artega Seven with Ahton. They’d sat on the dirt floor pretending rocks they’d collected were colony ships discovering New Earth. He loved that nonsense. She’d played along because she owed him that much and more.

A curt nod from the warlord brought her back. He sat forward, all calm. All cold, calculated practicality. It gave Kaia confidence to push herself off the wall and work her head back into the game.

“There’s something happening on *Colossal*,” he said. “Something big.”

She shoved her ass up onto Loran’s desk. “What?”

“Mare Halena, the commander. She summoned her one and only son back to the ship.”

“So?”

“So...” Loran scooted his chair to the table, legs spread wide on either side of her own. A callused hand drifted to her thigh, fingertips picking over the seams in the pockets stitched there. “Her son hasn’t been on that ship in over a decade. He’s been holed up on Mars, living it up. If she’s summoned him back, it means something is close. Something like a changeover.”

“...So?”

Loran looked at her like she was an idiot, fingers suddenly digging into her thigh as if to squeeze her into understanding. “My little greedy bitch, you can’t be that clueless.”

Kaia scowled, jerking her leg from his grip. “I’ve been too busy running jobs for *you*, Loran. Not giving a shit about the colonies.”

His lips twitched in a small smirk. “I know. Don’t worry. You’ll get it. If Orion Halen—”

“*Orion?*” Kaia scoffed. “Does he have a brother named *Canis Major?*”

“You’ll get to ask him yourself soon.” Kaia didn’t like the flash of Loran’s smirk, but remained silent as he continued. “*Orion Halen* doesn’t want anything to do with that colony . He’s got... a reputation. And I have a feeling he’s none too happy about the prospective wives his parents *probably* have picked out for him once he drags himself back to *Colossal*.”

Kaia’s thought back to the sleek ship she saw in the docking bay earlier, and the expensive-looking man with blue-black hair and long, bitter eyes chiseled into his stony face. Was that him?

“You know all this how?”

Loran shrugged. “Don’t you worry about that, little Scav. The rich kid wouldn’t pass up on a chance to stick it to his parents. *I bet...*”

Loran walked his fingers up her thigh, a small frown on his brows as he strafed inward. He smiled as her muscles tensed under his touch, her breath hitching. Kaia despised him, but it wasn’t just fear that held her in place, and she fucking hated herself for it.

“I bet...” he repeated, “...he’d love to drag a carefree, greedy little scavenger home to mommy and daddy. Fuck her brains out in the next cabin over from their fancy colony suite. Now *that’ll* be a rebellion. He can’t get out of his duty, but he can make their life fucking miserable.”

Kaia pushed away from him so hard that the heavy metal desk screeched against the floor, drawing his face into a scowl.

“No fucking way. Is that what you were pushing on that one out there?” She juttred her thumb toward the door, where no doubt the scantily dressed woman was still waiting.

“She’s too soft. Too perfect.”

Not like me.

“I don’t need sex with a rich guy, Loran. I need chips.”

“And I need a mole. Someone who can get me a foothold in the colony. Those things are goddamn fortresses, but once I’m in... well, we both know I can siphon all the chips either of us will ever need.”

“And then—”

“And then you can off yourself or whatever the fuck and send yourself to Heaven.”

“Why would a commander-in-waiting want *this*?” She gestured to herself. She didn’t hate herself, but she was practical. Poor, malnourished compared to Riker 109’s working girls or colony sluts, and not versed in the ways of propriety. She wasn’t a rich guy’s type.

“Oh, Scav.” Loran rose from his seat and bit his lip as he gave her that scan again, only this time, not so impartial or calculating. “I bet you’re exactly the kind of fireball he’d go for. Rough around the edges and just the right amount of rabid. Everything he doesn’t get to be, at least not anymore.”

Her cheeks burned, and she hated how small she felt under Loran’s wolfish grin. He was smart. If he had come up with this plan, that meant it had a chance of working. A real chance, if she didn’t fuck it up.

But this was a big scam to orchestrate. How was *she* supposed to seduce a would-be colony commander? How could Loran ever think she was capable of that? She wasn’t like the girl out there, endowed and polished with sex oozing from every pore.

But if she pulled it off... She could finally get to her brother. And soon, if she did it right.

“And you’ll make sure I get to Heaven?”

“You have my word, you crazy little bitch,” he smirked.

Kaia’s stomach turned at the flash in Loran’s eyes. “Tell me what to do.”

CHAPTER 3

KAIA

Just be yourself.

Kaia repeated Loran's words in her head like a mantra as she perched atop the bar stool. She rolled a gold ring between her knuckles. Loran had let her keep one, a token of goodwill in their "new joint venture." Kaia slid the too-large ring onto her thumb and glanced at her reflection in the dusty mirror that ran along the wall behind the bar. Her left cheek still sported a splotch of stinging pink. Kaia grimaced as she pressed her fingertips against the tender skin. She probably should have at least tried to cover that up, but for some reason Loran had instructed her to leave it.

She was still coming to terms with the fact of having agreed to this. The way Loran described it, if she managed to hook up with the heir of a colony ship, it would take her no time at all to get the chips she needed for Heaven. And that was tempting. After years of skimming, she was still nowhere close. At this rate, she'd die of old age before she got to kill herself for Upload. And Ahton was waiting.

"One H2O," the deep voice a few seats away demanded in that way no station resident ever would.

The bartender, scarred old Theo, who was presently polishing a glass, leveled a deadly glare in his direction, but quickly marked the patron as not being from around here.

"Hundred chips." He smacked his chip reader on the bar in front of the man who had to be Orion Halen.

"One hundred!" The man's smooth black brow furrowed in profile.

Theo shrugged. "Look where you are. We ain't exactly got limitless water here."

Full lips pursed. Cold eyes narrowed to displeased slits. Then Orion Halen's wrist was pressed flat against the reader.

It wasn't really one-hundred... About forty percent of that was tourist tax. Not that Kaia could afford it either way.

Enough stalling.

"Just be yourself," she repeated under her breath.

There were other instructions too. Like a strict command to ping a connection no more than twenty-four hours after she was on the colony ship. Or else. She didn't worry about that too much. At this point getting into the orbit of the damn colony was the primary hurdle.

So she slid off her wobbly barstool and walked over to Orion Halen. For a second or two she hovered, staring at the broad back hunched over a shot glass of H₂O. The collar of his synthleather jacket was lifted at the back, covering his neck. She smoothed her palms over the khaki pants stretched across her upper thighs and fingered for the knife in its sheath on the side of her leg, just making sure it was there.

Then she tried a little cough.

Orion turned his head toward her just a little, his jawline in sharp relief under the bar of the lights.

"H₂O is a stupid name." Kaia plopped her ass onto the rusted metal stool next to him.

The man's scent hit her like a rush of air. She couldn't put words to it exactly, but it was vaguely familiar. Kaia had been so used to the musky smell of human sweat mixed with the powder soap they all used that she was not prepared for the assault of cologne.

But this... Once her nose adapted to the potent sensation, Kaia realized Orion smelled pretty nice. There was something fresh underneath it, yet a warm bitterness on top.

"What is that?" She asked, finally turning to face him, and he was already there to meet her gaze.

Kaia fought the urge to recoil. Ice blue eyes tunneled into her face. Small pupils locked her down, unshifting, and she thought she saw something glowing underneath that had to be a trick of the shitty light in the bar. Kaia blinked fast, breaking

the contact. He just had weird eyes, that's all. Lots of people looked weird around here.

“What's what?” he drawled in a deep rumble.

“Your smell. That bitter thing.” Kaia elaborated, gathering the pieces of her resolve.

Orion shrugged, a lazy movement of one shoulder. “Coffee.”

Of course.

Memories of black pots on the fire and her father dissolving caffeine powder inside them brought recognition. She smelled it all the time as a kid, the one luxury her parents never skimmed on down at Artega Seven.

“So you gonna tell me or what?” The question brought her back to the very uncomfortable present.

“What?”

“Why is H₂O a stupid name?”

“Because that shit isn't pure. Pure as we got, sure, but it's hardly *H₂O*.”

Everyone knew pure H₂O was a delicacy only the wealthiest and most privileged would ever try. It wasn't even healthier—water needed minerals, salts. Rich assholes got hard for it just for the prestige. Pretended to appreciate the “taste”, when as far as Kaia heard, there was none.

“You always this pedantic, or did a rod just crawl up your ass?” Orion looked offensively bored.

Her cheeks flared, and the retort was on the tip of her tongue, but she was interrupted by the loud crack—Theo's wrinkled palm slamming against the composite surface of the bar.

“Well?” Theo glared at her.

Kaia gritted her teeth. She hadn't been expecting to be wasting her hard-earned take at the bar that night. But Theo would not tolerate her hanging around without buying *something*.

“Gimme a kerogel,” she said, waving her wrist over the scanner, cringing when the vibration of a balance being deducted buzzed against her skin. Most people on Riker 109 didn’t have ID implants—they wore tags for that. But Loran had forced one on her when he earmarked her for the lower rings. He made a rule of ensuring his whores were trackable at all times. Couldn’t afford to have them making relationships and giving the goods away for free.

Kaia glanced to her right just in time to catch the flinching scowl on Orion’s mouth. He clearly didn’t approve of her cheap alcohol choice. She didn’t give a shit, ripping the plastic top off the packet Theo threw at her and squeezing a dollop onto her tongue. She cringed when the sickly sweet first taste morphed into a bitter kick. In the corner of her eye, Orion downed the remainder of his water in a gluttonous gulp.

“Another,” he said.

Theo and Kaia exchanged glances as he produced another shot of not-so-pure-but-pure-enough water, waiting until it had been paid for before setting it in front of Orion.

“Careful with waving that thing around here,” Kaia jerked her chin at the shot glass perched between Orion’s long fingers. “You aren’t exactly at the finest establishment in the sector.”

“Thanks for the tip.” Orion downed the second shot.

Who the fuck pays a hundred chips for water and doesn’t even take time to savor it?

Kaia squeezed more kerogel into her mouth. It was by no means *good*, but she paid for it, and she sure as shit wasn’t gonna waste it.

“How can you drink that shit?” Orion was scowling at the packet between her fingers.

“Some of us aren’t made of chips, I guess,” Kaia muttered.

Orion sniffed, glancing at Theo. “Another for the lady. No, I don’t mean that fucking gel shit. Water.”

Kaia balked. Her first instinct was to reject the offer. You didn't accept H2O without expecting to pay it back around here.

But Orion wasn't from around here...

"Thank you." Kaia forced a smile as Theo slid a glass in front of her, giving her a warning look. He was a good man, in his own way. At least, he wasn't gonna let anyone get fucked with within the borders of his establishment.

Kaia hadn't splurged on H2O in months. She allowed herself a drink once a year on her birthday, and her twenty-fifth was marked with an especially good take from a skirmish a few hundred miles away, so she'd gotten one and a half.

She rolled her first tiny sip around on her tongue, closing her eyes instinctively to focus on the taste. It wasn't *good*, she was sure. But it was what she knew, and regardless of her gripes with the idiotic naming of it, to her it may as well be spring water from Old Earth.

"Thanks," she said again.

"Have another for all I care." Orion sighed.

Kaia grabbed the opening. "Tough day?"

He gave her a wry smile. "You could say that. And some more. What about you? You from here?"

He scanned her up and down with those freakish eyes, no doubt taking in her scuffed brown boots, black polymat leggings, worn polymat jacket. Was he judging her? His gaze lingered where the ribbed white tank top met her chest, revealing the faintest shadow of cleavage, if you could even call it that. Kaia was modest in that department—her tits alone wouldn't pull a colony man.

"I am now," Kaia said, picking at the dirt under her fingernails. "Been here ten years."

Orion's brows shot up. "A decade in this dump? I'm surprised it hasn't had an oxygen leak in that time."

"It has. I patched it."

“You a mechanic?” Kaia was perplexed at the sudden enthusiasm in his voice.

“That and some other things.” She smirked. “Pilot.”

Orion turned to face her fully then, hand dangling off the edge of the bar where his elbow rested. “What do you fly?”

“Just a small scavenging vessel. A piece of junk, but it’s my junk. Gotta be a mechanic to keep it running.”

He whistled, leaning in. “Which academy?”

Kaia barked a laugh, and the way he frowned for a moment made her wonder how fragile this rich guy’s ego could be. She raised the shot glass, which was still more than half-full, at him. “No academy. Learned on the job. Here.”

“You don’t have a license?”

“Why? You gonna report me?”

“Of course not,” he stammered. “Just didn’t think there were still places you could get away with that.”

“Welcome to Riker 109.” Kaia took another tiny taste of H₂O.

Between sips of water, she pressed more kerogel onto her tongue. It felt almost criminal to mar the H₂O with booze, but it gave her a nice buzz, helping her nerves.

“This station may be a shithole, but I’d fucking love to be in your position. I—” He paused to look at Theo, who placed a kerogel in front of him.

“On the house,” Theo announced.

Yeah, right. Kaia would bet one of Loran’s lackeys got him to do it. A shit-faced mark is an easy mark.

Orion ripped the packet open with his teeth. “Finally some good service.”

Kaia resisted rolling her eyes. Theo did it for the both of them.

She had no idea how she was meant to pull this off: not only seduce a colony heir, but convince him to take her back

to his ship with him. Judging by her interaction with Orion Halen so far, she'd be lucky not to kill the man even if she did manage to get him interested.

“So you're a scavenger. What do you scavenge?”

Kaia opened her mouth to, but hunks of metal didn't seem like the most exciting answer. She had to up the ante here, get this guy invested or something, right?

“I'll tell you over another H₂O,” she offered.

“Done.” Orion was already waving Theo over.

CHAPTER 4

ORION

His blood alcohol levels were rapidly rising in his Neurosync visual overlay—they had some strong shit in these backwater stations. He supposed they needed it, with water so scarce and misery so high.

But he barely paid attention to the percentage ticking ever upward. He was too busy learning about the life and work of the scavenger sitting before him. She had one cheap combat boot perched on the rung of her stool, the other dangling. It had started swinging with excitement, threatening to kick him in the shin as she told him about that day's spoils.

Both of her cheeks were now flushed with the alcohol, obscuring the red welt he'd noted on the left side of her face.

Orion widened his stance a bit on his stool to keep at a safe distance without interrupting her. He'd even caught himself grinning at her animated enthusiasm as her small but pouty lips curled up in a wicked smile.

“So what was the best thing you found today?” he asked.

Her eyes narrowed, chin dipped in that coy way that told him she wasn't quite sure how much she wanted to say. What was she afraid of? That he'd want whatever she found? That he was digging for info to take it from her? Hadn't he bought enough water for her to be convinced he didn't need anything she could give him?

The scavenger must have come to the same conclusion, because she shoved a hand in the thigh pocket of her cargo pants and pulled out a single ring. She pinched it between black-tipped fingers. Red was more the style on Mars, but they suited her. The ring gleamed against the darkness of her painted skin.

Orion's brows shot up. “Gold? How many karats?”

With a flick of her fingers, the ring disappeared in her fist. She shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. It’d fetch a pretty chip though, I know that.”

“You’re *selling* it? Such a special find?”

She leaned forward so suddenly that it caught Orion by surprise. Not even that close, but his eyes gravitated back to that delicate mouth as she said, “There’s three more.”

“No shit.”

Gold was rare. Not just rare for this shithole either. *Colossal* had about a dozen pieces in its own collection. And here she was, with four gold rings? Sure, they could be worthless. They probably *were* worthless... but Orion couldn’t help but be excited for this scrawny girl.

But mostly he was jealous.

“Damn, wish I could go flying around scavenging treasure like that.”

“Why can’t you?” Kaia leaned back. “You look like you have the chips for it.”

Orion groaned. His whole life was lived in luxury, yet still under his mother’s thumb.

“My mother sent me to fucking *Mars* to prevent me from flying.” And he had let her. Took it all like a bitch.

And here was a girl with no family, no name, no wealth to speak of, flying her own ship with no license.

She had it easy. She had zero expectations stacked against her. But still—Kaia made her own way in the world. She took it by the balls in ways he couldn’t even fathom. And something about her tangled mop of flame orange hair, her huge green eyes, her freckled nose and the UV spots on her cheeks, was fucking magnetic.

As he watched her babble about her adventures, Orion wasn’t sure if he wanted to fuck her or conquer the world with her.

Or both.

Shit. It might be both.

Orion could just see the crazed look on his mother's face if he brought Kaia back to *Colossal* with him. When he told her he was marrying a nobody, an outlaw pilot making a living picking scraps from murdered ships? Mare Halena would have a coronary before she had a chance to die of cancer.

Hell, it wasn't even a bad idea. If he had to go spend the rest of his few hundred years cooped up on a colony, he may as well do it with someone who'd bring a little excitement to his life, at least for a while.

You're drunk, Orion. Think this through.

Orion realized Kaia had said something and was waiting for a reply, but he'd been too preoccupied racing through the adventures they might have and the payback he could enact against his mother.

"Sorry, what?" He snapped out of his fantasies.

"I said I've gotta go." Kaia was already standing, having finished her H2O. She must have finished the kerogel as well because she wobbled when her feet were on the ground.

"Easy." Orion slid off his stool and grabbed her arm to steady her, even though he was feeling a bit like wobbling himself. There was a deep pulse low in his groin when she bit her little bottom lip and looked up at him through light brown lashes in that shy way women used as a method of seduction, but which seemed to just come naturally to her.

"I'll walk you to your cabin," Orion said.

"Oh, I'll be fine. I've walked these halls a gazillion times."

"Then you can walk me to mine, 'cause I have no idea where it is."

She breathed out a shaky laugh. "What number?"

Orion blinked, and his station cabin digits floated in his NS. "Hall B, Cabin Thirty-four."

He had tried to book a suite, but Riker 109 had none of those.

Kaia brought a black finger to her chin and turned in place, delicate brow furrowing as she oriented herself. Finally she stopped and pointed. “That way.”

Not waiting for him to follow, she stomped from the bar and into a series of narrow hallways.

Orion was sure they were lost, but Kaia assured him it was just a shortcut. They squeezed through a narrow passageway, their breathing and footsteps reverberating off the chipped walls.

Orion’s head buzzed, and it seemed like that kerogel was gaining potency in his system. The halogen lights illuminating their way overhead cast halos in his vision. The only clear sensation was the burn of Kaia’s hand in his. He realized he’d been stroking along the back of it with his thumb, her milky skin satin-smooth against him. And fuck if he didn’t only want one thing in that moment. He tasted iron on his tongue.

CHAPTER 5

KAIA

Orion had divulged little about his life back at the bar, except for his exile to Mars, where he was tortured by living a life of luxury since his teenage years. Sure, being banished from your family was tough, but not comparable to half the shit people on Riker 109 had gone through. His palpable excitement at her stories of struggling through life on the station and patching up leaks was disgusting... But at least Kaia had three shots of H2O and copious amounts of free kerogel sloshing in her belly.

Now she was leading *him* to his quarters, his hand burning around her own. She wished she could take credit for such masterful seduction, but it was all him. All night she'd felt like she was just along for the ride.

"Wait," he commanded behind her, and Kaia's first and only instinct was to stop in her tracks, all ruminations on his flaws put to an immediate halt.

What the fuck was wrong with her?

She'd almost forgotten that the hand, large and firm around hers as he stroked lines of fire in her skin with a thumb, was attached to an entitled asshole who waved his chips around, looked down on her and everyone at the station, and didn't *really* listen to a word she'd said at the bar. Kaia had seen how his eyes had glazed over even as he plied her with more H2O. She accepted it: if he wanted to sit through her rambling for an hour in exchange for free water, she'd take it.

But when he yanked her back toward him and she was faced with the solid expanse of his chest and that coffee-mint scent, her belly contracted. And when she glanced up at the muscular neck and straight jaw and chiseled cheek before her, gnawing warmth surged between her thighs.

The inches of space between them were thick with the pull of him, crackling like live-wire. Like the sunrise on Artega

Seven, when a person could feel the weight of the sun coming to destroy everything under its glare. Oh, and did he glare. He glared at her like he was hungry. Like she was food.

The heaviness between them shattered as he pushed her back against the cool, sloped wall. She normally had good reflexes, but her head was sluggish. Her first instinct was to shake it off, to reach for the knife in her thigh pocket.

No. This was good. This was the goal. His greedy eyes flashing in the shadows, fixed to her lips. His throat bobbing as he swallowed. His lips parting as he slid a hand along her jutting collarbone and up to her jaw.

Pressing for her to turn her still-smarting cheek toward him, he leaned in close, breath with an odd metallic taste caressing the raw skin.

“Who did this?” he asked, his voice low and full. His fingers grazed the injury and his eyes flashed when she winced. “Did you like it?”

Kaia tried hard to catch up, to react with the appropriate offense instead of this excited little lurch in her chest. But he had already moved on, hooking a forefinger beneath her chin. Her face lifted to him as though it was no longer her own, but a puppet whose strings thrummed with helpless anticipation.

God, he's beautiful.

He crushed his mouth to hers without further warning. It was messy and impatient, already licking expectantly at the seam of her lips. Entitled, like the rest of him, for when she was hesitant to open for him, he stiffened his grip on her ribs and pressed harder.

And his thigh... He had already kicked open her legs and wedged it between them. Kaia shifted her hips back, trying for more space. She was drunk, compromised, and this was bad.

But he was persistent, and fuck if her body didn't betray her—when he shifted his knee up further, applying firm pressure where her traitorous body wanted it most, Kaia choked out a small moan. Orion took the win, dipping into her parted mouth. When their tongues finally met, his kiss

deepened and slowed. He licked against her lazily, exploring her with a satisfied decadence even as his leg continued to work at her center.

Kaia melted against the wall. Maybe this was fine. Maybe it was how she got the job done. Her muscles unwound as she relaxed into the kerogel-tinged kiss that made her lids heavy and her belly full. She curled an arm up to his muscled shoulder, sliding a hand beneath the fabric of his jacket. Kaia wondered how far she could push it—how much she could give without surrendering too much of herself so soon. She felt compelled to find out.

Until her fingertips, having strayed up to the back of his neck, recoiled from the sharp sting they encountered there. It took a while for her mind to catch up, but realization cascaded when she became aware of the less sharp but far more disturbing protrusions on his tongue. Spikes, hardened and engorged.

She lurched away, hissing as the back of her head hit the wall and bright white splotches sprouted in her vision.

“Shit,” he grunted, sliding his hand behind her head. “You good?”

Kaia flinched from his touch. “You’re... you’re an—”

“An uhyre.” He cocked an eyebrow. “Well, part, of course.”

How could he be admitting this so nonchalantly? And how could she not have figured it out earlier? The features fit, that contrast of masculinity and beauty. And the fucking eyes. Shit, she was a complete moron. A drunk, stupid, stupid moron.

She slid from the wall and backed away, staring at her mark. Of course she saw it now. Orion’s face was a mess of contradictions. Narrow, elongated eyes that were nothing but hooded shadows above her in that moment. Pitch black hair and full brows sloping into a straight nose, a little flat. His generous lips and the refreshing mint of him were almost delicate. But the rest of him was all male. The angled, heavy bone structure. The bitter coffee. The predatory hunger that

zeroed in on her and the firm, insistent fingers that had marked their territory along her skin. It was in the way he moved, taking up space in a way only a man could, an all-consuming vortex that owned everything and everyone around it.

Turns out it wasn't just his fancy rich boy lines—he was part murderous alien.

And with an uhyre to seduce, the spiky fucking tongue was the least of her problems. Kaia pressed her own tongue flat against the roof of her mouth. She didn't taste anything strange... No exorin. She had to think. Decide if this entire plan was even worth it now. Most importantly, she had to get away because her skin was still on fire from the kiss, his vortex still tugging at her edges.

“How much?” Kaia rasped, fighting down panic. There was no exorin, she reminded herself. None of the liquid secreted by uhyre spikes when aroused. The addictive shit she'd heard in horror stories of when the aliens first came to Old Earth and ripped it apart.

“Ten percent. Mother's side. You didn't know?”

Was it the kerogel? Did Kaia miss the part where he disclosed being an alien monster at some earlier juncture? She took a beat to race back through the evening—no, he definitely didn't.

“How was I supposed to fucking know?”

“It was common knowledge on Mars.” Orion shrugged. “I'm heir to colony ship *Colossal*, like I said. My mother's part uhyre. Dad's human.”

“And he's alive?” Kaia cursed at herself as soon as the words left her mouth, but Orion gave her a wry smile.

“Physically, very much so.”

What did he think? Everyone in the fucking known galaxies knew all about his family's genetic makeup? She hadn't even heard of him until that day, and she would hazard a guess most people outside of colonies didn't bother keeping up with presumptuous colony assholes' lives either.

“Great,” Kaia rushed. “Well, I should go. Your place is just at the end of this hall, couple hundred meters. You’ll come out to a residential ring, and it’ll be on your right.”

“Want to see it?” Orion tried.

Is he fucking kidding me?

“No thanks. It’s late. Had a big day.” Kaia spun on her heel and hastened down the passage.

How had it taken so long to make the connection? She should’ve seen it in his eyes. She thought back to the Old Earth uhyre footage she’d watched years ago. Those glowing orbs with sharp, tiny pupils following the camera like they saw right through it to whoever was watching. Sometimes their eyes were bright green, or orange. Other times ice blue like Orion’s.

Hunter eyes. Killer eyes.

His had been only a little more “human” than that. Barely passable glacial shards that sparked or shadowed with his reactions, which had in retrospect seemed just as volatile. He’d be whining about his stupid mother one moment and ecstatic about some story Kaia told the next. She thought it was just the booze. If she hadn’t been such an idiot, plied with kerogel and water, she would have recognized it. But seeing an actual uhyre in the flesh wasn’t something one experienced in their lifetime... and they were better for it.

CHAPTER 6

ORION

He lay in his bunk, exhausted but unable to sleep from the bad alcohol and the hard-on.

Orion had stripped as soon as he got through the door. It was cold, but not enough to bring him down.

Of course, he understood the scavenger's reaction upon learning what he was. He had played dumb, but it took him long enough to convince the Martians he wasn't going to murder them at the first sign of eye contact.

Part of him actually considered doing it. Fucking her. The impulse passed quickly. She was way too scrawny. Not his type, nor the type that could handle him.

What made her so appealing in the first place was her rough attitude, her freedom, the adventures she got to live. As the evening wore on, he could just see how perfectly he could use this to stick it to his mother. It wasn't about fucking her at all, though if he went through with the plan forming in his head, that'd come in time. If all he wanted was a good lay, he could find a whore who could handle him.

So when he kissed her, it was just the alcohol driving the operation. Still, her delicate lips had felt like little plush velvet pillows under his tongue. Their softness made him want to rub his spikes over them, rough them up a little.

He wasn't sure which part of his genes scared Kaia more: the mean streak, especially in bed, or the addiction. Some women weren't scared of the physical risks. They were afraid of drowning. Once they tasted the pheromone-laced arousal of an uhyre, it was only a matter of time before the dependency set in. They'd seek it out again and again, whatever it took and however much it hurt.

And Kaia, the savvy pilot who orbited space fights and lived in one of the roughest parts of the galaxy, didn't seem the

kind who'd shy away from a few cuts and bruises. No—Orion had a feeling the dependence was the more frightening notion.

Of course, once she learned of his intentions, the prospect of addiction would be a non-issue. Satisfied with the plan forming in his head, Orion finally slept.

CHAPTER 7

KAIA

Kaia got up early with less of a headache than she normally had after getting drunk. All that H2O Orion plied her with must have helped.

She sucked down her breakfast packet on her way to Loran's quarters, raking her hair into a matted ponytail as she tramped through the halls.

She gave his door a good three bangs, the packet pinched between her teeth. She was shoving her shirt into her low-slung pants when the door slid open to reveal a bleary-eyed and bare-chested Loran, brown locks tousled around his face.

"Scav." His voice was hoarse and gravelly, the way it always was when he'd just woken up.

"Anyone in there?" She peered past him.

"No." He stood aside and Kaia shoved past him into the cabin. She balled up the empty nutrigel pack and tossed it into the wastebin near the wall, then rounded on the warlord.

"You—" she jutted a finger at him "—didn't tell me Orion Halen was a fucking uhyre."

"Ah." Loran smiled, dropping into his unmade bed. "So you've already thought about fucking him. That's progress."

"Don't you think at some point I'll have to? Or did you think he was celibate?"

Loran shrugged. "Doesn't seem like you'd mind. You always liked being thrown around a little."

"This shit makes me sick, and that was before I found out he's part spiky-tongued monster."

"So you already know what his tongue feels like. Where did he lick you, sweetheart?"

Loran moved too fast, lashing out to grab her thigh and haul her toward him. She stumbled into his lap.

“Was it here?” His hand slid to her crotch, squeezing over the trousers.

She should get up. She should smack his fucking paws away and get out of there. But she was already on edge from last night, and Loran’s rough grip was so possessive in exactly the way her body couldn’t help but respond to.

“No.” Kaia planted her hands on his shoulders and pushed herself up. He didn’t stop her, though a knowing glint in his eyes made clear that he was well aware of her hesitation. “Nothing happened. But I’m not doing this with an uhyre.”

Loran leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “I don’t think you’ve thought this through, Scav.”

“I’m not becoming an alien cum junkie, Loran.”

“It’s only a problem if you don’t have a steady supply, which you obviously would on a ship with the source. Besides, it’s all temporary for you. Just a stepping stone to your Upload, right?”

Kaia fidgeted with her fingernails. He wasn’t wrong. If nothing else, the prospect of developing an exorin dependence would motivate her to get Loran a foothold on *Colossal* faster, to end it all as soon as possible.

Except for two big problems.

“You’re afraid you won’t go through with it if you’re addicted,” Loran guessed.

“That and the fact that he might *murder me* before I can Upload.”

Loran waved her off. “He’s got, what, five percent in him? Ten? Pretty sure he’s been forced to learn to control himself.”

“His human father *is* alive...” Kaia conceded.

“There you go. He’ll just rough you up a little. But hey...” Loran raised a brow. “...We both know you won’t mind.”

Kaia turned her back, fists clenched. He knew her too well, and she hated that, but it also meant she trusted his read of the situation. Loran wanted something very specific out of this deal—if he thought she'd be killed before she could be useful, he wouldn't bother.

“And the other thing?” she muttered.

Kaia tensed with the weight of a hand on her shoulder behind her. His fingertips brushed her neck as he picked at the loose curls there, smoothing them back over her shoulder with a gentleness he rarely used. “Keeping your wits to get the job done?” he murmured gently.

“Yeah.”

“I'll help you there,” he crooned. “If I start sensing any trepidation, or if you cut contact at any point once you're on *Colossal*, you have my word. I'll make it my mission to take you apart piece by piece myself. There'll be no Upload for you then. Not ever.”

Kaia stood rigid, holding her breath as he palmed the exposed side of her neck.

“But if you follow through and do a good job, get me what I need on that ship,” his breath was hot at her nape, “I'll kill you in an Upload rig. Even if the exorin makes you beg to stay. Making sure you get to Heaven will be the first thing I do, whether you like it or not.”

Kaia exhaled the breath she'd been holding, shoulders unwinding their tension. Loran was not a good man. But she'd been under his heel for years, and she knew him, too. She could trust him on this one.

Loran turned her around to face him, a small smile on his lips. “Now why don't you go out and fix up that hull damage we talked about earlier? Take a couple of hours before you dock back in.”

Kaia nodded. Loran had a plan, and all she had to do was follow through.

“Gonna go patch up the aft hull, Bison,” she said to the docksman on duty once she got there.

Loran’s suggestion for her to do this was smart. She needed to clear her head and prepare for what she was getting herself into, and he knew that. Patching up the station was her meditation. Normally she’d be resentful at being manipulated like this, but now... Well, she’d take whatever tricks he had to offer to ensure their success.

Forty minutes later, she was in the *Take*, working the patch gun in one long clamp arm and the carbon patches in the other. It was delicate work, requiring precision that was not easy in such an clunky old vessel. But Kaia was good at it, and it would help her work off her nerves; and keep her distracted for a few hours.

She glanced at the time. An hour and a half to go.

CHAPTER 8

ORION

Orion woke having made up his mind. He would bring his little scavenger to *Colossal*, get a bit of crazy in his life, and prove to his parents once and for all that he would do his duty, but he would damn well do it on his terms.

Now he just needed to tell her the good news.

She had mentioned where she lived, and Orion had enough sense in his drunken stupor to record the cabin number in his memchip. It floated in his vision as he traversed the residential halls: Hall V, Cabin Seven.

Where are you? Bretton subvocalized through his Neurosync. *We leave in an hour. Get to the docks.*

He could wait.

The halls looked like shit, but Hall V looked a little less shitty than the rest. He didn't remember seeing it as an option for his layover. Was this one reserved for permanent residents of the station, or did Kaia have a bit more pull around here than he'd realized?

She had looked so scrawny. He just wanted to whisk her off and ply her full of sandwiches, as weirdly hot as that waif look was in retrospect. She had squirmed in her seat when he glanced at her chest at the bar, but those perky tits did something for him. They'd make nice little handfuls.

Orion stopped at Cabin Seven and knocked. Then knocked again, frowning. Where the fuck was she? He didn't have all day, and he was already late, having had to sleep off a hell of a hangover. They were meant to fly out less than an hour for rendezvous with *Colossal*.

"Lookin' for Kaia?" A wrinkled old woman popped her head out from the cabin next door.

"Yes. Where is she?"

“Probably out at the dock.”

“Which way is that again?” The station wasn’t laid out intuitively, and he’d already lost his bearings.

“Check the fucking map, asshole.” The woman slammed her door shut.

The degenerates at this damn station had no manners.

It took him longer than it should have to navigate the twists and turns and find the dock again. If the scavenger hadn’t derailed him, maybe he’d have had time to find the mess hall for some breakfast, if this place even had one. For all he knew, they all subsisted on nothing but nutrigel.

Bretton was already at the needlefin, shoving himself into his flight suit.

“You’re late,” he said. “I’ve been pinging your NS.”

“And I’ve been ignoring it. You look like shit.” Bretton looked like he hadn’t slept an iota. Orion would bet he was running on stims.

“Thanks,” Bretton said flatly. “Someone had to guard the ship. Can’t risk it getting picked to the bone.”

“You slept here?”

“Bit of an overstatement,” Bretton grouched. “Let’s go.”

“Gotta do something first. You can prep her for another passenger in the meantime.”

“What?”

“I’ll explain later.” Orion turned to scan the dock for any sign of Kaia.

He spotted an incoming ship through one of the viewports in the hull. It was a boxy old thing. All angles and chipped paints and patches screwed and glued. It had two metallic arms folded haphazardly on its flank, and it was a bit lopsided. Orion grinned at the figure behind the smudged cockpit visor.

The ship held steady as the outer airlock doors slid open for admittance.

“Orion? What other passenger? We’ve gotta get out of here.”

He ignored Bretton, watching Kaia pilot her own ship, a pirate ship, into the airlock. It was so fucking smooth. *She* was so fucking smooth. She made the ugly hunk of junk look like a goddamn Old Earth swan gliding to the surface of a lake. That’s what they’d called enclosed bodies of water.

The craft disappeared in the airlock, and a few moments later the inner doors opened. It maneuvered into an empty spot a few markers away and Orion held his breath in anticipation of an impeccable landing. But the thing started to wobble and stray. He grimaced when the right landing foot screeched against the floor, sending up sparks.

Finally the ship slammed down across two parking spots with a shuddering groan. How could she look like a proper pilot in space and like *that* in the landing dock?

He didn’t have time to ponder it. The pilot’s cab popped open and Kaia jumped out onto the roof of the craft with a pair of gloves between her teeth. A helmet dangled by the chin strap from one hand, and she used the other to descend the rusted ladder leading from the cockpit to the floor.

She looked like she’d worn the hell out of that faded orange flight suit. Orion was so impressed by the evident wear, he barely registered the nice way it hugged the curves of her little ass.

“*Orion.*” Bretton delivered a rough shove to his shoulder, but Orion paid him no mind.

But still he hesitated, second-guessing his decision. Was he being too impulsive? He didn’t know this woman. What was he getting himself into here? Wouldn’t he have enough to deal with once he was back on *Colossal*?

And then she looked at him. Her green hawk eyes slid to his, then flicked away with not even a hint of recognition.

Was she... ignoring him?

Fuck that.

“Orion!” Bretton growled as Orion strode toward Kaia, intercepting her path.

For a moment she looked like she might run. Which would be very, very bad for her. Maybe she had the same thought, because after a few seconds she faltered, then stopped. Her gaze flicked to the needlefin, then to Orion.

“Oh, hi. How’s it going?”

“Yeah, good. Look.” Orion didn’t intend to waste any time. “Kaia. Come with me.”

She stiffened. “What?”

“I want to take you back to *Colossal*. I thought it all through. I don’t want whatever shitty rich brats my parents picked. I want someone exciting. Someone different. A little *crazy*. Like you.”

She froze like a cryocorpse as he delivered his invitation, not looking as grateful as he’d have expected. Which was preposterous, of course, because no sane woman would turn down this offer. Not from him.

Orion realized this was perfect. Kaia wasn’t sane. That what was so alluring about her. She’d need *convincing*.

“You won’t regret it,” he spoke fast, glancing back at Bretton, who was standing there with his arms crossed over his chest, glaring. “You’ll have whatever you want. No more scrounging for parts on some shithole chunk of metal. Your ship?” Orion swept his arm at the heap of junk she flew into the dock. “I’ll get you a new one. We can fly together. Go anywhere. Do anything.”

He was blabbering, but there was no time to do this properly, slowly, convincingly.

“Look, I swear to you that you’ll love it. I’ll make you love it.”

“It?”

“Our marriage!” Orion blurted, exasperated. She was tapping her helmet against her thigh, panicked eyes roaming.

Her gaze turned to the needlefin, which was already humming as the engines warmed.

Her mouth was a thin line, chin working forward and back as she rubbed her lips together. She was considering it, and she needed to consider it fucking faster. Orion bent his head closer. “But I have to go, Kaia. Now. So you take it or leave it.”

CHAPTER 9

KAIA

Marriage? What the fuck was he thinking?

It wasn't supposed to be that easy. When she stumbled into him on her return to the dock, she couldn't even meet his eyes, pretending to ignore him like an idiot. She was sure she'd blown it.

Turns out she was wrong. Her heart raced as she stood before him, her lungs full of coffee and mint. How could her "seduction" have worked so fast? How could it have worked at all? She was just a scavenger on a rundown station. A nobody. The whole plan, even if she did want to go through with it, was meant to start with a simple invitation to accompany him to his colony, not a fucking *proposal* hours after they met. What was wrong with him? He was clearly unhinged.

It was all about what *he* wanted. *He* wanted to marry someone exciting. Someone "different". Someone he could shove into his parents' faces. That he'd use her like a pawn in his little twisted family game told her everything she needed to know about him. Orion Halen was colony royalty, but he was no better than Loran or any of the other thugs on this station.

Her hand twitched with the slap she was itching to deliver, but she caught herself. Orion didn't need to be a good person for her purposes—in fact, him being an asshole would just make everything easier.

She watched the monster, the mark, breathing down on her, waiting for her answer.

"All right," she said, and the look on Orion's face wasn't one of relief or elation. Nothing like that. In his eyes was the spark of victory.

"Good." Orion Halen grabbed her hand and began to march her toward the needlefin.

"Hey, wait." Kaia resisted, digging in her heels.

“No time to pack. We have to go now.”

“I said wait.” She yanked her hand from his, noting the flash of irritation on his face. “You go. I’ll be right there.”

Kaia broke off at a brisk walk toward *Ahton’s Take*. Heart racing, she fought to control her pace and resisted the urge to run. Not around an uhyre.

She punched the red button to open the *Take’s* hold. As soon as the door lowered enough for her to squeeze through, Kaia clambered inside, picking her way through unsold loot, garbage, and scraps.

When she was crouched in the back corner of the hold, the dim halogen lights overhead barely lighting the metallic silhouettes around her, Kaia pressed her hand flat into an indent nestled into the floor. She winced as the two miniature sampling needles pierced the center of her palm and the pad of her ring finger. A moment later the recess withdrew, revealing an unlit black hatch with an opening just large enough to fit her arm.

The DNA security system was the most expensive part of *Ahton’s Take*.

Kaia got on her stomach and reached into the hole, feeling around the interior. She knew exactly where it was, and soon her fingertips hit the edge of the rectangular card. She plucked it out and locked up the secret alcove.

This was it. Everything she’d earned over the years, and everything she had to keep. She shoved the card into her back pocket and made her way back through the hold, squinting as she hopped down into the bright lights of the dock. She locked *Ahton’s Take* and glanced over at the needlefin, which waited with hatch open and engines prepped.

Kaia blinked away the sudden stinging in her eyes, swallowed down the lump working up her throat. She stroked the hull of her brother’s namesake. It had been with her all these years, vital in her mission to get back to him. Would she ever see it again? Would Loran pick it apart for scraps as soon

as she was gone? Kaia took a few shaky breaths and pressed her lips to the metal for just a moment.

The tears were dry before they ever got a chance to spill. She pulled herself together, turned, and strode to the needlefin.

CHAPTER 10

ORION

When Kaia appeared at the hatch, Orion grabbed her arm and hauled her into the ship.

“About fucking time,” Bretton growled from the cockpit.

Orion ignored him, directing Kaia to one of the three passenger seats nestled against the wall. She wasted no more time getting her ass into her seat and snapping the belt buckles across her chest. He was slower at that after spending years planetside, fumbling with the overlapping belts for a few moments before working them into place.

The ship lifted with a subtle vibration just as he finished strapping in.

Good to go, Orion subvocalized to Bretton.

This isn't a good idea, Orion.

How about you just do your job?

There was muffled chattering in the cockpit as Bretton communicated with the docksmen—they didn't have Neurosyncs for subvocalization here, of course. The ship moved, a subtle push rocking him in his seat. It wavered as Bretton guided them through the dock.

Orion glanced at Kaia next to him. She clenched the arms of her seat with bony fingers, black paint chipping on her knuckles, which looked even whiter than the rest of her pallid skin. She stared straight ahead. Only the hint of red rimming her green eyes gave away the fact that she'd been crying, or close to it. Her orange hair was a mop around her head and shoulders, frizzy and a little wet from the sweat of the old helmet, which she had positioned in her lap.

The girl looked like she was terrified to be there, which was not how Orion envisioned this going. And sure, perhaps a last-minute proposal in the dock wasn't the ideal way sweep a

woman off her feet, but didn't she realize her whole life just changed for the better? She was about to go from a malnourished scavenger to the commander's wife on the biggest colony ship in the universe. *Have some goddamn gratitude.*

Orion's mulling was interrupted by the thermaview of the needlefin flickering into transparency around them as Bretton lowered the shields. The sharp inhale next to him mirrored the little jolt of his own awareness at the sudden appearance of infinite space.

The only part of the ship that remained opaque was the floor, stretching a few inches up onto the curving walls. Kaia had unclasped her belt and turned in her seat. She kneeled on the firm cushion, gripping the back for balance. She looked a little more serene with the view—surprising, since people tended to get a shock at the emptiness opening up around them. But she was a pilot, after all.

Orion grinned at the prize he was bringing back.

“Beautiful, huh?” He watched her profile as he said it. Her peachy pink lips curled into a small smile. But it soon disappeared, delicate brows drawing together.

“Yeah, except *that*...”

He followed her line of sight.

“Shit.”

Bretton, we're being tailed. Even mid-subvocalization, the thermaview shuttered to black, engaging the needlefin's lightweight shields.

I know. Strap in.

Orion turned back to Kaia, ready to drag her back into her seat, but she was already up and making way to the front.

“Wait.” Orion got up to follow her. The ship jerked a sharp keel to the left, knocking them both off balance. She regained hers faster, nimble legs flexing to keep her upright, and reached the cockpit before Orion could get there. Bretton hadn't locked the door. There had been no need; it had been

just them in the ship for days, talking shit in the cockpit about their childhoods on *Colossal*.

“What the fuck?” Bretton’s booming shout carried out to the passenger cabin. When Orion got to the entrance of the cockpit, he groaned at the sight of Kaia in the copilot’s seat. “Get her out, Halen.”

The warship coming at them was small for its kind, a compact Raptor C-type—outdated, but widely considered a wartime classic, among the best for its time. It was painted a sleek black, with no identifying markers as Universal Law required.

Kaia pulled away when he tried to nudge her up, narrowed eyes following the pursuing ship even as she rattled out a fast stream of instructions to Bretton—one he was predictably ignoring. What was it with women? They always had opinions at the worst possible moments.

The warship strayed over the needelfin, out of view of the cockpit’s visor. With a glance at the radar, Orion saw it coming back around to tail them. Bretton looked to the radar screen instead, jaw set and eyes tight as he tried to maneuver around the ship. He punched a comms channel.

“Unmarked vessel, this is *Lotus 214A36*. We are a non-hostile vessel under colony protection. Disengage.”

“He won’t fucking listen to you,” Kaia growled. As if to mark her words, the needelfin quivered with the shock of impact. An alarm flared on the dashboard. Bretton had the bow guns extracted, but the attacker wasn’t at their bow. The warship was now on the side and, judging by the radar, swerving in their direction.

“And now your stern propulsion is dead. Great job.” Kaia rolled her eyes. “I told you, he favors starboard.”

Orion gripped the back of her seat as another convulsion rocked the ship, and it dawned on him.

“Bret...” He leaned toward the pilot over the blaring of an alarm. “She knows who it is.”

Bretton was silent, fingers flicking on the dash as he multitasked.

“Bretton!” Orion growled.

The fury in Bretton’s eyes was palpable as he glanced between Orion to the girl. “Will you both get the fuck out of here? I’m trying to save our asses!”

“Oh, yeah, and you’re doing a great job. Look, I’m telling you, strafe left,” Kaia urged.

“Right *into* the goddamn Raptor? Are you fucking suicidal?”

Kaia threw her hands over the back of the seat, her lithe body contorting with exasperation. Tense fingers brushed against Orion’s on the fabric, and their eyes met, locking in a moment of comprehension.

She twisted in her seat. Looking up at him, her words came fast. “Let me do it. You or this fucker get on the aft cannon.”

The needlefin had one aft cannon. It wasn’t a fighter ship, equipped with only the bare necessities of self-defense. Heat-wise, it was no match for a Raptor, but they had to do *something*. They were in the middle of fucking nowhere. Chances of backup were slim to none, so the best they could do was stall and hope.

“Orion.” Her voice was even, but as the warship circled them, taunting, there was fear in her eyes. “I know this guy. His reaction times are sloppy on port, and he fucks around too much. I can handle him, but someone needs to shoot.”

Orion narrowed his eyes, considering. This was a horrible idea. She wasn’t even a licensed pilot. How could she do a better job than colony-trained Bretton?

But he remembered how smoothly she flew her hunk of junk into the dock. That required skill. Precision. And... she clearly knew whoever was attacking them.

“Hand over the controls, Bretton.”

“Fuck off.”

“Bretton, so help me, when I become Commander, assuming you don’t get us all killed first, I will lock you up for retroactive insubordination for the rest of your life if you don’t hand over the controls right fucking now.”

Bretton flinched at the threat, the movement jolting the needlefin up as his hands white-knuckled the yoke. With a stream of expletives and a spray of spittle, he punched in the codes to transfer control to the copilot’s seat, where Kaia was already getting to work.

When Orion felt relatively sure that Bretton wouldn’t murder his new fiancé in the cockpit, he went to man the cannon.

CHAPTER 11

KAIA

The needlefin's sleek controls felt foreign in Kaia's hands, and when she first tested the yoke, the movement was too sudden, the fighter responding much quicker than *Ahton's Take* had. Bretton shot her a seething glare. Kaia quickly strapped herself in before she could go flying around the cockpit.

But it didn't take long to get a feel for the sleek carbon fiber in her hands. She planted her feet into the floor, the yoke between her legs, and peered through the visor. The view was severely limited. In her old ship, it spanned the full cockpit. Here, the thermaview coating applied shields to most of the surface, the pilot having to rely on radar. Considering the radar system in *Ahton's Take* was unreliable at best, Kaia seldom used it, instead maneuvering by eye. That was gonna be a problem.

She spat a string of expletives rivaling Bretton's when the ship jerked under another impact.

Loran must have changed his mind. Maybe he thought she was betraying him, that she'd tell Orion everything, and decided to cut his losses. Despite the needlefin being much nimbler than Loran's craft, Loran was a good pilot—he wasn't letting them go.

She tried to get a pin on him on the radar screen, but watching two 2D dots on a grid wasn't intuitive. She struggled to superimpose their relative positions over the physical world in her mind's eye, but it was no use. Kaia performed choppy evasive maneuvers that she hoped would keep Loran on his toes until she oriented herself. She needed to work him in range of the aft cannon, which meant getting above him. But how was she supposed to do that when she couldn't even figure out where they were in relation to each other?

“What are you doing? Watch the fucking radar, not the visor!” Bretton was yelling, gesturing wildly at the screen.

Kaia chewed her lip, eyes gravitating to the narrow view of space from the front of the cockpit. This wasn't going to work. She needed a visual.

Orion's voice came through loud and clear from the cannon bay. “We gonna get in range anytime soon?”

She released the yoke, flexing out the tension in her fingers. Then her eyes flicked to the thermaview release.

Fuck it.

She disengaged the shields. In an instant, the surrounding walls disappeared and she could see everything. Relief cooled the sweat on her brow. She looked to her left and saw it: Loran's Raptor in full view.

“What the fuck are you doing? We're naked out here!” Bretton snapped. “Put the shields back up!”

But Kaia was in it now. She could see the white glow of heating laser in Loran's starboard cannon, and with a flick of the wrist the needlefin dipped out of the path of the shot. Not waiting for Loran to regroup, Kaia keeled left, then up and under, into the underside of his hull.

She smirked as Loran bailed, dodging with an ungainly roll.

“Are you playing fucking *chicken*?” Bretton gaped.

He shut up when Kaia maneuvered to Loran's port side and dodged another clumsy laser blast.

“Just a little higher.” Orion's voice was calm now. The concentration in it mirrored her own at the controls and she pictured him aiming the cannon, thumb hovering over the release. She pinched the tip of her tongue between her lips, focusing. She had to get him a shot.

The next time Loran feinted left, Kaia was the one to cave—the ships must have been no more than a few feet from each other. He was getting desperate. She fired a few warning shots from the lightweight lasers at the bow. They weren't

positioned to hit, and she wasn't half as good a shot as she was a pilot. Each time she tried to get up and over Loran's craft, he dipped over them, keeping her beneath his belly. He knew what they were going for, and he wasn't about to let them have it.

Kaia sucked in a breath, thinking. She killed the engines, then reversed propulsion. Her body jerked forward at the sudden deceleration, the straps of her harness jutting into her collarbone.

"Shit," Bretton grunted next to her. Kaia couldn't help but beam through a fresh rush of adrenaline.

The needlefin responded nimbly as she pushed it, grinding the engines into submission. It took no time at all for the ship to halt—not long enough for Loran to realize what was going on. He shot past them, its antiquated propulsion not fast enough to maneuver around the way Kaia had. Kaia twitched the needlefin up higher, above the warship making an arc up ahead.

"There's your fucking shot," she said, not sure if Orion would hear her. She didn't know how to open two-way comms.

Either way he seemed to get it. A thick blast whizzed from the bottom of the needlefin, whipping past in the visor. It missed the moving target, but was soon followed by another, and this one was a hit.

"Fuck yeah," Orion growled through the speaker.

"Fuck. Yeah," Kaia concurred. But it wasn't time to relax. The fighter had turned around and was coming straight for them.

Kaia kicked the aft propulsion back in, preparing to maneuver the cannon into range again. But before she could do so, the Raptor careening for them slowed within daunting proximity, affording Kaia a view into the cockpit.

Loran's eyes were steel, but the corner of his mouth twitched in the flash of a grin. His chin lowered in a short nod, eyes locked on hers, before he accelerated and sped away.

Fuck.

She understood then exactly what this was. Loran was toying with them. Orion had been attracted to her volatility, her lack of giving a fuck, just like Loran said he would be. And she saw the way Orion's eyes flashed when he heard that she could fly.

Now he got to see it firsthand.

Loran "helped" her along by orchestrating an attack she could thwart to impress their mark. Did it work?

The steadiness in her hands during the scrimmage disappeared now that the danger was over, the energy draining out of her all at once. She limply shut off the weapons and re-engaged the shields, just in case. She unstrapped as Bretton switched the control back over to his station.

"Good work," Bretton muttered next to her. "But you've gotta learn how to read a fucking radar."

Kaia slumped in her seat. She didn't have the energy for a comeback, and he wasn't even wrong. She looked out at the strip of space visible through the visor. Warmth that numbed her limbs and hazed her vision crept into her limbs. It always happened after an intense flight, and this one had been on another level.

Loran told her once, on a rare occasion in which he felt talkative in bed, that the hours after a skirmish were miserable for him. The adrenaline would pump through him with no outlet. Kaia learned to stay away from him during those times. For her, it was the opposite. Of course, she never got into actual scrimmages in her busted-up ship, but there were some close calls—collections where she'd been impatient, gone into the ruins of a battle before the area was clear. She'd have to evade the remaining fighters or drones until Loran sent backup to help, and sometimes he liked to wait, to make her sweat a little.

But after the intensity of those chases, Kaia was always calmer than ever. The cockpit door hissed behind her, and Kaia

sighed. She doubted there would be much calm in her future for now.

“You are a fucking beast,” Orion swiveled her chair around and from her seated position, Kaia came face to face with the hard-on pressing through his crotch.

Eww.

“Thanks,” she said wryly.

“I’m fucking pumped. Did you see that, Bretton? We kicked that asshole’s ass.”

Bretton grunted, flicking at some button on the dash.

Orion had both hands planted on the arms of her seat, bending over her with an erection that left little to the imagination. And being in the presence of an aroused uhyre was not Kaia’s idea of a celebration. How long until he snapped? She needed to fix that, and fast.

“Wanna get your dick outta my face any time soon, or are we just gonna stay like this?”

Insults should help.

Orion frowned, straightening with his arms crossed on his chest. “Don’t tell me flying circles around that asshole doesn’t get you a little wet, princess. Who was that anyway?”

The first rule of lying was to do as little of it as possible. Loran had told her that once.

“My old boss.” Kaia shoved a hand through her hair, forcing her fingers through the matted tangles.

“Must not be happy about you running off to a better life, huh?” Orion nodded solemnly.

“Something like that.”

“Seemed to give up on us pretty fast,” Bretton mused, fiddling with the controls.

His powers of perception could become a problem.

“He’s not bad. He’s just... possessive. And now he’s down a scav.”

She didn't like Bretton's noncommittal grunt, but Orion was already changing the subject. "I'm starving. Let's eat."

CHAPTER 12

KAIA

She didn't understand how these men could eat so much and not explode. An hour after breakfast, which she declined on account of having already had her nutrigel pack that morning, they had a snack. And within another few hours, Orion said he was once again hungry.

Nutrigel was designed to satiate. If they were thinking logically, they'd just stick to that. Instead, she glimpsed them eating all kinds of weird shit in the small canteen abutting the passenger cabin.

But staring through the thermaview as they once again retreated to the canteen, Kaia was rethinking her approach. Orion's sudden proposal, and the rush to get off Riker 109, had frayed her last nerve. She was supposed to be the one seducing this man. Instead, she refused his food and insulted his alien package.

Everything was going to plan, except for her attitude.

So when Orion called her over to the canteen, she complied. Bretton's elbows took up most of the tiny plastic table. He had a plate between his arms and long yellow-brown strips piled on top of it. White specks of something dotted his beard. He picked a strip between his fingers and popped it into his mouth.

Orion was extracting a box from a dispenser in the wall. Kaia wrinkled her nose as its scent wafter over, burnt and fleshy.

"Sit." Orion nodded toward one chair, and Kaia did as instructed, maneuvering into the small space to perch on the stool closest to the door.

When he opened the steaming box and extracted its contents onto two plates, Kaia nearly retched. It had smelled like flesh because it *was*. Real animal flesh. Crusty brown and

crisp on the outside, reddish and wet on the inside when Orion cut into his chunk of it.

She stared at her plate, barely registering Orion and Bretton exchanging looks in her peripheral vision.

“What is it?” Orion asked as his jaw worked around the piece of fried animal muscle he’d shoved in his mouth. It looked tough. Kaia shuddered as a dab of pink blood seeped between his lips.

She’d already decided to make an effort, but she wasn’t sure she could handle this. There was a non-zero chance she’d vomit.

“Well?” The annoyance in Orion’s voice made her bite back a retort.

“I’m not that hungry...”

Orion scowled. “Are you seriously turning down a steak right now?”

Kaia swallowed. Was that what it was? A “steak”?

“Do you have any nutrigel?”

Orion’s jaw was the only part of him that moved as it worked around his “steak”.

“Why do you want nutrigel when I’m giving you proper food?” he asked.

“She’s probably never had proper food,” Bretton finally spoke up. He didn’t look at her, pushing his half-full plate to the middle of the table. “We’re almost there. I’m checking in.” With that, he rose and lumbered out of the canteen.

“That true?” Orion watched her.

Kaia was trying not to talk or breathe too much, so as not to inhale the disgusting smell wafting from the plate before her. “Sort of... We ate roots when I was a kid.”

Orion tapped a forefinger against his fork, thinking. Was he deciding whether to believe her?

“You realize this stuff is a delicacy, right? Try it.”

“I can’t.” It came out whinier than she would have liked, and she cringed at herself. “I’ll be sick.”

Orion sighed and dragged her plate toward himself. “Whatever. More for me. Want a fry?”

“A fry?”

“Sliced potatoes. A root vegetable for the little root eater. They’re addictive.” She recoiled when Orion plucked one from Bretton’s plate and held it to her mouth.

When Kaia leaned back in, she decided the “fry” didn’t smell so bad. Slightly sweet, slightly tangy. It was dotted with little white particles, and Kaia began to suspect what it was she saw on Bretton’s beard earlier: wasted specks of one of the most important minerals in the universe.

“Is that salt?” She plucked the strip from Orion’s hand. He looked amused, but she paid it no mind; she was already taking an uncertain nibble. Kaia held it in her mouth, letting the salty flavor melt into her tastebuds. Holy shit, salt was delicious.

She ate the rest of the plate slowly, chewing each bite to pulp, savoring.

“It’s a start, but fries aren’t gonna fill you with what you need,” Orion complained at his plate as he finished his steak, knife ripping through the disgusting flesh.

By the time she was done, Kaia’s belly was ready to explode. But there *was* a problem. One she had pushed to the back of her mind while eating the salty deliciousness before her, but could no longer ignore. Her mouth had grown excruciatingly dry. Her tongue, she was sure, would shrivel up and disappear any moment. Was this what physical food did? She didn’t remember the roots from back home making her this parched. Kaia wished she had insisted on a nutrigel packet. Nutrigel contained both a thirst suppressant and what little hydration her body needed. Whatever she just consumed seemed to do the opposite.

“What?” Orion asked, and Kaia realized she’d been staring at him.

No way. She wasn't asking. Definitely not him, and not for the most valuable resource in the known galaxies. Asking for things made debts, and she was already in over her head. But fuck, her throat was closing in. But he did make her eat this stuff, didn't he? He wanted her to...

Why couldn't he have fucking warned her? Kaia watched him, suspicion pressing her dry lips into a thin line. She licked her lips and found the last granules of salt there, melting on her swollen tongue.

"What's the problem?" Orion pressed.

"Nothing," she croaked through her dry throat.

She didn't need to look at him to feel his stare. Kaia was sure then that this had been his plan all along. Well, fuck him. She wasn't gonna cave. She pretended not to feel the weight of his glare, instead folding her hands on the table and staring at her chipping knuckles.

How long that lasted, she didn't know. Time really dragged when the roof of your mouth felt increasingly like a filter scrub sheet. So when he banged something onto the table under her nose with a clatter, Kaia jumped first from the shock of the noise.

It wasn't until a second later that she saw the thing slammed before her was a shot of clear liquid, and damn if that didn't make the torture even worse.

"Drink," he said.

Kaia studied him, searching his face for an unspoken confession of however he was going to make her pay for this. Tracing for signs of a sneer, or a perverted smirk, or that specific glint in a man's eye when he was getting ideas.

But Orion wasn't looking at her at all. He was back at his plate, ripping pieces of flesh and shoving them into his mouth. A little irritated, but that was all.

Her greedy eyes gravitated back to the shot of H₂O in front of her. He just... gave her the whole thing. Just like that. She brought it to her lips slowly and took the tiniest of sips. As

soon as it hit her lips, she had to restrain herself from gulping the whole thing down like a greedy little bitch.

It tasted better than the stuff on Riker 109. She let it sit on her tongue, closing her eyes with the fresh wetness of it. She glanced at Orion, who continued to look like this was nothing. Not even a favor, much less a bribe.

Maybe this would be fine. Solid food. Water being dispensed like it was no big deal. And she wasn't even on the colony ship yet. Whatever time she had remaining in this life may as well be spent in relative comfort, right?

Yes, Kaia thought. This can work.

CHAPTER 13

ORION

As they approached the rendezvous point with *Colossal*, Orion's irritation simmered to a boiling point.

He'd taken a nap reclined in his seat. He had urged Kaia to do the same, knowing once they arrived there was no guarantee of rest. Not with his mother there to assert her dominance fast as she could manage.

Kaia declined. She was so fucking stubborn—first her food hangup and now her refusal to sleep when he *knew* she'd need it. Was everything going to be an uphill battle with this girl?

A good fight in bed was one thing, but he wanted them meek in other contexts. He had other shit to worry about than keeping his woman in line.

Shit. My woman.

But the way her eyes lit up when she tasted those fries, and the suspicion morphing to desperation on her face when he poured her some H₂O made the skin around the spines on the back of his neck contract with satisfaction. He was showing her a whole new world—a world of abundance and hydration and solid food.

He thought it was a genius plan to let her stuff herself with salt and not tell her what to expect. She'd get thirsty, and then she'd have to ask him for help. For resources. A shot of H₂O was nothing to him. But to her, it was a show of his power and generosity.

Except she hadn't asked. She'd just sat there, glaring like a little animal who saw right through his ploy. Fucker.

Orion watched the port side of *Colossal* grow larger before them, stomach dropping into a heavy pit. He hadn't been on this ship in fifteen years, and hoped he wouldn't find himself back for at least a few decades more.

No such luck.

He glanced at Kaia next to him, who was staring at that growing speck in the distance with wary eyes as she rubbed her wrists. Orion took her hand, folding it into his own. She tensed, but didn't resist.

Good girl.

“Nervous, princess?” he asked.

A flash of something crossed her face. Her fingers clenched within his. “Don't call me that. And no.”

Liar.

If *he* was nervous to be back there, she was probably on the verge of a panic attack. Her whole life hadn't been spent on Riker 109, that much he'd gathered. She came from planetside, poor thing, so she wasn't completely sheltered. But seeing a colony ship up close was something else. Very few people who weren't residents would even get close to seeing such a thing in their lifetimes. If the secrecy of the colony's trajectory didn't stop an unwanted visitor, the laser cannons would.

“Docking in five.” Bretton's voice came over the intercom for Kaia's benefit as she didn't have a Neurosync yet. They would get that sorted shortly.

“Strap in, princess,” Orion instructed, lest she not know what docking entailed.

Kaia snatched her hand from his to focus on her harness, fidgeting with the clasps. Oh, yes, she was freaking out.

Orion strapped himself in and prepared for a long few hours.

CHAPTER 14

KAIA

As Kaia descended the ramp of the needlefin, the dock coming into view before her made her head spin. The open expanse of it appeared as though it may be larger than an entire deck of Riker 109.

Painfully bright lights illuminated the space. A row of shiny new needlefins sitting next to their own, which was steaming as its engines cooled, were mere specks in the dock's starfield. A few dozen other vessels were neatly parked in spots marked by pristine paint and rows of faint LEDs embedded into the floor.

Kaia stumbled as something big and hard shoved into her back.

“Shit.” Hands grabbed her shoulders. Coffee and mint. “Can't just stop like that.”

“Can if the person behind you looks where he's going,” Kaia bit back.

Be nice.

“Come on, don't be like that, princess.” Orion nudged her off the ramp, keeping one heavy arm looped around her shoulders, digging her into his side. Kaia clutched her helmet to her chest as he dragged her across the deck.

“No welcome party?” he called back to Bretton, who was trailing them.

“Commander Halena requests you at the command center.”

It wasn't lost on Kaia that the pilot's voice was suddenly more formal than at any point during the twenty-or-so-hour flight.

Orion did not follow suit.

“I bet she does,” he snorted.

As they reached the far side of the dock, Orion steered them toward the wall on the left. The door they stopped at was invisible to Kaia until it was right in her face. Orion pressed a hand to a smooth indentation at its side. If the authentication process hurt, Orion didn't show it. When the door opened, his palm came away with five distinct pricks already beading blood. He brought them to his mouth, sucking at the sampling points while directing Kaia inside.

The passageway they entered was a narrow, rounded tunnel, lit dimly by warm, luminescent strips lining the walls. Some of the tightness in her gut unclenched as they stepped deeper into those dark, narrow confines. Just like the passages on Riker 109. Except not chipped, dirty, or dented.

“Private hallway? Does it get you to the command center faster?”

“Blood passage. And yes, unfortunately,” Orion said wryly. By the way he slowed his pace, Orion wasn't acting like he wanted to get there in a hurry, so why bother with a shortcut?

“More privacy,” he grunted, as if reading her mind.

“My shoulder hurts.”

“Huh?”

Kaia shrugged off Orion's arm, which was still keeping her pinned to his side. “Too heavy.”

“Better get used to it, princess.” But he let her be, walking ahead with what appeared to be a cocky certainty that she'd follow.

Where else are you gonna go, idiot?

He grew more tense with each turn they took, muscles bunching under fitted black carbonsilk. Yes, she'd been nervous. But this didn't seem to be a walk in the park for Orion Halen either. Somehow Kaia doubted he was expecting a warm family reunion.

This time, it was Kaia that had to stop short after nearly colliding with the broad wall of his back. He'd stopped dead in

front of a door and stayed there, unmoving. He rolled his rounded shoulders a few times and flexed his hands into fists, then shook them out.

How bad could his mother be if her own son was so stressed about seeing her?

Then, with a hiss, the door was open. Kaia followed her new fiancé into the beam of light ahead.

CHAPTER 15

ORION

The command center was just as he'd remembered it: bright, sterile, stifling. Monitors projected trajectory and resource graphs over the thermaview, text and figures glowing over the blackness of space. Black carbon seats were molded along the walls, presently empty.

Mare Halena sat in the commander's chair in the middle of it all with her chin on her hand, studying something on one of the projected screens. Per Halen stood rigid at her side.

"Mother."

"Oh, good, you're here." She tore her gaze with some hesitation from the screen and spun the platform on which both her seat and her husband were positioned toward Orion. "Bretton said there was some nonsense with an attack?"

"Nothing we couldn't handle."

"Naturally. What is that?"

Orion realized Kaia was hiding behind his bulk, and she was the "that" Mare Halena was peering at.

Sorry, princess. Time to shine.

He stepped aside and pressed a hand to the small of her back to nudge her forward. He gritted his teeth at her flinch. She shouldn't be wincing from him in front of his mother. Shit, she shouldn't be wincing from him at all!

Mare Halena's forehead furrowed. Her brows, now raised, were thinner than he'd remembered. She looked old and almost mortal. Almost. His mother's glacial eyes, mirrors of his own in color, narrowed to slits.

"What have you brought, Orion?"

Orion opened his mouth to respond, but his girl seemed to have grown a bit of a backbone because she straightened and took a step forward. "Kaia."

“Kaia who?”

She clenched her helmet in one hand—Orion didn’t know why she was insisting on carrying that thing around—and put the other on her hip. “Just Kaia.”

“Why are you in my command center, Just Kaia?” The peculiar rattle in Mother’s voice, auditory evidence of the sickness marching her towards Heaven, didn’t make her sound any less intimidating.

Orion stepped up behind her and slung both arms around her shoulders, letting them hang. She stood rigid against his chest, and she’d better not fucking move away and ruin this for him.

“She’s here because she’s my fiancée.”

There it was. That sweet pang of satisfaction at the punchline. He knew Mare Halena too well to expect a *visible* reaction, but he also knew she would be seething inside. And confused. And maybe a little scared? Hopefully anyway.

“Orion...” It was his father who spoke, placing a pale hand on his wife’s shoulder.

“We have candidates picked for you, Orion. As you know.” His mother ignored her husband in his entirety and opted instead to subvocalize to Orion directly.

How rude, he thought, to exclude my wife-to-be from the conversation like this.

“Well, good news for you then. I’ve already done the legwork of finding a bride,” he said out loud.

Mother pursed her lips, scanning Kaia’s body. Orion knew what she was looking for: signs of privilege. Signs of physical strength and stamina. Signs of fertility most of all.

Kaia had none of those things. Well, they’d find out about the fertility part. Orion expected her to wither under Mare Halena’s chilled gaze. Instead, she just went more rigid and straightened like a statue under his arms. He looped his forearms over her chest, squeezing his pride at her reaction.

“Not a problem, my son. You can pick one or two more from our list.”

He smirked. “No thanks, I think I’m fine for now.”

The commander of the largest colony ship in the known galaxies drummed her fingers against her seat, and Orion knew that would be the closest she would come to showing her agitation. Her husband, of course, kept his mouth shut. He stayed out of colony business and out of his wife’s way. As a good commander’s spouse should.

“Well, if there’s nothing else...” Orion pressed.

“There is plenty more, Orion. Per, get the girl quarters for the night. My son and I have a lot to discuss.”

Orion’s father moved to action, and Orion’s grasp across Kaia’s chest tightened as he approached them with a placid smile. “She’ll stay in my cabins.”

Per Halen hesitated, looking back at his wife, Orion’s bitch of a mother. But before she could make this a fight, his fucking bride-to-be chimed in.

“No.” Kaia ducked out from Orion’s arms. “I’d prefer my own cabin for now.”

Father didn’t even try to hide the relief on his face, offering his arm to the girl. Conflict avoidance was his happy place. “Very well then. Come, dear.”

Orion scoffed at the pretense of Kaia having any choice in the matter. She’d be in his cabins soon enough.

Per Halen offered Orion a placating smile. “Don’t worry. I won’t keep her far.”

And the fucking girl grimaced. Shit, she wanted to be nowhere near him. That wouldn’t do at all. The smug satisfaction on Mother’s face burrowed into his sternum. He’d sort this out with Kaia later because this shit was not going to fly.

Orion watched as his father led her away, this time through the common entrance as his blood necessitated.

CHAPTER 16

KAIA

“**S**orry, we didn’t have anything larger prepared,” Kaia’s father said from the doorway as she stepped into the most luxurious cabin she’d ever seen.

She didn’t know where to look. Her gaze bounced from one feature to another, unable to absorb any of them. Not the large plush bed against the wall. Not the soft rug beneath her feet—which she’d cringed at stepping on, denting the thick fibers with her shabby old boots. There was a transparent, possibly real glass door on the other side, leading to what appeared at a glance through the opening to be a bathroom. A separate, private bathroom.

Kaia’s attention finally fell to the alcove just off the wall to her right.

“Is that...”

Her minder followed her gaze. “Oh, yes, I suppose you may not have had one of these. Each cabin is allocated five hundred milliliters of H₂O and two liters of bathing water per day. Where are you from?”

Half a liter of water? And wait... did he say... bathing?

Kaia stared at the stack of shot-glasses nestled into the side of the hydra station, though she did manage to answer the question. “Riker 109.”

“That was Orion’s last layover, wasn’t it? Is that where you met?”

Kaia nodded.

They were so clean, the glasses. They looked heavy stacked on top of each other like that, in a neat little column of transparent polymer.

“You must’ve made quite an impression in such a short time.”

Kaia turned to him then, dragging her eyes from the stack of drinking vessels. The man's face was kind enough, but those eyes betrayed a hidden shrewdness Kaia had long learned to recognize. The smartest people always knew how to play dumb.

“You're Orion's father?”

“Yes. Per Halen.”

“You weren't born on *Colossal*?”

When Per Halen smiled, it reached his eyes. “You're observant.”

“Have to be where I'm from.”

“I was born on a small station in the Lantern Galaxy. But I've been here since I was twelve. Almost two centuries.”

Kaia nodded. She wondered how he ended up here and what hardships he may have endured before. But after all that time as the most powerful man on a colony ship, she doubted he could relate to much of her situation anyway.

“Got some good anti-aging tech on this ship then, huh?” The man didn't look a year past fifty.

“We are quite advanced. I'll leave you to settle in. I'm sure Orion will come check on you later.”

I hope not.

How much time did Kaia have until that happened? She'd already been stuck in the needlefin with him for nearly twenty-four Old Earth hours. Kaia was used to a much more solitary existence on Riker 109, spending hours in *Ahton's Take* or her cabin. By the time Per Halen turned to leave, Kaia's nerves were shot. So when she was finally alone, the heavy silence let Kaia take her first full, easy breath.

She was exhausted. She'd been too hyped up to relax on the needlefin. Now that debt slumped her shoulders and fell heavy on her lids. She couldn't wait to crawl into the bed waiting for her—a real bed, with taut fabric covering a firm mattress and a smooth blanket spread neatly atop it.

Kaia set her helmet aside and pressed her nose to the unblemished white fabric of the bedding. There was a synthetic, almost medicinal scent about it she'd never experienced before. Bedding on Riker 109 always smelled like people. Either her own skin and sweat or someone else's. But this, it didn't smell like it had been touched by any human hands at all, though surely someone must have come in to arrange it. Her skin tingled at the thought of lying in it, feeling that clean softness against every inch of her.

But first... Kaia walked over to the hydra station. Her mouth was already watering as she observed the various buttons on the device. That wasn't good. She'd gotten used to not drinking liquids her whole life, yet all it took was a couple of days of water consumption to make her notice the chapped, tight feeling in her mouth when she didn't have it.

Kaia flipped a glass under the dispenser and pressed the H2O button. Moments later, clear liquid began pouring into the glass in a generous stream. When the glass was full to the 25mL marker on the side, the stream ceased. She brought it to her nose with a trembling hand.

It smelled like nothing. Delicious, pure nothing. The first small sip on her tongue made a quiet sound catch in her throat. There was nothing in that taste except the faintest undercurrent of something stony and a little salty—likely trace minerals from whatever planet the water was siphoned. Kaia swallowed, this time not bothering to suppress a small moan. It was perfect.

She clutched the glass to her chest and approached the open bathroom door a few steps away. Square tiles lined the walls, ceiling, and floor of the pristine space. The cabin didn't just have a private toilet basin embedded into the floor, but its own dedicated shower stall separated from the rest of the space with a transparent partition.

She took another slow sip as she traced the silver knobs beneath the showerhead: one red, the other blue. Kaia had never seen a modern washing cubicle in person, but she'd seen enough of them in digital books and pictures to know they

didn't look like this. This was a simulation, recreated in the design of Old Earth.

And she had two liters to bathe with...

Finishing her water, Kaia set the glass on the synthstone sink—which also featured similar red and blue knobs—and removed her flight suit. She'd been in that thing since the last morning on Riker 109. Now the sweaty bits were beginning to chafe. She stripped the undersuit padding piece by piece, then the base layer, piling them on the floor. Finally, she turned to the thing she'd been avoiding since she entered the bathroom. The expansive mirror above the sink.

Riker 109 didn't have mirrors. The closest it had were polished sheets of metal, scraped and dented over the years, creating caricatures of whoever looked inside. Kaia had never had to face her own real reflection—the kind that offered no chance to hide behind a warped distortion.

Now she looked.

The green eyes staring back at her were exhausted. Sunken undereyes crinkled with dehydration lines that she'd never seen quite so clearly before. A bold spattering of freckles dotted the plane of her nose and her sharp, gaunt cheeks. Her lips didn't look too bad, having just been moistened by the H₂O, but still the corners of her mouth had little white scabs. The reflection of her tongue darted out to poke those flakes at each side.

Her observation moved lower, straying from her pointed chin to the thin neck and jutting collarbones. Sharp shoulders slumped in the mirror. Kaia forced them back. They obeyed after a few protesting creaks. The movement drew her eye to her small chest. Light nipples had grown hard and obscene to her eye; the bathroom wasn't cold, but the temperature change still felt drastic after being stuffed into the suit for so long. Lower, Kaia counted the ribs. They dipped into a narrow waist and a concave stomach. Her abs ran down in two vertical lines on either side—no muscle to really stand out, but no fat to hide them either.

Kaia looked just like anyone on Riker 109, so she'd never been self-conscious about her scrawniness. But if the transport to *Colossal* was anything to judge by, here they had solid food and water to wash it down with, and ate three meals a day. Was everyone on the colony going to be fat and fleshy? Would she look like a walking skeleton next to them all?

Who cares? It isn't like I'm staying.

It took Kaia a long time to figure out just the right balance of red and blue knobs to turn before she got the proper temperature of tolerably scalding water in the shower. She stayed under the stream for three glorious minutes, holding her face up to the wet needles raining down. Toward the end, she stuck her tongue out in a tentative test. She was meant to have half a liter of drinking water each day. Would anyone know if she cheated and drank some of the bathing ration?

Look at that. Just got here and already getting greedy.

Kaia didn't feel bad about it. Where she came from, being able to squeeze the most out of what you'd been given was a virtue. She allowed herself a few long gulps before deciding not to push her luck too much. Maybe they monitored what went down the drain for reuse.

She dried herself with a fluffy microfiber towel she'd found hanging on the side of the shower partition. This was followed by her customary joint massage, though the warm water had already made her wrists and ankles feel better than they had in years.

By the time it was all done, Kaia was ready to collapse in that bed. How long would she have to sleep before Orion came to fetch her? With any luck, he'd have a busy day with his mother. Or maybe he'd be too tired and go off to sleep in his own cabins. Kaia wondered if he'd still have that bitter coffee smell to him now that he was here, or if he'd opt for some new fancy colony cologne.

The memory of the scent made her pause. She approached the hydra station in the wall once more, glancing at the buttons. Some had cold H₂O, others hot, even flavored. There was a button for pea milk. But there it was—coffee. Was she allowed to dispense that? Per Halen hadn't specified a caffeine ration.

Kaia decided to take her chances. She watched a few dollops of dry brown powder land in her cup, soon topped with steaming water. Kaia found stirring sticks in a container next to the cups. Her parents used to agitate their coffee with similar instruments, so that's what she did.

The smell was like Orion, but even more potent. Bitter, *full* darkness wafting to her nostrils. It made her want to curl up somewhere warm. She cupped the glass in both hands, drawing in more of that aroma.

Kaia climbed into the bed with her drink, nestling under the thick cover. She was intending to drink slowly, savor the delicacy. But she couldn't. Each sip compelled her to take more. Each kick of that strong flavor a portal back in time to her parents and her brother in their little home on Artega Seven.

Once the glass was empty, Kaia set it next to the bed and curled up on her side. The overhead lighting dimmed of its own accord, fading out into total blackness.

Kaia's sleep was restless, if she could even call it sleep. Usually she didn't have trouble knocking herself out. Not in her cabin on Riker 109, and not even in Loran's bunk when she ended up there. But here, in the most comfortable bed she ever had, after a shower and a glass of water, she kept tossing and turning. She repositioned her pillow. Was it that? No, the pillow was perfect. Soft and shaped to support her neck in a way no pillow had before. So why couldn't she fucking sleep?

After what felt like hours of restless tossing, Kaia threw off the cover and sat up in bed, rubbing her eyes. She got up to

pace the cabin, hands twitching in jittery contractions.

This couldn't be normal. Was it something in the air? She hadn't slept in more than an Old Earth day. Why couldn't her brain just fucking switch off?

She stomped into the bathroom, squatted at the toilet to empty her bladder. Then, pinching her nose, she shoved herself back into the base layer of her flight suit. God, it was smelly... It seemed like a crime to put her clean body into that thing. But if she spent any more time staring at the walls, she would go crazy.

With the black base layer on and boots cinched around her ankles, Kaia stood before the door. Dim lighting had come on when she got up before, so the cabin knew she was up, yet the door remained shut. She felt for an indent on either side, some pressure-sensitive area for her palm. Nothing.

Could it be voice activated?

“Umm, open?”

No response. Kaia traversed the cabin, searching for a control panel, but found none. Slowly, it dawned on her that maybe the problem wasn't with her lack of familiarity with these modern amenities.

Did they lock her in?

“Hello?” she called. “Someone there?”

Nothing. She took her fist to the door once more, harder. “Open the fucking door!”

What if no one ever came? What if Orion forgot about her in all the commotion? Or what if his mother convinced him bringing her here was a stupid idea, and he was just gonna leave her there? The walls suddenly looked very close together. They shrank in a stifling distortion. Heart hammering, Kaia spun on her heel once, twice, sucking for air in the tiny space. Everything was too small and too cramped in this luxurious coffin. Kaia wasn't thinking anymore when she came at the walls with a flurry of kicks and punches, leaving no marks at all on her target and plenty on her fists.

Just as she had grabbed her helmet by the chin strap and swung her arm back for another slam against the door, it slid open. The hiss startled Kaia, and the helmet clattered to the ground.

CHAPTER 17

ORION

“**T**he fuck...”

He stood before a creature in a fit of rage. Red-rimmed eyes stared wide and unseeing. Patches of sweat had seeped through her clothing. Lips peeled back to reveal grinding teeth through which she wheezed shreds of air.

The clang of her flight helmet against the floor snapped him into action. He stepped into the cabin, allowing the door to slide shut behind him.

Kaia rounded on him, hands balled into shaking fists. “You fucking trapped me in here. You can’t just do that. I didn’t come here to be your prisoner. Don’t care how much fucking water you ply me with, you asshole. And this fucking cabin. The fuck is wrong with it? Can’t fucking sleep in here.”

She prowled before him, crossing the floor in two steps to the left, then right, and back again. Orion raised both hands, palms out in front of him in a placating gesture, and took a tentative step. Kaia jumped back, eyes snapping to the door behind him.

“Hey. Hey...” Orion continued to advance, albeit slowly, sending her backward until she hit the edge of the bed. “Breathe. I didn’t know they locked the door.”

He had come to take her to his cabins, since she had no business being in one of her own. Kaia stared at him for a good while, then lowered herself onto the bed. She raked both hands through her hair. “I’m so tired.”

“Why don’t you sleep?”

“What, locked in here?”

“No... Shit, Kaia, you’ve been up for over a day. No wonder you’re on edge.”

Rule one of managing your rage as an uhyre: always, always get enough sleep. That went for tiny humans on a short fuse as well apparently.

“I tried.” She hunched.

“Is the bed shit?”

Kaia rolled her eyes. “No, it’s the most comfortable fucking thing. Maybe that’s why.”

That wasn’t why, and Orion knew it as soon as he saw it.

“What’s that?”

He jutted his chin toward the shot-glass next to the bed, stained with brown around the bottom edge.

“Just a drink I had. Was I not supposed to? Your dad said ___”

Goddamn, she was clueless.

“It’s not that.” He sat on the bed next to her, and she didn’t even have the strength to tense up like she usually did. “Ever had coffee before?”

Kaia offered him a tired glance. “No. Why?”

“Of course you can’t goddamn sleep.” He explained in a tone he’d just as readily use for a child. “Caffeine is a stimulant. It wakes you up. And if you’ve never had it before, it’ll be that much more effective.”

Kaia deflated. She threw herself back into the bed with a long, full exhale, her arms splayed wide as she lay limp. Seemed like giving her an explanation helped with the freakout, maybe. Her face swiveled his way, and she looked down her nose at him, seated near her hip.

“How long until it’s out of my system?”

“About twelve hours. You stop feeling the effects sooner. For you, I dunno. That thing doles out double shots.”

“What do I do until then?”

Orion shrugged. “I can get you a sleeping pill, but it’ll only fuck you up more. Better wait it out. Come on, you can rest in

my cabin.”

Her expression hardened again. Wiry arms folded across her chest like a child preparing for a tantrum. “I want my own cabin.”

“You’re my fiancé, Kaia. My cabin *is* your own cabin.”

She’d better not give him any lip about it, not after the fight he just had with his mother over this.

The girl propped herself up on her elbows. That little mouth opened to speak, then snapped shut again. And again. Finally, she found the words, and the courage to place her small hand over his in a move that was surely manipulation, but made his skin spark nonetheless. “Orion, I... I know I chose to come. But we barely know each other. It’ll take time.”

He was already shaking his head. “That’s not how it works. Your new role comes with responsibilities.”

He got up and filled another shot glass with H₂O, smiling at the greedy glint in her eyes as he held it out to her. She looked like she wanted to argue, just for the sake of it, even as she stared at the water. She was so fucking difficult. What was her problem? But finally Kaia accepted it and took a small sip. The lines on her face softened as she swallowed.

“Responsibilities,” she muttered. “Like fucking you?”

He cocked an eyebrow. He wasn’t thinking of demanding that on their first night on *Colossal*, but she wasn’t wrong. “Eventually.”

“Don’t you have whores for that? A trail of willing addicts to stick your dick in?”

Orion hummed, not sure if he wanted to correct her. He realized she must think he was some monster, fucking whatever moves regardless of the side-effects. Maybe he didn’t need to tell her yet that his sexual partners were few precisely *because* he wasn’t interested in producing exorin-addicted hangalongs.

“That’s none of your concern,” he said instead.

“You’re an uhyre.”

“You knew that already, princess.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Well, that is what you are. The bride of a colony heir. Can’t get any more of a princess than that around here.”

“We’re not married yet.”

Orion scoffed. “Save the fight for the bedroom, will you? We both know you can’t back out now. Where will you go?”

“Home!” she spat.

“On what ship? You’re here. You’re in this now. And you agreed to it.”

Kaia sipped her water in that slow, meticulous way she went about consuming anything. Like it was going to be her last meal.

He was bluffing a little. His mother would jump at the opportunity to send Kaia back to wherever she came from. She’d made that much clear to him hours ago, when he dug his heels in and insisted that he’d raze the whole fucking ship to the ground unless he got to choose his own bride.

Mare Halena saw right through him, of course. She knew this wasn’t about Kaia. Not really. And when earlier that night she’d paraded out the very capable, very fertile, very willing options she’d prepared for him, Orion almost questioned his own stubbornness.

Luckily, his resentment for the position foisted on him was stronger than the whims of his dick.

He realized the retort he’d been expecting from Kaia hadn’t yet come. She sat there, looking tired and pallid.

“I... I feel sick.”

Fucking hell.

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic, princess.”

“No,” she groaned, pushing herself up. He noticed a fresh sheen of sweat on her forehead. “I mean I’m gonna...”

“Shit.” Orion jumped off the bed. “Come on.”

He hauled her up by the arm, taking her weight as they stumbled into her bathroom. She lurched for the toilet basin, hands perched on either side. Orion grimaced as her back began heaving. He didn't see, but heard whatever was in her system splatter over the ceramic.

“Shit,” he repeated. It must have been too much for her—the fries, the water, all washed down by caffeine. Her stomach wasn't used to it. He plied her with all that shit and didn't warn her.

At least Orion knew a thing or two about fixing women he'd broken. He knelt on his heels behind her. His hand found her spine, protruding as she hunched. He rubbed up and down those bony parts of her.

“That's good,” he muttered. “Get it all out.”

“Go away. Don't...” She was interrupted by another splatter. “Don't fucking look.”

“I'm not looking, princess.”

He fixed his eyes instead to the nape of her neck, brushing hair from skin prickling with goosebumps. He stroked across the plane there, soft and slow.

By the sounds of it, she was mostly puking water. How much had she had? H₂O on *Colossal* was purer than the crap on Riker 109. That of all things shouldn't have made her this sick.

A few minutes later she was done, and Orion pulled her limp form up to the sink, where she splashed her face and gargled the shit out of the tooth powder he'd gotten out of the nook under the sink.

Finally she was back in bed, lashes crusted with tears and lids drooping with exhaustion. She was staring at nothing in particular, skin pasty and eyes unfocused.

Orion wasn't about to drag her to his suite after that. He was about to leave her be when she trained those distant eyes on him.

“You’re right.”

“What?”

“I agreed to this, like you said.”

Just like that?

Sometimes bitches just wanted to get taken care of a little.

“You can stay here for now,” he relented. She was too weak to play with anyway, that much was clear. “Settle in. But you’ll follow a strict eating and exercise regimen. You’ll need your strength.”

“Okay,” she whispered.

“Good girl.” Orion patted her cheek, and this time she didn’t move away.

He headed for the door. He needed some damn sleep after the marathon he’d just been through.

“Orion?” Her voice was so small behind him, so submissive, that it clenched something in his chest.

“Yeah, princess?” He turned, watching her little fingers fiddling with the blanket that was tucked to her chin.

“Do you think I could get an S54 card reader? I... I brought some books with me. It’ll help me sleep.”

He smiled to himself.

So she likes to read then. Wouldn’t have guessed.

“I’ll have one brought.”

“And my door?” She glanced at the doorway, which had already opened on Orion’s approach.

“I’ll sort it out.”

She didn’t look entirely convinced, but she didn’t argue.

Good.

Maybe this could work after all. Once he left the cabin, Orion ran a hand down his face, trying to rub away the remnants of all the shit he’d just dealt with.

CHAPTER 18

KAIA

She hated to admit it, but Orion was right. Kaia signed up for this clusterfuck of a situation, and that meant playing along. She got the sense that his offer to start her on a new “regimen” or whatever so that she could take his uhyre abuse was meant to be generous.

Generously fucked up.

But after her initial revulsion to Orion’s demands, she realized this was an opportunity. A way for her to stall. The more time she could buy to figure out the practicalities of getting the job done, the sooner she could be out of there and back with Ahton.

Kaia was caught in the middle of two traps that would eventually snap shut on her: Orion’s attempts to stick an heir in her on one hand, and Loran’s plot to gain purchase with the colony on the other. She was trapped in the middle, and she needed all the time she could get to manage the situation.

She still couldn’t sleep, especially not after that conversation and the embarrassing display of projectile vomit. Kaia hunched on the edge of the bed with one knee under her chin, flipping the S54 card she’d grabbed from *Ahton’s Take* between her knuckles.

It was true that it had books on it. That was one of the things it had.

Kaia stiffened when the door hissed open without warning, ready to snap at the girl in the doorway. But the words caught in her throat at the sight of the tablet in the girl’s hands. Kaia practically pounced on her, snatching the thing from her blue-painted fingers.

“Thanks,” Kaia said, checking for an S54 slot—there it was—before curling the tablet in against her chest.

“No probs! I’m Alina.” The girl held out her hand. Kaia stared at it.

“What?”

“Oh. We... shake at the colonies.”

“Shake?”

“Like, you take my hand and shake it.”

Kaia frowned when Alina dipped forward to grab her right hand, waving it up and down limply within her own.

“It’s a greeting.” She grinned. “From Old Earth times. We kind of try to replicate some of that lifestyle, so we can, you know, go back to it once we find the planet.”

Right. The colonies were forever searching for another planet like Old Earth. Back when it was green and beautiful and habitable. Before the invasion.

Never mind that there were plenty of habitable planets around. Desert planets, iron planets, planets with an atmosphere, even ice planets—those were the ones they drilled for water.

But none that matched the criteria that the colonies were after: that elusive “New Earth” which would be perfect, provide diverse food sources, indefinite sustenance and comfort. And water, of course. It had been thousands of years since Old Earth went down, and these chumps were still hoping to find something that most people had realized long ago didn’t exist. Instead of making the best of what was there, they used up their hoarded wealth to go ever-deeper into space on their silly little “expeditions.” It’d be funny if they weren’t so filthy rich and everyone else so fucking poor.

“I brought some clothes.” Alina held out a small stack of folded fabric. “You’ll get something nicer later, of course.”

Nicer. The fabric under her fingertips was the softest she’d ever felt. Why did these people have to put in all these caveats? Apologizing for their fancy cabin, downplaying their fancy clothes. Did they not realize how the vast majority of humanity lived?

Kaia stroked the clothes a little as she placed the stack on the bed, hoping the girl didn't notice the indulgence.

"I'll also be your guide on the ship. I'm so excited! We don't get newcomers."

"Maybe you can guide me to learning how to open the door."

"Oh yes, that. I heard. Sorry about that. It'll only open from the inside from now on. Otherwise, only you'll be able to get in."

"And Orion."

Alina tilted her head, oscillating between confusion and amusement. "Well, sure, blood has access everywhere. If it's anyone else, like me, just tell it to open. The cabin's already analyzed and mapped your voice."

Great, another piece of me taken without my permission.

"Fine."

"When you're ready for your tour, just chime. And here, a comms device until you get your own NS."

Kaia fitted the bracelet onto her wrist, not bothering to explain that she was definitely *not* gonna be getting a Neurosync implanted into her brain. Those things were creepier than any tech she'd heard of.

"Get some rest. Hope the tablet helps." Alina leaned in conspiratorially. "The ship has a wicked library of romance reads. I'll show you later."

"Sure."

When she was finally alone again, Kaia got crawled back into bed with the tablet and the S54 card. It wasn't just about the card... these tablets were usually "all-in-one" things. Big and bulky, about the size of her whole palm, but multifunctional.

Ping a connection no more than twenty-four hours after you're on the colony ship. Or else.

So the first thing she did was go into the comms function and confirm it wasn't disabled. She keyed in the sector and station IDs for Riker 109. Kaia was well aware that comms was probably monitored on *Colossal*—shit, they'd be idiots not to. So she didn't dare make her message anything too obvious.

RECIPIENT ID: A35R109-*

FROM: CCLSL-25109

Data: NONE

A basic ping, something inconspicuous. Nobody who intercepted it, or who received it on Riker 109—which would be everyone with a comms device—would pay it any mind.

Nobody except for someone who was waiting. Loran would understand. With two-way comms established, he'd contact her with further instructions.

With that first task done, Kaia scrolled through the data on her card and opened up some old footage. It only took a few minutes for the familiar vids of her family back on Artega Seven to lull her rattled mind. Soon she was locking the tablet and wedging it under her mattress as she rolled to her side and finally fell asleep.

Kaia slept like a log for close to fourteen hours, according to the time on her bracelet. She wasn't sure what time it was on Riker 109 anymore, but on *Colossal* it was 0700—morning.

She allowed herself the luxury of another quick shower, refusing to sully her clean clothes with her sweat. Damn, she was already getting spoiled. She'd found a nook under the sink, where Orion had extracted tooth powder the night before, and within it a hairbrush.

She scowled at herself in the mirror at the memory. She'd forced herself to take it when she was sick—his relishing in her illness. Each condescending stroke of his hand along her heaving back, his scorching fingers against the nape of her

neck, made her want to elbow him in the ribs as she'd hunched over the toilet.

But she took it. Like a good little “princess.” That was what he wanted, after all. He wanted to loom over her like a ghoul while she was at her most vulnerable. Well, she'd give him that. She'd give him whatever she had to, for as long as she had to. Because the little brother she'd killed was waiting, and she had a promise to keep and a murder to atone for.

Kaia spent twenty minutes jerking the brush through the knots in her wet hair until it lay flat and untangled back on her scalp.

By the time she put on the fresh clothes and stood before the hydra station, trying to figure out if the thing dispensed nutrigel packs. But all she could find were liquids of various kinds, and she wasn't about to burn through her water ration first thing in the day. She wasn't about to drink that coffee shit again either. Kaia frowned, reexamining the buttons even as her stomach made itself known. She normally only needed one or two nutripacks a day. Recent events must've taken a lot out of her because her stomach was growling in that way that'd earn her dirty looks in public on Riker 109.

If there was no nutrigel in the dispenser, there must be a cafeteria somewhere. Kaia eyed her comms bracelet. She could chime the girl—what was her name?—for directions. Instead, Kaia slipped the thing off her wrist and left it on the desk. She was almost certain there'd be a tracker inside it, and she'd rather not get followed.

The hallway was wide and warmly lit, though the level of foot traffic Kaia witnessed didn't seem to live up to the expansive construction. The first person Kaia saw was a woman in an outfit similar to her own, walking in the other direction. The smile the woman offered made Kaia freeze and turn around to watch her retreating form.

Was she supposed to know this person? The thought that came to mind first was quickly disregarded as senseless, but still it appeared—did the woman know of her somehow? Was she another one of Loran's rats in the colony? Kaia rubbed her

achy wrists, twisting out the tension. She was just being paranoid, a fact confirmed when the next person she passed offered a similar smile and a nod. These people didn't know her. Why were they acknowledging her at all? Didn't they have anything better to do?

Kaia built a mental map of the space as she traversed various hallways. She still hadn't found a cafeteria, and by the time a fifth person—a kid—asked her how she was doing, Kaia decided to take advantage of these people's weird friendliness.

"Hey, kid." She paused, and the boy stopped. "Where can I get some nutrigel around here?"

His nose wrinkled. "Nutrigel? Why?"

"For... food." Was he stupid?

"Uh, I dunno about that, but there's a café if you take the next right about fifty feet away."

"Thanks." Kaia headed in that direction. She hadn't heard it referenced in that way before, but she was pretty certain "café" must have been colony slang for "cafeteria."

She was wrong. Kaia realized when she found herself standing in front of Cozy Corner Café.

"What the fuck..." she muttered under her breath.

The place was tiny, practically a hole in the wall. Through the glass screen she saw five round imitation wood tables. Each table was of a different design. None of the surrounding chairs matched, as if they'd just thrown together a bunch of random shit for people to sit on.

How was this place supposed to feed anyone? Kaia assumed *Colossal* would have multiple cafeterias. But this cluttered little hole was way too small to be practical. And the woman beckoning her behind the counter was way too happy-looking to be a cafeteria attendant.

Kaia entered, pausing to peer at the large menu handwritten in white on a black board pinned to the wall.

“Early riser, dear?” The attendant put a set of cutlery on the countertop, white napkins folded with a fork and knife.

“I guess. You got nutrigel?” Kaia scanned the menu, but all she saw were things she had no interest in trying: omari eggs in various styles, hash browns, whatever the fuck that was, other names that were unfamiliar to her.

The woman scanned Kaia up and down. “You’re new?”

Kaia wasn’t sure she wanted to answer that. Colonies rarely took visitors or new residents from outside of the system. Would it spell trouble if she revealed herself to the first stranger she met? “You got nutrigel or what?”

“We don’t eat that here, honey. Only on expeditions or flight missions. How about something off the menu instead?”

Kaia’s throat contracted with the memory of the “steak” Orion had put in front of her before. She didn’t know what most of the things on the black board meant, but what if it was that again? Kaia racked her brains for that other thing she ate: the salty potato strips.

“I don’t know... You got fries?”

“No, and the burger joint doesn’t open until the afternoon. How about you let me pick for you? I can do something nice and mild, nothing crazy.”

“No flesh?”

“No flesh.” The woman chuckled and extended her wrist facing up, chip reader flashing.

Kaia hesitated, but pressed her wrist to the reader. A few chips would be a small sacrifice considering to what she had coming.

The long vibration indicated a declined transfer.

Fuck... did Loran empty her out before she left, or was *Colossal*’s tech incompatible with her implant?

“I... Uh, never mind.” Kaia began to back out of the place.

The woman’s wrist dipped under the bar without hesitation. “Don’t worry about that. Just take a seat.”

“What are you playing at? I’m not getting into debt here, lady.” Kaia knew this game all too well.

The woman’s posture hardened then, lean biceps shifting beneath her sleeveless shirt as she folded her arms across her chest. “We don’t talk to people like that around here.”

After a beat, she softened a little. “Take a seat. No debt. I’ll sort you out.”

CHAPTER 19

ORION

“**W**hat do you mean, you *lost her*?” Orion glared at the squirming girl before him.

“She... she was supposed to chime me. I thought...”

“Are you shitting me?”

“I was never told...”

When the girl, Alina, chimed Orion to come to Kaia’s cabin because she was getting no response, he already knew what to expect. The stupid girl was meant to watch Kaia’s cabin, make sure she didn’t run off. Idiot. When they entered the cabin, they found no Kaia, and the comms bracelet that would track her sitting on the desk.

Orion ground his fingers into the bracelet, prickling metal on his tongue. He took a deep breath, visualizing a forest on a planet, tree leaves flickering in a warm breeze. Calm and easy. He exhaled.

But when he finally spoke, his voice was still lower and rawer than he’d have liked. “Find her.”

“Y-yes, sir.” The girl scurried from the cabin.

This was the last thing Orion wanted to deal with this morning. He already had a full agenda shoved on him by his mother. He was expected to be in the command center by 0800. Not that it mattered. He’d get there when he got there. But it was the goddamn principle of it all. He had shit to do, and this bitch was already making him change plans to run around after her.

He’d have to teach her some kind of lesson over this. Orion thought of all the ways he could do that, most of them involving very little clothes, as he began his search.

Orion didn't bring her all the way to *Colossal* just to get his dick wet in a scrawny little scavenger. He wanted to fuck her back on Riker 109, sure, but that wasn't why he brought her. She wasn't even his type. But he was becoming increasingly preoccupied with the idea of bending her over and forcing some obedience into her. The princess needed to be taught a good, hard lesson.

Orion ignored the surprised greetings and deference in those he'd passed on his search. He hated that his return was even a big fucking deal. What did these people, these colonists, think would happen? Everyone knew he'd be back eventually. Surely Mother already had her well-oiled communications machine send out some story for why her good-for-nothing heir was returning to the fold.

She wouldn't have told them about the cancer, of course. That would be idiotic and incite panic.

"We have to put up a united front, Orion," Mare Halena had said the night of his arrival. "And that's the only reason I don't send your little whore back this instant. Consider it an olive branch."

His olive branch was currently more like a stick in his ass.

Orion rounded a corner into a sub-passage and stopped when he glanced at the glass-paned storefront of a cafe.

There she was, sitting at a synthwood table. She had a foot propped on her chair, the other bouncing on the floor the way it had back at the bar on Riker 109, when she got excited about some story.

She had two empty plates before her and was tucking into something in a third. Orion scowled. This girl was just puking her guts out in front of him yesterday, and now she was plying herself with more shit her stomach wasn't used to.

It took him a moment to register the other person at the table—a sturdy woman a bit older than him. She said something and Kaia's entire face lit up in that way he got a brief glimpse of on the needleref, when the thermaview first opened up to show her an infinite field of open space. When

her lips parted in an open-mouthed laugh, the spines on his neck itched.

How dare she sit there and have a good time when he just spent half an hour looking for her at the expense of his plans? For someone who'd just come from a shithole, his princess sure was incongruously entitled.

Maybe it wasn't that. Maybe she was doing it to spite him. To goad him.

And then her head turned, as if she felt the anger radiating from Orion's every pore on the other side of the glass. The laugh froze, cut short as a shadow fell over the glimmer in her eye. Her shoulders lifted a little. Her foot stopped bouncing as he stalked toward the entrance, and that only made it worse. Some random server could get that open, pleasant side of her, but not him. Not the man who saved her from a fucking wreck of a station. Not the man who just changed her life.

CHAPTER 20

KAIA

She should've been expecting it. Kaia knew she wouldn't be left alone forever. Reality just had to smack her over the head again, and it looked like a 6'7" part-alien glaring at her through the pane of glass.

Kaia rubbed her eyes. She was so tired of being on edge, just waiting for that menacing presence to come looking for her. Riker 109 hadn't exactly been a relaxing lifestyle either, but at least she knew her place there. And where to hide to get some peace and quiet.

Kaia focused on her empty plate as Orion appeared in her peripheral vision.

"Good morning, princess." His voice was a raw husk grating on her nerves.

Dolores, who had been regaling Kaia with stories of life on a colony for the last hour, was already on her feet. She wiped her hands on her apron and then held one out to Orion for that shaking thing colonists did.

"Mr. Halen! Great to see you back."

Orion didn't return the greeting, focusing instead on his prey. The feet of Kaia's chair screeched against the floor as she stood.

"Good morning, Mr. Halen." Kaia held out her hand.

For a long few seconds, Kaia thought he wasn't going to take it. He was mad, that much was clear. Was it her accepting food without paying for it? Did he think the debt would fall back on him? Did she use too much H₂O?

But as he watched her outstretched hand, his brows unfurled and the glacial shadows in his eyes melted slowly into something like amusement. The firm clenching of his fingers around hers cinched her racing mind firmly to the

sensation of his palm searing hot against hers. Was he always like that? Hot?

Dolores was busy offering Orion the chair she'd been sitting in. "Kaia, this is Orion Halen, the heir—"

"She knows who I am." The corner of Orion's mouth twitched. "Or I should hope so, being my fiancé. You seem to be feeling better, princess?"

Kaia saw the cogs turning in Dolores's eyes. Her brow creased when she glanced at Kaia. With worry or skepticism or both, Kaia wasn't sure behind the resolute smile plastered on her face.

"Much better, thank you," Kaia said.

Dolores leaped into action, gathering the empty plates strewn around the table, stacking them along her forearm. The heat of Orion's palm against her lingered after he released it. His touch had this way of crawling through her and settling, heavy, in her stomach.

"How much do we owe you?" Orion turned to Dolores.

So that was it. He was upset about the payment.

"Oh, nothing, of course," Dolores bustled. "I told her it was my pleasure. Even more so now, knowing I just fed our future commander's wife her first breakfast on *Colossal*." She threw Kaia a wink.

Nodding without surprise, Orion made for the exit. "Let's go."

Kaia bristled at the callous instruction. Like he just *assumed* she'd follow. Like he could order her around.

Well, he can.

Kaia nodded her thanks to Dolores and followed.

CHAPTER 21

ORION

If she was trying to soften him up by showing him she was already growing familiar with colony greeting customs, it was working. And if she was trying it with her show of deference in calling him Mr. Halen, she was a manipulative little fox.

“Alina’s going to give you a tour of the place,” Orion was saying, his arm slung round Kaia’s shoulders as he led her down the hallway back towards her temporary cabin. “I’ve got meetings with Mother and the lead crew all day. Won’t see you much. Tomorrow we’ll go through your diet and fitness regimen.”

“Okay... what about medical?”

Orion squeezed her bony shoulder. “If you follow your workout plan, you won’t need medical.”

“No, but... You know, if I get sick again.”

“You won’t. Your stomach just wasn’t used to the solids. You seem fine after that monster breakfast you just had.”

She hummed noncommittally as they turned the corner. Alina was already there, pacing in front of the cabin door. When she spotted them, she looked equally relieved and terrified.

“Oh, thank God,” she squeaked. “Mr. Halen, once again I am so sorry—”

“Save it. I gotta go.” He turned Kaia toward him, waiting for her to look up at him with those giant owl eyes that threatened to swallow him whole. “Be good. No more running off. Got it?”

Her throat shifted as she swallowed. “Okay. And... I won’t see you until tomorrow?”

Orion smirked. “Afraid so. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, right?”

She blinked up at him blankly. She had a lot to learn. He had a lot to teach her.

Maybe he’d try to see her that night after he got away from his slave driver of a mother.

Any hope of seeing Kaia after his duties that evening was long dashed by the time Orion finally stood beneath the shower in his cabins.

They used to have showers in the gym—a hundred milliliters per session. But apparently shipments from the icebreakers had grown less reliable, and *Colossal* had to prioritize its gray water stockpile in preparation for the next expedition.

So cabin shower it was. He watched the cool water run pink down his bloody knuckles.

Orion had spent the day listening to Mother’s advisors drone on and on about the recent history of the ship. They’d explained the two expeditions *Colossal* undertook under Mare Halena’s command, one resulting in the discovery of a new ice planet.

It had been a bittersweet moment for Mother. Leaving behind an icebreaker to ensure yet another coveted supply of water for the colony was, by all regards, a huge win. But once again, failing to find their Goldilocks was a punch to the gut—and Mother was running out of time.

She wanted another expedition before she died, though Orion saw the skepticism in her advisors’ eyes. They’d exchanged dubious glances at the oval table on which maps of the potential targets were projected.

Orion never doubted the existence of a New Earth. Hell, there had to be more than one. But it had been thousands of years since the colonies began leading humanity’s search for

such a planet... If they were ever going to find it, wouldn't it have happened already?

Orion scrubbed the towel into his face, trying to scrape the exhaustion from his lids, temples, cheeks. It was no use. He hadn't had to absorb so much information in years. If he were on Mars, he'd be out partying with Boris right now.

Boris. That fucker.

It was 0200, and most people would be asleep. Kaia would be for sure, unless she drank coffee again. Orion coughed a wry laugh, shaking his head as he shoved his hand through his hair, clenching for a satisfying pull at the roots. Between his mother, his training, and that little scavenger, Orion had his hands full. When he was finally free, well past midnight, Orion's last nerve had been ground to dust.

Spending hours soaking at Crimson Spa was a faraway memory. When would he get to do that again? To just relax, with no one waiting or breathing over his fucking shoulder. The only place for that now was the gym—the opposite of relaxation, but nonetheless the perfect way to work off his desire to wring someone's neck.

It had been empty when he came in, and he spent a good forty minutes beating up a well-worn punching bag until the metal on his tongue sent him to that place where he could just stop thinking. He saw nothing but the thing hanging in front of him—wrinkled synthleather that may as well have been flesh cracking and denting beneath his fists. The rest of the world was an unimportant blur in his peripheral vision. He needed to see nothing, hear nothing, perceive nothing but his target. It was a kind of singular focus, something automatic taking the yoke of his skeleton to deliver each punch of his knuckles against the bag. Again and again, until the skin rubbed and split, raw—crimson iron on his knuckles, silver on his tongue.

It faded, deflating until his exhausted mind was back in the pilot's seat. Then all he could taste in his mouth was dry sand. His fists looked bad, but the bag looked worse. Chunks of white foam cascaded through cracked lining in contorted chunks. Orion raked the back of his arm across his lip, rubbing

away sweat and spit. He downed a disposable cup of H₂O from the mini-dispenser in the corner, crushing it before tossing the thing into the waste chute. It moistened the desert of his tongue as he swirled it from one cheek to the other.

He'd needed that. When he walked back to his suite, the tightness fraying under his ribs had dulled. Mother would approve, even if she'd have suggested going down to the brig and finding something fleshier to take his frustration out on. Orion wasn't in the mood to deal with living things after a full day of doing just that.

He didn't even consider checking in on Kaia after that. After his shower he slumped straight into bed, exhausted bones and joints still feeling foreign now that he was back in the pilot's seat of his body. The uhyre part of him didn't care for the mundane: the sleeping or the living. It only cared to come out for the fun parts: the fighting and fucking. Orion's life had been spent learning to keep it in check, but any uhyre knew that sometimes giving up control and letting the alien out was just what was needed.

CHAPTER 22

KAIA

The day had been fruitful despite spending most of it being stuck with Alina, who refused to let Kaia out of her sight. Alina's tour gave Kaia a chance to get her bearings and begin to map out her new "home." The girl was nosy—nosier than anyone on Riker 109 would've dared with a stranger. When Alina had asked about her family, Kaia mumbled something about them all being dead and left it at that. But she used the question as an opening to broach the subject of Upload.

"What about you? I guess you guys all get Uploaded here? Got a bunch of great-great-grandparents waiting for you?" Kaia had asked casually as they sat at the proper, full-sized cafeteria Alina had shown her. Turned out they did exist. Kaia took a small bite of a fry, incapable of stomaching another full meal so soon after breakfast, but unable to resist the temptation of the over-salted oily strips.

"Oh, I wish." Alina licked burger oil from her lips and scrunched her fingers into a napkin. "We all save for it. Some of us even make it. More of us than out there probably. It can take generations. My parents saved for me, and there's still not enough. But they're from the lower decks." Kaia had to pause, digesting this information. She'd always just assumed colonists were all rich, gallivanting through space in their little bubbles and fucking off *to* Heaven when they were ready.

"But you don't have to worry about that, of course." Alina slapped her palms together, brushing the salt off her skin to the floor.

Wasting it.

"Hmm?"

"As Commander's wife you're guaranteed Upload, of course. Perk of the job." Alina winked.

"What do you mean?"

“You didn’t know. You two must really be in love then, huh?”

Guaranteed. Was Alina exaggerating, or would marrying Orion really be her ticket to Ahton? And if marriage was the only prerequisite... when was the wedding? Kaia’s brain spun in overdrive, and she risked another question.

“How does that work?”

“Well, there’s lots of rules attached. Can’t get suicide approval like normal people, and of course you get to benefit from *Colossal’s* life extension tech too now. So you’re in for a few hundred years of luxury before you get to Heaven. Pretty great, huh?”

“Yeah... Pretty great.”

No, it wasn’t. It was a dead end. Kaia couldn’t afford to leave Ahton stranded all alone out there for a few hundred years. Kaia chastised herself for letting herself get distracted. She needed to focus on her and Loran’s original plan—that would be her ticket. Only that.

The rest of the day was spent pretending to pay attention to Alina’s tour. When Alina finally dropped her off back at her cabin, Kaia got into bed and grabbed the tablet from under the mattress. She tapped through the footage of Ahton, vids she’d seen a thousand times before, tucking it away for years. He’d been so fucking smart. Even when he was warning her it was time to go home out in that fucking desert, he was being the smart one. She opened a video dated a month before his Upload. In it, he’d still had the strength to wave the little spaceship rocks over his head and make thruster noises as his “colony” came in for a landing.

Kaia had stopped crying about it a long time ago. She wasn’t rewatching the footage again to feel sorry for herself—not even to feel sorry for Ahton. But now she needed the reminder to steel her nerves for what was to come. Dealing with Orion and the things he’d make her do. The things Loran was expecting of her.

Kaia remembered the full-blooded uhyre footage she'd been shown once, from a time when they were still around. They were huge and spiky in all the wrong places, with angled mouths and sharp tongues that leaked black exorin when they spoke in growling baritones. Their skin scarred by cracking, creating jagged lines of lightning that burned bright through the gashes from within. All in all humanoid, but so, so not human.

She would deal with all of it. Outmaneuver all of them. She had to.

She'd already gotten something she could use, which was encouraging. According to Dolores, the cafe owner plying her with "scrambled" eggs that morning, shower water was indeed *not* safe for consumption. That must've been what had made her sick before. Orion seemed to think it was just her stomach not being able to handle all the new solid food. Kaia decided to keep the root cause to herself. Who knew when she'd need to conveniently fall ill again?

Kaia's fingertips left prints on the glossy screen as she stroked a finger down the still image of Ahton's cheek, frozen in laughter before her.

"I'm coming, little brother. Soon."

Orion came to fetch her at noon the next day, bursting into her cabin like he owned the place while Kaia was sniffing at another shot glass of coffee—her tentative second attempt.

"Not a knocker, huh?" Kaia fought to keep her voice level, bristling at the intrusion. Orion simply grunted, palm already at his mouth to lick away the pinpricks of blood that enabled him to spoil her privacy.

"Where we going?" Kaia jogged to keep up with his long strides as he led her down the hallway from her cabin. His eyes kept drifting to the spines protruding from the back of his neck, tapering off into sharp little bumps beneath the collar of his shirt.

“Medbay.”

Her ears perked up then. That had to be where the Upload rig was. She wanted to see it with her own eyes, confirm it was real. Check out what state it was in, maybe get some idea of age.

“But wait... Why? You said I wouldn't need it.”

“Mother's orders,” Orion said dryly.

Kaia's uncertainty grew when a silver-haired doctor met them at the medbay doors and ushered them into a private alcove, then instructed Kaia to remove her clothes.

“The fuck?” She turned to Orion, who leaned against the wall with his hands shoved into his pockets.

He shrugged. “Every Commander's spouse needs to go through a physical. Gotta make sure you're not gonna keel over on me. Shouldn't take long.”

“Your clothes, please.” The doctor waited.

Kaia's mouth went dry as she watched Orion watch her. “All of them?”

“You may keep your undergarments, if you wish.”

“Can you step out?” She asked Orion.

“I'll be seeing you without clothes a lot more, princess. Best get used to it.”

Kaia clenched her teeth, chewing on a retort.

“Would you like me to go through the procedures with you, Miss...” The doctor frowned down at his chart.

“Just Kaia.”

“Kaia. First we will weigh you. Then we'll use liquid displacement and other scanning techniques to measure your body fat to muscle ratio. Additionally, we'll be checking your internal organs—brain function, heart function, fertility potential, and so on...”

“Fertility potential?” Kaia stammered.

“Naturally. You must have the capacity to bear children to continue the colony commander’s line.” The doctor blinked at her, as if surprised he had to even explain this. Of course, it made sense. But she hadn’t been to a doctor in her life. The only one she ever met was back on Artega Seven, telling her family her brother had less than two planetary months to live. Kaia wished she’d been better at hiding her emotions because in the next moment Orion was on his feet, which just made it worse.

“Hey.” He held a firm grasp on her shoulders, bending back a little to catch her eye. “Hey. This is all standard. Everyone knows fertility is gonna be low. It always is, for all of us. Long as you’ve got ovaries and nothing totally out of place, it’s just a detail.”

Kaia heard the doctor shuffle and emit a little cough behind her, which earned him Orion’s icy glare before turning back to her.

If Orion thought looming over her would be some sort of comfort, he was mistaken. The very scent of him was stifling. The heat of his touch burned through her cotton sleeves, hands encircling her arms too firmly.

“Give us a few minutes, Doc.”

Soft footsteps retreated. When the door hissed shut, Kaia’s every muscle seemed to coil in on itself, her body screaming at her to get away and run. He felt it too. Keen eyes flicked to the stammering pulse in the side of her neck. She watched his throat shift in a swallow.

“Are you afraid?” His cracked timbre rubbed at the last of Kaia’s nerves.

“No.”

He hummed. A low, brief sound that gave nothing away.

She *wasn’t*.

She’d prove it.

He let her go when she pulled away and turned her back to him. Her hands remained steady as she shucked her shirt over

her head and got to work on removing the pants.

When she was down to her black bra and underwear, the self-consciousness she'd been holding at bay slithered to the surface. She stood cold and slouching, staring at the white wall ahead and trying to ignore the weight of Orion's gaze behind her. She failed.

Did her spine stick out under the bright, blue-tinted LEDs overhead? Did it cast ugly shadows along the backs of her ribs? The women she'd seen on *Colossal* so far had soft lines in place of the sharp angles Kaia had seen in her bathroom mirror. Her cotton top and leggings hung loose in her hands. She kept her back turned as she folded them slower than necessarily over the exam table. She was stalling, and each passing second only added to the gnawing pit in her stomach.

CHAPTER 23

ORION

“Turn around.”

For a second he thought she might disobey. Part of him wished she would. Then he'd show her.

But she turned to face him.

Fuck, she was small. He'd known as much before, but now without cloth covering her up, it was painfully evident. His gaze strayed to the protruding nub of bone at her wrist, with a dent of a joint beside it tapering into long, spidery fingers.

He followed as her hands began to move up to her chest, at which point his attention drew there, to the small tits barely concealed by a strip of black fabric.

But before covering them, she forced her hands back to her sides, picking at the fringes of her black underpants as she stood there. Orion grunted appreciatively at the restraint. Nerves were weakness, and she didn't want them to see.

It was futile, of course. He smelled it on her, saw it in every move. And who wouldn't be nervous in his presence? Orion zoomed out and gave her a proper, methodical onceover. The proportions were all there. Shoulders on the wider side—great for upper body strength—tapered down into a jutting ribcage and a thin waist, then back out to wider hipbones.

A bit of extra fat to get her hormones going and a lot of extra muscle to handle the mating process, and she'd be good to go.

He reached down without thinking to adjust himself over his pants, grunting again at the look of repulsion on Kaia's face.

“Don't look too eager, princess,” he droned.

You can come back, Orion subvocalized to the doctor.

It had taken two hours to take blood—dehydrated veins weren't conducive to sampling—complete a physical examination, and perform thorough organ scans. Kaia appeared to have gone through the full range of negative states within that time, from self-conscious tension to wary resistance, resignation, and finally broiling anger that he saw in the lines and furrows of her face before it ever reached her tongue.

But reach her tongue it did.

She was lying on the exam table with a scanner drone hovering above her abdomen and an ultrasound wand in the doc's gloved hand.

“Fuck! Watch it, will you?!” She flinched, stomach hollowing out as she retreated from the cold gel Doc began applying to her skin.

Orion had been patient. He'd even been amused, at first. His little scavenger bristling at the thought of getting poked and prodded was an endearing sight.

But they'd left the most important part for last, and he was getting sick of her shit.

“Your only job right now is to stay still for a few fucking minutes,” he snapped from his seat. “I suggest you do it.”

“Yeah, tell me all about doing my job, Mr. I-was-dragged-back-here-by-Mommy.”

She muttered it so low under her breath that he could pretend not to hear. If he wanted to, he could. But he was already out of his seat and across the space. The doctor had already backed away, his ultrasound wand dripping gel onto the floor. Her chin was already in his hand and the spikes on his tongue already pressed against the roof of his mouth.

“You seem confused, princess.” Orion's voice was calm despite it all.

The tendons of her neck were taut with her face wrung to the side like that. Hot air from her nostrils washed over his hand, and her face was so fragile that he could just crush it.

Kaia remained still and silent in his grip, but he gave her a chance, cocking his head as he waited for the comeback. None came. Smart girl.

“Who do you think you are here for, Kaia?”

When she didn't answer, he tightened his grip. “It wasn't a rhetorical question.”

“No one.” She gritted through her teeth, eyes fixed at his neck instead of his face.

Orion leaned in, giving her face a little shake. “Try again.”

She met his gaze then, looking pathetically confused. It took a few more seconds before her next attempt. “You.”

“Better. But everyone on this ship is mine, even if I don't fucking want them. You—” he swept a firm thumb along her cheek, admiring the way the soft, freckled skin gave under his finger “—are my mate. As soon as I fuck you and marry you, anyway. I think you may be having some trouble understanding what that means. Let me clear it up for you.”

Orion released her as he squatted to her level. She did not move. He propped his forearms on the edge of the table and rested his chin atop them, close enough for her to smell the exorin on his tongue.

“I brought you here to entertain me and avoid taking a couple of my mother's handpicked sluts,” he breathed. “Part of that job—a critical part—is giving me an heir. I can fuck anyone on this ship a hundred times over and find one that'll take eventually. That's what some colonies do. Did you know that? But there's a problem, you see. Do you know what that is, Kaia?”

She shook her head, just a little, but it was enough. She tried to look away, but the part of him that lurked now just beneath the surface wouldn't let her. It captured her eyes across the distance between them as easily as if he'd plucked them from her head and held them fixed in his fingers.

“Can’t have a bunch of goddamn women addicted to exorin running around the colony. Some, maybe. A few. But fuck if I’m gonna support them the rest of my life. So *Colossal* commanders need sacrificial lambs, you see? Someone to take it. Someone to get fucked and give us an heir. That’s you now, Kaia.” He paused to appreciate the pulse drumming visibly in her throat. “So that’s what you’ll do. But don’t worry. You’ll like it. When the cravings take hold, you’ll even need it. It won’t be love, but you won’t know the difference and I won’t care because I’ll have my hole and my heir.”

Orion straightened, taking a breath that his imagination infused with salty ocean air to bring himself back down. The itch in his spine subsided by the time he opened his eyes and looked back down at her. “Now stay still for the doctor and let him check if your womb’s working or if I need to send you back to where you came from.”

He’d told her not to worry about it before—that this was a technicality, and that of course nobody expected anyone on this ship to be some magically fertile freak of nature.

But there had to be *potential*. There had to be *something*. If she were barren, all of Orion’s plans would come crashing down and he’d be forced to take his mother’s picks, after all.

Maybe that wouldn’t even be so bad... He’d have a neat excuse to abandon this little project he stumbled into with no ill standing. After all, it wasn’t his fault if his wife-to-be simply couldn’t bear children to continue the colony legacy. Was his rebellion worth all this fucking hassle?

“Ovaries seem in place, and the uterine tests come back clean. Hormone levels aren’t where they should be, but that’s just malnutrition and dehydration. When was the last time you menstruated?” Doc wasn’t looking at his subject as he spoke, eyes distant as he scanned something in his NS vision.

“I... umm... I don’t know. A few years ago,” she said quietly.

“Uh-huh.” With that, he directed the scanner drone away and slid the ultrasound wand back into its sheath by the side of the table. He slipped his rubber gloves off with two quick

snaps, tossing them into a dispenser by his side. “I’d say you’ve got as much potential to conceive as anyone here, so long as you get your weight up and resume your menstrual cycle.”

Kaia’s pinched brow smoothed. Her shoulders loosened as she tilted her head back on the table.

She’s relieved.

Orion realized only then that part of him was expecting her to want an out too. An excuse to run. But she wanted this after all. She wanted *him*. Because of course she did—who fucking wouldn’t? Orion chastised himself for even doubting it, letting himself get wound up over her defiance. She was just fucking with him the entire time.

He grabbed her hand on the table, squeezing hard enough to hurt. But her cold little fingers squeezed back. And the smile she gave him was nervous, but real, just barely crinkling the corners of her eyes.

“Just the Neurosync left now.” Doc turned away to prepare the injection.

Kaia ripped her hand from Orion’s grasp, wide eyes darting to the doctor’s hands. “What?”

“The NS. Don’t worry, it’ll be painless,” Doc muttered, reaching under the counter to pull out a vial of threads suspended in gelatinous liquid.

But Kaia was already scrambling off the bed, edging to the door. “No. No Neurosync.”

“I assure you this is quite standard. Colony newborns have it from their first day. It will simply assist with vision overlays and subvocalization comms, as well as emotive links.” The doctor’s little factoids appeared to only be disturbing Kaia all the more.

The glimpse of relief Orion had gotten before dissipated at the prospect of yet another complication.

Great. Another thing that’s going to be a fucking battle.

Bitches weren’t supposed to be this much effort.

He grabbed her arm and dragged her back to the table. She must have been struggling as he shoved her back onto it and slammed her down with his palm against her chest, but he barely noticed.

“Just sedate her and do it.” Orion looked at the doctor, ignoring the string of expletive-laden protests from the writhing thing below him.

The doctor paled. “We can’t perform the implantation with the subject sedated or... resistant. Her brain will be at high risk of rejection.”

“Then you’ll try it again!” Orion boomed, wrangling Kaia’s kicking legs with his other hand.

“Impossible. Rejection destroys the frontal lobe. The subject is likely to end up permanently comatose.”

Orion stared at him for a moment, then down at Kaia, whose heartbeat slammed fast through her sternum against his palm. She clutched his arm with both hands, nails digging crescents into his skin hard enough to draw blood.

He released her with a snarl, letting Kaia clamber off the table and hug her arms to her chest, shaking.

Orion sighed, rubbing at the corners of his eyes. He’d overdone it. God fucking damn it. Of course she was scared. Neurosync implants were only common on colonies—to outsiders, the things probably looked like worms burrowing into their brains. It wasn’t even her objection to the NS that set him off, but her defiance.

And her defiance was why he brought her here.

“Look.” He put both palms up in what he hoped would be a placating gesture, letting her extend the space between them, “Forget it. This is over. Let’s go eat and cover your diet plan.”

Kaia watched the doctor put away the suspended NS tendrils, relaxing a little when they were back in the coolbox. She appeared to gather herself, forcing a small little smile but not turning her back as he ushered her to the door.

CHAPTER 24

KAIA

It took Kaia the length of the walk to Cozy Corner Café to get her head straight. She was used to getting pushed around by Loran back on Riker 109. She'd learned when to push back and when to keep her mouth shut and do as she was told. That helped.

But Loran was a person, and whatever lurked beneath the surface when Orion had snapped earlier was definitely not. His body was just a sleeve for the thing within. The way he had moved, watched—shit, the way he *breathed*—was other. Alien.

She had stayed very still, knowing in her very bones that, with that thing that having taken over, pushing was not the smart thing to do. And then he was back, and it was so fucked up how relieved she felt to see the human asshole side of him again. That she could work with. That she could use. By the time they were sitting down with a plateful of fries between them, she had regrouped.

Orion seemed to be back to normal as he sat there, extolling the virtues of the Neurosync. “It’s a superior way of communicating. It enhances all your senses. Helps you pick things up more. More intimate than speech. What are you worried about? It’s a perfectly safe procedure if you don’t fight it.”

“I will fight it, Orion. I swear it.” She hoped he believed her. That he wasn’t sick enough of her yet to want to risk turning her into a comatose shell by getting that thing inside her by force.

He dropped it. Thank fuck.

The “diet plan” wasn’t flesh at least. But it wasn’t *good*. She tuned Orion out as he ran her through the list he’d created based on the testing from that day on a tablet, along with his own “expert” impressions of what he thought she needed.

Kaia bristled at being told what to eat. Why did these people have to be so high maintenance? Nutrigel would give her all the nutrients she'd ever need...

He must've guessed what she was thinking. "I know you're used to that nutrigel garbage, but it provides the bare minimum you need to survive, and that's not good enough. We don't even eat that shit on missions unless we really have to."

She managed a noncommittal grunt.

He expanded a row of meal names. "Look. No meat in any of these, so we'll need to compensate with beans and legumes."

"What kinds of beans?"

"The edible kind, princess." Orion slouched back in his seat, running a hand down his face.

Kaia allowed herself a few moments to scrutinize the angles of his face and the tight shoulders hunched up a little around a tensed neck. Annoyance suited him somehow, in a twisted kind of way.

She rubbed her jaw where inhuman fingers gripped it before. Maybe it was time to be a little more accommodating.

"Hey." She forced what she hoped was a reassuring smile. "It's cool. I'll eat the beans and stuff."

She actually picked up a leaf of some sort from the platter next to the fries, fighting back a grimace as bitter juice leaked out of it at the first bite. She tried not to chew too much, swallowing the thing whole. Orion cracked a reluctant grin at the sight, then pushed a hand through his hair with an unwinding groan.

She had so much to still figure out, but the day had already felt endless and it was only mid-afternoon. Plucking another leaf in an attempted show of deference, Kaia chanced a question she'd been dreading since she got onto *Colossal*: "So when's the actual wedding?"

"Pretty sure that's what Mother wants to discuss with us tonight. Well, probably one of the many things on her agenda.

Right under tormenting me.”

“Tonight?”

“We are ‘invited’ to dinner. With my parents.”

And there she was, hoping to get the evening to herself after that drain of a day. “And you tell me now?”

“I’ll have Alina send up some clothes.”

“That’s not the point.” Kaia snapped, then remembered herself. “I just... You’ve got to tell me these things, when I have to, I don’t know...”

“Interact?” Orion rose, and she followed like the good little pet he expected her to be, taking a few deep breaths as he transferred chips for the meal.

When they were out, Kaia looked for the words to explain how exhausting it got just to be around people so much. She couldn’t think like that, couldn’t wind down. People needed watching, and that needed energy she just rarely had. He seemed to be just fine dictating her every move so far, so she’d expected him to brush her off.

“I just need to...” she began.

“Mentally prepare,” he said before she launched into her arguments. “I get it. I’ll warn you next time.”

That’s it? Just like that?

“Thanks,” she sighed, his simple acceptance of the matter deflating her anticipation in a way that was almost disappointing at the end of it all. Almost. “Tell Alina to bring some finger polish.”

She glanced down at her fingers, the old paint all but peeled. It was the one luxury she ever allowed herself on Riker 109, and only because a whore she defended from a client once offered her a cheap supply. Kaia wasn’t much for appearances, but she was not about to show up to dinner with peeling knuckles.

They stopped at the door to her cabin, where Orion threw it a glare. He’d done that when he picked her up earlier that

day too, looking at the door like it was his arch nemesis. Kaia knew he didn't want her there. He wanted her to himself to do with as he pleased, in his own space.

Clearing her throat, she began her retreat before he had time to dwell on it. But Orion grabbed her wrist and his eyes were a cold, stark contrast to his fingers on her skin.

"I'm giving you time. I hope you appreciate my... lenience," he murmured, glancing at the door behind her again.

The words "fuck off" were already on the tip of her tongue, but she made herself choke on them.

"Sure," she ground out, fighting the urge to land a nice, satisfying slap to the asshole's chiseled cheek.

He hesitated, but finally his painful grip eased, allowing her to retreat into the faux-safety of her cabin

CHAPTER 25

ORION

They arrived in the commander's private quarters at twenty hundred on the dot. Orion gave his bride a final onceover.

He wished her assistant had picked out something a little less appropriate. A rigid black corset pushed up the minimal volume of her breasts into something resembling tactful cleavage. Having no tits apparently had its advantages in that she could wear such a contraption and still manage to look presentable for a dinner with the parents. The thick charcoal skirt was cinched right underneath her ribs, interrupting the skin-tight top with a loose, flourishing billow of synthlinen.

It looked all wrong. Her bony shoulders jutted out weirdly from the rigid fabric, and the giant skirt looked like it was going to swallow her up. Besides, he'd have preferred something a little more rebellious. Orion chuckled at the vision of Kaia showing up to Mother's cabins in her orange flight suit.

"What?" she demanded, smoothing the skirt with hasty hands.

"Nothing."

She frowned, running a palm along the top of her head in a smoothing motion. Orion wanted to smack her hand away, make her leave the only part of this that worked alone. He could see they'd tried to ruin that too. Her hair had been brushed back along her scalp, but they at least failed to fuck that up. The curls stuck out in burning rebellion, refusing to conform.

She wore no jewelry. The only hint of adornment on Kaia's body was the fresh coat of silver paint going the full length of each finger to the base knuckle. It looked like war paint on her hands.

Is that what they were doing? Going to war?

If that was the intent, it seemed to quickly turn into a fucking peace deal. Dinner was not going well.

They sat at the ancient Old Earth pine table in his parents' dining cabin, waiting for the chef to emerge from the kitchen with the first course. As a kid, peering over the edge of that slab of wood growing up, Orion always sniffed the grain. He imagined he could catch a whiff of the sap. Ridiculous, of course—the thing was way too old to maintain any real fragrance.

Mother had arranged for the most uncomfortable seating arrangement possible. Her at the head as usual. Father on her right. On her left she placed Kaia, with Orion stuck off to the side like a loose thorn.

At first, Orion had high hopes. Kaia had no manners and less patience. He couldn't wait to see her bristle at his mother, who would certainly make it no secret that she despised Kaia's mere existence. Kaia would try to refuse the "flesh" Mare Halena's chef was sure to serve. Mother hated wasting a meal, so she'd make some condescending comment that would set the girl off. It would all be very entertaining.

"We heard you may not be accustomed to meat or our other normal foods." Mother turned to Kaia as soon as everyone sat down. Her hair—pitch black and pulled into a neat, tight bun—was thinner than he had remembered it at the temples. Her face was lined and tired. But her eyes, shrewd as ever, quickly disillusioned him of any hope of weakness or senility. "So I arranged a selection of plant-based options. I also had someone from Mission Resources bring up some nutrigel packets in case nothing is to your taste."

And Kaia immediately fucking perked up.

"She doesn't eat nutrigel anymore, Mother," Orion said.

"I'd love some actually. I've been getting used to the solids, but sometimes it still makes me sh—" Kaia choked down the word, and the blush would have been so adorable if it hadn't been aimed at his mother. "It makes me a little queasy." Orion didn't even know she had it in her to look

sheepish like that. The smile Mother returned was fake. It had to be, because Mare Halena hated all shows of *weakness*.

And then it got worse.

“Per mentioned your family passed, Kaia,” Mother said twenty minutes later, as they were winding up the first course. Well, he and his parents were winding up the first course. Kaia was finishing sucking the guts out of a nutrigel packet.

“Yes. Long ago,” Kaia said.

“Your parents?”

“And little brother.”

Mother frowned. “What happened, if you do not mind?”

Yes, she fucking did mind! Kaia hadn’t even deemed necessary to talk to him about her past. Why wouldn’t she goddamn mind spilling her guts to the woman who’d tried to convince him to choose someone else—anyone else—to fuck and marry just days ago?

“Cancer,” Kaia answered flatly, her lack of protest at the intrusive question only making Orion seethe even more. “He got caught out at daytime on Artega Seven. The radiation burst...”

Mother’s gaze hardened on him. “Orion didn’t tell me that.”

He hadn’t told her that because Orion didn’t fucking know. Kaia cleared her throat, blinking fast as she averted her attention to the table.

And then Mother decided she felt in a sharing mood today. “Me too. The cancer.”

Kaia stared at her. “That’s why...? But... How long?”

“A year at most.” Mother flicked her napkin to her plate, looking distinctly unbothered by her predicament. “Detected too late, for once. Not even colony resources can cheat death sometimes, I suppose.”

“Upload can,” Kaia blurted out.

“I suppose that’s true. But I can’t command this ship from Heaven. So you understand my urgency to get my son caught up with everything he’ll need to be once I’m gone.”

Kaia nodded.

“And you understand, of course, that being his future wife comes with great responsibilities of its own.”

Here we go.

“Kids...” Kaia muttered, and Orion stabbed a chopstick into his salad. How about she just start with good old fashioned dick sucking and take it from there?

“Oh, honey, that’s the least of it.” Mother barked out a laugh, teeth flashing in a sinister smile. It didn’t seem to faze Kaia in the slightest.

Orion couldn’t remember the last time conversation flowed that naturally with him and his mother. And with Kaia herself... well, the only thing flowing between them was his desire to shove a fucking cheeseburger down her throat.

This wasn’t good. Mare Halena wasn’t supposed to *like* her, and he was pretty damn sure she didn’t. Kaia was on *Colossal* as revenge. His defiance made flesh. And now they were leaning toward each other at the table... *bantering*. Orion and his father exchanged looks. This was all part of Mare Halena’s little game. A way for her to rob him of the satisfaction he so deserved after all these years.

He instinctively grabbed Kaia’s hand under the table. She’d better remember why she was even there. For *him*. Only him. She barely had a chance to tense before his mother recaptured her attention with her speech about what was in store for Kaia as the commander’s wife. Orion squeezed harder, crushing her palm in his until she finally showed him she felt it. The wince was a victory.

“And comms is just part of it. You’ll be a personal assistant, an organizer, a project manager, a trusted advisor. A comforting embrace.” Mother was looking at Per Halen as she went through the lengthy list of responsibilities.

“A yes-man and apologist for my actions, that kind of thing.” Orion cut in.

“Stop waving your chopsticks around, Orion,” Mare Halena chastised, before turning back to Kaia. “That’s why I’ve arranged for you to start studies from tomorrow morning. You need intensive training, just like Orion does. It’ll be more difficult with both of you being so... new at this. But necessary. And Per has the impression that you’re strong, even if you don’t look it—”

“I’m working on that,” Orion said.

“Oh, I think we can take that off your plate, Orion. You fly, I hear?” Mother asked, and Orion’s heart sank.

“Yeah, I fly.”

“Not licenced, I presume?”

Kaia squirmed in her seat, no doubt suspecting a trap, as she should. “Not exactly...”

“Good. I’ve arranged a placement at the pilot academy. The routine will help you get used to colony life. They’ll teach you the basics. And get you licenced while you’re at it. The training comes with a rigorous exercise regimen. Unlike some of the... *more relaxed* colonies, *Colossal* pilots have stringent fitness thresholds. I’m sure Orion will be pleased.” Mother pursed her lips in a small smile.

“Thank you, Mrs. Halena,” Kaia gaped.

Orion scowled. Mother wouldn’t so much as let him set foot in a cockpit after the incident at Noranor. Hell, she sent him away for it. Yet here she was, offering the most prestigious training program at the colony to the scavenger he’d just dragged in.

And Kaia just took it, without even questioning his mother’s motives. It disgusted him to see her sucking up like this. Didn’t she realize Mare Halena was only doing this to spite him? Did she just not care?

“So you and my mother are best friends now, huh?” Orion spat hours later, back in Kaia’s cabin following a tense and wordless walk.

Kaia looked exhausted, having lifted the sides of her billowy skirt and slumped immediately on the edge of her bed. She kicked off her shoes and flexed her bare toes as she reached down to rub her ankles.

Now an air of vigilance returned as she straightened. “What do you mean?”

“Drop the act, princess. We both know going to fucking *school* is the last thing you want to be doing.”

“Uh... pilot school. And maybe if you’d told me there was all this shit I was expected to do and know I would’ve suggested something like that myself. Or hell, not come here in the first place.” That last part trailed off in a low mutter, but the little bitch just couldn’t help herself, apparently.

“You talk as if you give a damn. You came here to better your life, right? You’re terrified to even touch me, which I’d say is duty number fucking one.”

“I’m not *terrified*. And what about you, heir?” She spat, thrusting herself off the bed. “You’ve been whining about having to go back here since the night I met you. I know why you wanted me here. You told me, remember? Someone exciting, a little crazy. Right? Something to stick in your parents’ noses. And now you have a problem with me making the best of it? Learning more about this delusional cult ship you just dragged me into, maybe get in a cockpit again?”

“You agreed to this!” Orion bellowed.

Cult? He had no love lost for the colonies, but that was a little farfetched.

“So did you!”

They advanced step by step as their voices rose until they stood inches apart. The bunched fabric of Kaia's skirt shook in her fists. This was the loud anger. Indignation more than anything else. The dangerous rage was quiet, and neither of them was there. Maybe this was all she had. Useless, heated flareups, like most people.

It only took a flick of his hand to grab the front of her skirt and drag her against his chest. She started to protest, but his mouth was already there, searing a crushing brand into her lips.

When she clawed her fingers into his shirt and tried to wrench herself away, Orion grabbed the back of her neck to keep her in her place. It wasn't a kiss, and she should know that. It was a lesson. A blistering instruction in taking it when your fiancé—your damn commander—commanded it.

It only lasted a few seconds before they shoved each other back, flushed faces gulping for breaths.

“We both agreed to this, princess.”

Orion clasped the back of his neck, rubbing the spikes there to ease the itch drifting down his spine. He assessed the fragility of the body before him once again, taking quick stock of all the soft and hard parts, all the fragile parts. He pried his eyes away and tramped out of the cabin.

CHAPTER 26

KAIA

Kaia sat at the chair next to the small desk in her cabin, the silver finger polish pinched between her thumb and forefinger. She was flicking the little bottle by its cap, twisting it up and down in her hand.

She'd chosen silver as a sign of neutrality. Kaia was perfectly aware that she was just a pawn on this board. A tool for Orion to disrupt his mother's plans. She had no intention of getting in the middle of that whole mess.

Orion had been right. Getting another responsibility on her schedule wasn't Kaia's idea of a good time, even if it got her in a cockpit again. She loved flying, but she had bigger shit to worry about now. But she couldn't exactly say no—not to the woman who had the power to throw her off her ship at any moment.

Of course, Mare Halena had only played nice to show Orion that his little games were inconsequential to her. Her admission about her terminal cancer was likely an attempt to disarm Kaia rather than any real display of vulnerability. The old woman's extensive descriptions of Kaia's "responsibilities" were a transparent strategy to scare her off, to make her second-guess her commitment. It might've even worked, if Kaia was planning to stick around for any of it. But she did need to play the part of someone whose intent was to do just that, so she smiled and nodded.

Kaia admitted that turning Orion's vision for her relationship with his mother upside-down delivered a twisted sense of satisfaction. She knew she should stay neutral, keep a level head and play the act smart—it was what Loran would tell her to do. But Kaia sure as shit wasn't Loran.

Being asked about her brother was difficult, and Kaia was lucky Mare Halena didn't pry for more of the story. She wasn't ready to discuss her part in it all.

There seemed to be no love lost between her and her son. Kaia wondered if she'd ever learn that story.

Doesn't matter.

She did learn more about Mare Halena's timeline for the wedding. After expressing appropriate gratitude about the training Mare Halena "offered," Kaia prodded a bit into the timeframe of things. Things like the dreaded wedding.

"I estimate six Old Earth months will be long enough to get you up to speed. This is also when we plan to embark on the next expedition. It will give the residents hope to have their future commander be wed and begin his reproductive duties in conjunction with that event."

Kaia had resisted squirming in her seat, but she did instinctively pry her hand away from Orion's, where he'd been holding it in her lap for the previous ten minutes. Stuck between Orion and his mother, Kaia had to give a little to maintain the delicate balance between the man who was her ticket to Upload and the woman who had the power to ruin it all for her.

So she had tolerated this one bit of physical contact, and after a while even appreciated the heat radiating off his skin in the otherwise chilly space.

Would six months be long enough for her to get Loran an in on the ship? She'd need to do it before *Colossal* made its jump to the edge of known space and embarked out into unexplored territory, well out of Loran's reach.

Kaia would need to use her time wisely. She'd need to research power dynamics on the ship, resource providers Loran might be able to infiltrate, how instance traversal worked to ensure she'd end up near Ahton, and other practicalities. She hoped six months would be plenty of time to figure it out without setting off alarm bells in the ship's access monitoring systems, which she was sure were in place.

Kaia still hadn't heard from Loran since her ping, but something in her bones told her he'd received it and was biding his time. Loran's machinery was always in motion. She

wondered what *his* expected timeline was for the whole operation.

There were so many balls to juggle, but Kaia was closer than ever to her goal of reuniting with the brother she'd killed. If she could just keep this house of cards from collapsing, she'd be Heaven free. But when Kaia was in bed and her thoughts veered away from planning and calculations, there were no more distractions to keep her mind off the other thing that happened.

She couldn't call it a kiss. That wasn't what it was. It was more like an angry, belligerent possession. A crushing of bodies that said *I'll show you that I own you*.

It wasn't designed to make something under her ribs swell, goading her to lean into the fire of it, but that was what happened—the sudden urge to poke and prod, to see how far she could push it before the fire lost control.

She may have wanted to die, but Kaia wasn't suicidal. Not in *that* way. The dangerous impulse was idiotic. She may have been able to begrudgingly play those games with Loran, but this wasn't just an asshole warlord she was dealing with. She needed to keep her shit under control. And that meant keeping things moving.

She pulled her tablet from under her mattress and sent her second ping to Riker 109, willing Loran to guide her next steps.

RECIPIENT ID: A35R109-*

FROM: CCLSL-25109

DATA: NONE

She felt a little better right after the message was sent. At least things were happening. At least she was *doing* something. Kaia twisted to her side and tucked her knees into her chest, thinking about anything but what just happened, forcing the flashes of it out of her head. But no matter how much she focused on Ahton, on her plans, even on Loran and memories of her life on Riker 109, a pair of ice blue eyes and mean, hard lips were the last thing in her head before she slept.

Pilot training took place adjacent to a rookie dock in the ship's bow. The bow, being the command hub of the colony, teemed with officers and senior staff too big for their breeches. She had expected it to be at least a little fun. Kaia knew how to fly already, and now she'd get to do it for real.

Except it had been two weeks and they hadn't even left the classroom yet, much less seen the inside of a cockpit. With each day spent in the confined space with another half-dozen trainees, Kaia felt more and more like she might crawl out of her skin.

Orion found himself in the same part of the ship for his own "handover" duties, whatever those were. Thankfully, his mother seemed to be driving him hard enough. Though Kaia had a feeling, from the glimpses of him she'd caught throughout her days, that he'd cut to the pilot's bar at every opportunity to get shitfaced.

He hadn't bothered her in her cabin in the evenings since dinner with Mare Halena. Kaia was relieved when the pattern continued, but she did ruminate on the cause. Was his mother having him work nights? Was he just too exhausted at the end of each day to bother her? Or—and this is the thought Kaia had been resolutely trying to squash—was he bored and done with her already? How long would it take for him to discard her, and what would happen to her when that happened?

The anxiety of it was what stopped Kaia from fucking off to the pilot's bar for a drink of her own. She didn't have the luxury of screwing around. She had to get her bearings, figure shit out, and start siphoning intel to Loran before the fear of Orion's boredom turned into a cold, hard fact.

So she got the intel. Intel like how nobody knew which *exact* genes powered *Colossal*, only that they were all within Orion's family. She learned that this obfuscation of how the ship worked was by design, the original architects thousands of years ago designing the system to minimize chances of

someone replicating the gene set in the future. Whoever built *Colossal* wanted the power to stay in the family.

“But isn’t that a little fucked up?” Kaia interrupted the instructor, a wiry old man who went by Sutton, in the middle of his lecture on the topic.

“How so, Kaia?”

“You got seven thousand people living on this ship.” Kaia had learned the approximate population of *Colossal* in an earlier lesson. “And all their lives depend on this one family, who was apparently so power hungry that they’d keep anyone else from controlling their precious spaceship? Putting thousands of people at risk should they die off. How is that *not* fucked up?”

“Most colony ships work this way for sound historical reasons. Old Earth fell because of the squabbles of men vying for power at the expense of all else. It is why they ran out of resources, and why they eventually bowed to external influences—”

“The uhyre, you mean.” Kaia raised a brow, knowing the irony wouldn’t be lost on him.

Peter, the quiet guy who sat next to her, scoffed. “She’s got a point.”

Peter was the one fellow trainee in the batch who didn’t seem to gawk at her like she was an animal when she first arrived. They had no idea who she was or where she’d come from, and it seemed like her relationship to their commander-to-be hadn’t gotten around yet. Kaia was glad for it.

“We must all live with the consequences of Old Earth’s actions, even thousands of years later,” Sutton lectured. “But I’d posit that we’ve done well for ourselves, at least compared to some less fortunate living conditions. Wouldn’t you agree?”

The man looked down at her from above the ugly rectangular glasses sitting on his hooked nose. Why was he even wearing those? Nobody needed glasses here—*Colossal* could correct your vision with a ten-minute trip to the medbay.

“Least on my poor little home station, I’m not stuck in shitty classrooms extolling the virtues of being under a single family’s thumb,” she muttered.

No. I’m stuck under the thumb of a crazy psychopathic warlord instead. Except she still hadn’t heard from Loran.

She expected further argument, but Sutton instead directed his attention to the door behind them. Even as she was turning around, the hairs on the back of her neck rose like she just knew.

“Mr. Halen,” the instructor acknowledged.

Kaia’s body couldn’t quite figure out if it wanted to slump in relief or panic. He was there, clearly for her, considering he had his brow cocked in her direction. Either this was a sign of him not getting bored with her after all, or this was where she’d get to find out who was taking her place and where she was being shipped off to.

Orion glared coldly at Peter.

“When you’re done extolling the awful conditions my family forces upon you all, I’d love to invite my fiancé to meet me in the pilot’s gym.”

“Why?” Kaia blurted as gaping faces snapped to her.

The relief washing through her at still being called his fiancé was dampened by the realization that he just gave her away to the entire class. Then again, maybe semi-publicly claiming her like this was the best she could have hoped for. It was proof she was still in business.

“First sparring lesson, princess.” Orion ignored the saucer-wide stares of the other trainees ping-ponging between them.

Kaia pushed her seat aside with a resounding scrape and followed him out, ignoring the fresh scowl on Peter’s face.

The gym wasn’t empty when they got there, but the duo on the sparring mat cleared out at a quick instruction from Orion.

“Get in.” Orion jerked his chin to the mat.

“I don’t have workout clothes with me.”

That was how far it had come—she had a separate set of clothing dedicated to exercise now. If someone were to tell her she’d be changing at least once a day and have several outfits to pick from a few weeks ago, she’d have laughed in their face.

She’d been presented with a workout program and a set of stretchy attire the first day of training. Kaia hated it. The top was too tight, designed to flatten a chest she didn’t even have. The bottom was thin leggings that always itched when she’d started to sweat.

Orion looked her up and down, taking in her skin-hugging burgundy trousers and sleeveless white tee. “It’s fine. No time to change.”

“Oh, how come? Got a hot date at the pilot’s bar?” Kaia jabbed.

The amusement in his eye made her regret it. Did he think she was jealous or something? Fuck that. Kaia rolled her eyes and chucked off her shoes, then hopped onto the mat. It gave under her bare feet, cool and soft beneath her toes.

“Okay. Now what?” Kaia glanced around the space, spotting other gym-goers throwing tentative glances their way as Orion removed his own shoes to stand in front of her.

“Now you hit me.”

“Orion, I’m serious.”

“Me too.”

“But why?”

“Because when I fuck you, you need to be able to temper me,” he said coolly.

Fuck. Kaia hadn’t wanted to think about that, and she definitely didn’t want to feel the stares of everyone who’d heard the statement now.

“Fine.” Kaia bent her knees, slouching forward a little the way she’d seen boxers do in old vids. She shook out her hands, bouncing a little on her toes the way they did. She looked for some glimpse of feedback in Orion’s expression, but he remained a motionless statue before her, not even bothering to brace himself. Was he expecting her to hold back, or just to suck?

Kaia wasn’t the holding-back kind. She went straight for the throat.

The sputter wheezing out of him as her punch landed was a satisfying start. It wasn’t even a good hit, she knew that. But when his eyes widened and he stepped back a little, Kaia felt herself smiling.

“The fuck?” Orion coughed.

“You said to hit you.”

His eyes narrowed, and Kaia wondered if maybe this hadn’t been a bad idea.

“Fuck it then.” In a quick movement, Orion had his massive arm locked around her chest and her back slammed against him.

The crushing pressure of his forearm constricted Kaia’s breathing. Pain jolted from an awkwardly pinched nipple through her breast. “Break free, princess.”

Kaia wriggled, trying to dislodge her breast with zero success. She didn’t know what this was, but she didn’t think it was how “sparring” was supposed to go. Wasn’t he meant to teach her things? Or was this just an excuse for him to fuck with her?

If that’s how he wants to play it.

Kaia juttled her knee forward, then shoved her heel back. The smack of her bare foot against his shin told her she found the mark. He jerked his left foot aside, giving her the opportunity to thrust her hips upward, tucking her legs as she twisted herself sideways in the air. It was no use. His tight hold keeping her torso against his chest prevented her from

breaking loose, no matter how hard she tried to contort her lower body.

But Kaia felt a pang of pride at the sharp exhale against her hair when she drove a loose elbow into his ribs. He barely grunted as he corrected the situation by grabbing her hands in one of his own and pinning them against her abdomen.

Kaia's pulse hammered and sweat was already beading on her skin, but she refused to give up. She wouldn't give this asshole the satisfaction. She kept kicking anything and everything within reach: the air, his legs, his feet. Her side cramped in protest as she sucked air into burning lungs. She twisted her neck, trying to sink her teeth into the flesh of his arm with no luck.

Her fight against the immovable object behind her went on like that for a while. He said nothing. Didn't object or make suggestions. He just took it, shifting his weight under her blows and futile flurries. The others in the gym turned to watch at first, but averted their eyes when they saw her flailing, some shaking their heads with a measure of discomfort. How stupid she must look to them, red-faced and breathless. How useless.

This is what he wants, she realized. He was *trying* to make her look like a complete idiot.

With a final growling jerk, Kaia slumped beneath him.

His voice was gentle when he finally spoke, his chin propped on top of her head. "You done, princess?"

She gave it another weak wrench before resigning herself to being humiliated.

"Now you know. Aimless struggle is useless. I'm stronger and bigger, and it'll only wind me up. You feel me?"

She did. It hadn't registered when she was in the midst of it, but there was a hard bulge pressed against the small of her back. Her breath caught as she shifted her hips forward, trying to put distance between herself and *that*. But with a quick pull, Orion dragged her back against him, keeping the contact.

“You want to be strategic about it,” Orion continued in a low purr, and Kaia was hyper-aware of his finger tracing little circles on her bare shoulder.

Suddenly all the points at which their skin connected—his hands wrapped around her wrists, his arm flush with hers—were acutely emphasized in her senses. Even the hard protrusion of him, very obvious through the layers of cloth between them, wasn’t as distressing as those points of bare contact, where the pain of his hard grip mingled with the textured heat of his skin.

Kaia shook her head, trying to focus on his words. He breathed against her ear, and she smelled the exorin on his tongue, cold iron and blood enveloping her in a heady aura tinged with mint.

“Use your hips. Drop your weight. Just like a stone. Relax. That’s good.”

That *was* good. She could just do what he said. Focus on following instructions and not think about the rest of it.

“Now push your hips back. Into me, not away, hard. This isn’t about my dick, princess. You gotta commit.”

“Don’t call me princess,” Kaia bit back weakly, shoving her hips into him.

“I’ll call you whatever I want. Good...” The assurance came with a low, strained grunt. “Now twist your wrists and pull your arms away from your body. I’ll resist, but with the leverage in your hips, you have the advantage.”

Kaia clamped her teeth on her bottom lip, straining with the effort of pushing her hips back and her arms forward at the same time. He wasn’t taking it easy on her, his hands remaining firm around both of her wrists.

“Harder. Come on, I know you’ve got some fight left.”

Kaia hissed through gritted teeth, the taste of impending victory taking hold as his hold budged.

She didn’t need the next instruction. She intuited how to use the leverage to widen the gap between them and twist from

underneath his arm. Kaia stumbled forward, wheezing out an elated laugh as she spun to face him. She did it. She fucking broke free.

“Good job, princess.” Orion shifted his weight and adopted a neutral expression, limbs going loose and still. But beneath that forced placidity, cold eyes tracked her every move in a way that seemed almost robotic.

“What’s next?” She shoved her hair back from her face.

“Nothing. That’s enough for today.”

“Oh. Well, good,” she said, hurrying off the sparring mat. “I’ve got my fuel tank repair class in ten anyway. Who knows? Maybe they’ll finally let us see an actual ship this time.”

She bent, forcing her full attention to pulling on her shoes instead of the weight of his stare at her back.

She skipped the tank repair class, slinking straight to her cabin from the gym.

Orion’s bitter mint scent still lingered on her skin hours later, mixed with the salty tinge of their sweat. She should have showered as soon as she got back to her cabin. Instead, she sat in bed, back against the wall, as if stubbornly stewing in the aura of him clinging to her would somehow help desensitize her. But her flesh was still prickling from his touch, and her gut was still in knots. Kaia wanted to just get this over with and get far, far away from Orion.

She jumped halfway off the bed at the chime under her mattress. She knew exactly what it was—the only thing it *could* be. And at such an opportune time.

RECIPIENT ID: CCLSL-25109

FROM ID: A35R109-09

DATA: DEAREST KAIA, WE’VE ALL BEEN WORRIED ABOUT YOU. EVERYONE MISSES YOUR SCAV RUNS. HOPE COLONY LIFE IS TREATING YOU WELL. I

DO WISH WE'D HAVE GOTTEN A PROPER GOODBYE.
CAN YOU ATTACH THOSE REPAIR NOTES YOU HAD
FOR AHTON'S TAKE? WE NEED TO REUSE THE
SHIP NOW YOU'RE GONE. LOVE, LORAN AND
EVERYONE ON RIKER 109.

It took her another two startled readthroughs to figure out what this was. Repair notes? Reusing *Ahton's Take*?

But of course, she'd already known comms were likely to be monitored by ship administrators. Loran would no doubt have made the same deduction. It wasn't common for colonists to communicate with external parties—colonies were cultish that way—but as a rare new arrival, she may be forgiven for still having contacts outside.

And asking for innocuous “repair notes” from her old life was a perfect excuse.

Kaia flopped to her stomach and shoved her arm under the mattress once more, extracting her S54 card. Then she disconnected the reader's wireless signal from *Colossal's* network, taking the tablet offline while she inserted the card and transferred over a first, innocuous data dump—some of her notes about the colony.

She synced a copy of her academy schedule from the card to the tablet—the data had to be temporarily decrypted for transfer, but the tablet being offline should prevent any in-flight snooping of her data packets. After adding some fake data about *Ahton's Take* thruster and claw repairs for cover, Kaia re-encrypted the payload and attached the resulting file to her new outgoing transmission.

Finally, she tapped out a hasty reply, buzzing with excitement. At least the plan hadn't changed. They were *doing* something.

RECIPIENT ID: A35R109-09

FROM ID: CCLSL-25109

DATA: LORAN, COLOSSAL IS GOOD. ADJUSTMENT
IS HARD, BUT SOON ORION AND I WILL MARRY

AND I APPRECIATE HIS EFFORTS. I MISS YOU
ALL. THE TAKE REPAIR NOTES ATTACHED.

Attachment: AT_Repair.pgp

She re-read the note a few times, scrutinizing each sentence to make sure nothing stood out as suspicious. The encrypted attachment held data for Loran, and the plain-text message held data for whoever might be watching. Assuming *Colossal* didn't have ways to break her and Loran's encryption protocol was a risk, but she hoped even if they did, this first set of data she sent would be innocuous enough.

She stashed the tablet away and got up to scrub the coffee-mint sweat smell of her fiancé off her skin with her shower ration.

CHAPTER 27

ORION

It had taken every shred of self-restraint not to slam her onto that mat and rip her apart earlier that day. Orion swirled the shot glass of kerogin between his thumb and index finger in the pilot's bar, replaying the incident. For a few excruciating moments, he thought he may have to stop her incessant writhing because clearly she didn't know when to quit. She fought for much longer than he had expected, each jerk and twist of her body pulling at his tattered strings until she was nothing but prey, meat thrashing in his arms that needed to be either killed or fucked. Maybe both.

He'd inhaled the forest, closed his eyes and pictured the leaves. He'd tried to humanize the flesh in his clutches, remembering that this wasn't some animal but a person who was not ready for the kind of games she was goading him into.

Just as he'd been about to shove her away for fear of breaking his new toy, the fight had eased from her body and she fell limp in his arms. She learned fast once he taught her how to sever his hold. Of course, he helped a little. She'd never be able to get away that easily in real life. But she didn't really need to. She just needed to know the basics that would make him falter in the heat of the moment.

He had smelled her arousal. And then, when she'd gotten away and stood facing him, the way her nipples pebbled through her singlet wasn't lost on him. He wondered if she'd even recognized it herself, how hot she was for it. Or if she put it down to sweat, and exertion. Her eyes had dragged up and down his body twice before staring resolutely somewhere else.

Orion always suspected the fight of it wasn't what scared her. It was the other thing. The exorin, threatening to get her hooked and dependent on anyone other than herself. She'd have to accept that eventually.

He hadn't followed her out of the pilot's gym. He needed distance. Ignoring the other patrons, he'd taken out his frustration on the punching bag in the corner before ditching his afternoon meetings in favor of the farthest bar he could find.

He'd downed a few shots and thought about something—anything—other than how her cunt would feel squeezing his cock. He said he'd give her time to build her strength, and he would. He had half a mind to drink well into the night, maybe find a tight little distraction.

Orion smirked at the thought of Kaia's earlier jealousy, asking him about his hot date. He had the opportunity now that he was back on *Colossal*. On Mars, he'd had to restrain himself to the best of his ability. He had no interest in leaving a trail of addicted Martian women in his wake once he inevitably left the planet. But here, nothing was off limits. If some chick he picked up got addicted, she could get exorin straight from the source. Except then he'd be *responsible* for someone other than himself, and having one little pain in the ass to patronize was going to be more than enough.

Besides, his evening appointment wasn't with some lowly official he could just ditch. Mare Halena was waiting for him.

Orion groaned as he got off his stool and headed to the command center.

By the time he got there, he'd been composed and sober-looking enough. Not enough to fool his mother, of course. Her nostrils flared as she no doubt smelled it on him: the alcohol, but also the adrenaline of earlier, which clung to him like a stain. She made no comment.

“Good, Mr. Halen, you're here. Shall we get started?” The lead navigator flicked a map of X1s Galaxy onto the thermaview pebbled with faraway stars. “I believe we left off with digging into the three potential planets yesterday.”

The view zoomed in on three columns of data—signatures the scout ships had picked up from their long-range mission.

“X1s-A appears to be about half the circumference of Old Earth. The other two are thought to be approximately the same size.”

“Let’s focus on those two then,” Mother said in that clipped tone.

The man discarded the first column without question. “X1s-B and C have similar profiles. There is an eighty percent chance of a breathable atmosphere, but that’s the easiest part to detect... We don’t know much more, other than the stories.”

“Stories?” Orion asked.

“There are rumors that *Elysian* picked up additional data from one of these three planets when it had to skirt past X1s Galaxy on its last expedition.”

“*Elysian*... the colony that disappeared?”

The navigator nodded. “They never returned from the expedition, but a scout they left behind reported getting a transmission concerning these planets. Original data has been lost, but her accounts were promising.”

Promising? Orion stared at his mother. Was she that desperate to find New Earth before Upload? Desperate enough to go chasing the trail of a missing colony, likely dead like so many others on their expedition flights?

Going out into unexplored space was always a gamble. Everyone knew that. But taking that gamble on some random hunch from a random navigator whose parent colony was probably a dead husk somewhere out there was lunacy.

“Please tell me we have more to go on.”

“We have enough to consider it.” Mare Halena’s eyes were flicking up and down, no doubt scrolling through the scant data in her Neurosync vision overlay.

“Yes, but you’re not just *considering* it. You told Kaia we’re going in six months.”

“I have already considered it. We have three promising planets, and we will investigate two of them.”

“Mother.”

“You are here to shadow, Orion. Your input isn’t required.” From the corner of his eye, Orion saw the lead navigator look away.

“What do you think about all this?” Orion forced him back into the conversation.

“Sir, it is not my place to—”

That’s enough, his mother’s subvocalization chimed in his comms.

“You are the lead navigator,” Orion ignored her and persisted. “If not yours, whose fucking place is it?”

His mother must have subvocalized something to the man, because he nodded in her direction and made a hasty exit.

“If you think you’re going to come in here and start barking orders before I’m even dead, you’re very mistaken.” Mother’s voice was a raspy growl. “You’ve been away for over a decade, and now you expect to have an opinion?”

“You *sent* me away.”

“I couldn’t allow my careless son to doom this entire colony with his silly piloting exploits.”

“And what do you think you’re doing now? All you know about these planets is their atmosphere! Has the cancer gone to your brain? You’ll probably be dead by the time we get there, so it’s me you’re dumping this on.”

His mother drew herself up from her chair, imposing in her stillness. “Get out.”

“Are you even listening? You can’t just risk all these—”

“Orion, I think I’ve made myself clear. You can leave now.”

With a last look at the data projected before them, Orion shook his head and stalked from the command center. He’d rather not give a shit about any of this, except now he had to because he was here, stuck on the ship his mother was conceivably sending to its demise.

CHAPTER 28

KAIA

A month later, Kaia was beginning to feel glad for the extra calories Orion had her on because the strength training regimen and the sparring took it all out of her. She thought she'd get a break on days she was scheduled for the sim rig—running flight scenarios in the fake cockpit of one of ten ship models. But the concentration required to complete those simulated missions drained her in some ways even more than lifting heavy shit and putting it back down.

Whatever she was doing seemed to be serving her joints well, though. She realized the other night that she hadn't actually found them aching or felt the need to rub them down lately.

Still, Kaia cheated at the gym when she could. She'd loiter. Take it easy between sets. Grab very long water breaks. At first she almost felt bad about it, until she noticed everyone else in the pilot's gym did the same thing. Well, everyone except for Peter, who'd been brooding since he learned of Kaia's ties to Orion. He pumped that barbell over his chest, back arched and braced as though it were about to snap, with barely a break to breathe.

After a while, she wasn't even sure that it was cheating. It seemed like stalling for an inordinate amount of time was just part of the "power lifting" program the academy had them on.

The mutual stalling was conducive to striking up conversations. She'd even gotten to know some of the regulars. Most full-fledged pilots didn't bother talking to rookies, but it seemed her position held a certain draw. She dutifully made small talk and asked about their day. Sometimes they shared useful info, like *Colossal* weapons configs around the outer hull or other tidbits she'd then transmit to Loran under the guise of notes about her old ship back on Riker 109. To anyone else, it would look like her good friend Loran was just *very* interested in *Ahton's Take*.

The gym had plenty of muscle-laden regulars. But none of them were as big and intimidating as Orion. It was a given; his uhyre genes ensured his size and strength advantage.

She was up against that advantage now as she twisted his arm, forcing him to release her, and followed up by jutting a knee into his groin with all her strength.

“Good.” Orion barked, taking a step back. “You’re better with standing grapples now.”

“Better?” Kaia laughed. “I just kicked your ass.”

“That’s a bit of an overstatement, don’t you think?”

She rolled her eyes. “Whatever. I’ve gotten out of every hold you had me in for the last two weeks.”

Kaia had been having weekly sparring sessions with Orion for a month now. She was growing more confident in her abilities, and in her growing strength, even if some of her new gym “buddies” did call it “newbie gains.”

She was even beginning to learn to ignore the hard-on her sparring partner always got during their training, having resigned to the fact that it was just a normal part of what he was. As was the way his hands would sometimes claw up her shirt or to her ass, digging harder than he needed to keep her still, or keep her down. At first it was terrifying, not knowing when he’d snap. Because an uhyre always snapped. But he hadn’t. Not yet, and Kaia realized she’d begun to trust him not to. It felt almost good, relaxing into this dynamic. Even if she did end up replaying their sessions in her head every night like some kind of masochist.

It was getting worse. The thinking. She didn’t know why her body loved fighting him so much. It sure as hell wasn’t smart, and it sure as hell wasn’t sustainable. But sometimes Kaia couldn’t fight the ache she was left with after their sessions. She’d slip her hand between her legs to her clit, already swollen beneath the pads of her fingers. She’d take care of herself to relieve the pressure, and all the while she would think about *anything* but him. Then she’d pretend it never happened.

“So you’re just gonna pretend I’m not letting you win here, huh, princess?” Orion snapped her back to the present on the mat.

“Oh, fuck you.” She was already flushed and on edge at the memory of what he was making her do. Now not only was he minimizing her abilities, he also wouldn’t stop calling her that ugly, mocking nickname. Kaia dismissed him with a flap of the hand as she turned to walk off the mat.

He gave her no warning. One second she was turning her back to be done with him, the next a wall was slamming into her from behind and sending her down. They rolled as they hit the ground and for a moment she was atop him, but not long enough to get an advantage.

He soon had her on her back, hands pinned over her head. His knees clenched tight around her thighs, forcing her legs together. She squirmed against the unpleasant friction between her thighs. Her knees knocked, bone grinding against bone to shoot lightning up her legs. She was suddenly reminded of a vid she saw from Old Earth, of one of those giant snakes constricting around a hoofed mammal. The ones that swallowed their prey whole.

Kaia didn’t know what to do. The only part of her she could move was her chest, barely. She could arch up just an inch or so, but her arms and legs were immobilized beneath her opponent.

But Kaia had long learned not to thrash or panic. He only got more excited if she did that. Staying calm didn’t give him the same pleasure. To Kaia, that was a win as well as a safety mechanism.

“What the fuck, Orion?” She wheezed as he slammed his chest into hers, forcing the breath from her lungs.

His hair had fallen, shrouding his eyes, but she still felt them on her, and they were freezing. They’d never done this before. Not like that—they’d been training standing grapples. Doing this lying down was... wrong.

What she hated even more was the bite in his voice as he tilted his head to the side. “Go on then, princess. Kick my ass.”

This wasn't training, and they knew it.

He wants me to struggle.

Twisting her neck to create distance from his mocking glare, Kaia tried to notice any obvious weak spots in his position. But she couldn't even try to knee him anywhere.

She picked at the side of her thumb with her index finger—the little movement she could manage—wincing through the pain in the tendons of her locked-down wrist. She saw no way out of this, and his goddamn job was to teach her, not expect her to do it on the first try. He was just taking revenge.

“You're an asshole.” Her voice was hoarse, and even she was surprised by the sting of angry tears behind her eyes. What the fuck was wrong with her? She looked off to the side, staring at the corded forearm in front of her nose.

“You need to learn not to get cocky. Don't fuck around, princess. If you escape, it's only because I let you. You're weak, Kaia, but it's not your fault. Everyone is. All you can do —” he grunted, pinning her down with an elbow and freeing his hand to grab her chin, yanking her face to his “—all you can do is get strong enough to handle it. Understand?”

His hand on her cheeks was a bruising clamp. The hair in front of his face shifted, revealing one blue orb flicking to her mouth as she blinked away the wet rage pooling in her eyes.

“Do you understand, Kaia?” he demanded.

“Uh-huh,” she couldn't get actual words out with him holding her mouth like that, but the grunt of ascent seemed to be enough because he let go of her face and instead let his hand rake down her neck, then throat, and then lower.

Kaia didn't really think through what she did next. Her body simply reacted without asking her head for permission. With a sharp intake of air, she pitched her head forward. She saw his eyes widen before they blurred out of her view. He'd been just close enough above her for her teeth to connect with

his neck. She bit, and she made it count. Kaia kept her teeth clamped into his flesh even as he tensed under her jaws, latching on and sucking the spit gathering at her lips back into her mouth.

“What the *fuck!*” Orion jerked back, but Kaia didn’t let go. Her head rose a few inches off the floor as he tried to pull away. Ringing exploded in her ears and her squeezed-shut eyelids blotched white as he slammed back to the ground, hitting the mat hard. But still she held on.

He finally released her wrists to grab the back of her hair and haul her off of him. Her teeth felt they were going to break with the force it took, because a part of her didn’t want to give in. Not this time. That part wanted to take it all the way, to hold on until he had to rip his fucking throat to be free of her because fuck him, he deserved it.

But another, harder yank at her scalp made her falter and loosen her jaw. It was enough for him to peel her off. Kaia took advantage of his momentary shock and swung a sloppy punch at his temple. It connected with a satisfying crack and a bolt of pain shooting up her forearm, but she had no time to dwell on it. She was already twisting out from beneath him.

She didn’t actually get away. Orion regrouped fast enough to grab her before she did, clasp her ankle and hoist her back, driving her shirt up her stomach before she could so much as clamber to a crawl. He pinned her face down beneath him. Steel hands ground her upper arms ruthlessly into the mat.

His next move was worse than all the hurt radiating from everywhere.

He rolled his hips against her, grinding his terrifying hard-on into her rear, and fuck if her first instinct wasn’t to shift back to meet him for just a split second. She stopped that shit real fast, but it had been enough. The sound that escaped his throat was something bare, splayed raw for her ears, and it was followed by a strained growl: “Not goddamn now, Kaia. Don’t fuck with me.”

Her nerves were aflame, and the batshit crazy part of her was screaming to disobey. Make him break enough to break

her. Chase the friction back against him. Catch his eye and dare him to do it.

Kaia pushed the crazy way down. Her cheek was flat against the mat, and she resisted the instinct to look back over her shoulder. See if there was anything human in his eyes, or if that was gone now.

She got a hold of herself. She had to be careful.

Don't look him in the eyes.

She flopped her legs and hips limply to the mat.

Don't struggle.

She forced her body to relax under the monster above her, tension pooling out of her and into the floor.

Don't make it worse.

Kaia breathed. Slowly. She smoothed her expression and stared at a random spot just ahead—a little rip in the edge of the mat.

When he rocked his hips into her again, it was a dare. Kaia didn't react, not even with a twitch.

Inside, she was screaming. Her whole body was revolting against this forced nonresponse. The heat pooling between her legs wanted to chase that friction, and the rest of her wanted to thrash against the suffocating hold Orion had on her.

Then the weight was lifted, so fast that for a moment she felt empty, naked, splayed flat on the floor. She chanced a glance back over her shoulder. Orion was crouching two feet away, staring down at his knuckles braced on the mat. Kaia willed her throbbing limbs into action to push herself to a sitting position. A muscle in the back of his jaw twitched in the shadow cast by the light overhead.

Kaia's mouth was dry, and her cheeks burned as she realized other parts of her were paradoxically not.

“You...” She moistened her lips. “I thought I was supposed to try.”

The arm he had wedged into the mat tensed, bulging bicep working.

“Get out,” he snarled.

Gladly. Kaia began to scramble to her feet.

“Don’t. Fucking. Run.”

Every fiber of her being wanted to do just that. But she forced herself to move in slow motion, as though she was wading through nutrigel. She rose and backed herself toward the exit, bending only long enough to take her shoes.

Kaia didn’t run until she’d turned the corner out in the hallway. And when she did, she ran hard. She sprinted through the burning in her chest and the cramp in her side, clutching the skin over her ribs.

When she was in her cabin, Kaia sat on the bed and stared at the door. She wasn’t stupid. Orion’s blood could get him in here. He never knocked. He’d never needed to. If he changed his mind, he could barge in there any time.

Why hadn’t he just done it?

She clenched her thighs together, wincing at the friction. It was only then that the pain began to set back in. It was everywhere—her chest, her head, her arms. She could already see reddish welts that would turn blue by the next day splotched all along her skin. Angry blobs where his fingers had been.

The chime under her mattress made her jump, breaking her stare-down with the door.

“Shit,” Kaia muttered.

Get yourself together.

She dropped to her knees in front of the bed, swearing under her breath at the searing pain in her kneecaps. She winced as she shoved her arm under the mattress, sweeping until she felt the hard edges of the tablet she’d stashed there. When she extracted it and propped it in her hands, she already knew what it would be. There was only one thing it *could* be.

RECIPIENT ID: CCLSL-25109

FROM ID: A35R109-09

DATA: DEAREST KAIA, THANK YOU FOR KEEPING US ALL INFORMED OF YOUR HAPPINESS AND SAFETY THE LAST WEEKS. IT COMFORTS US ALL. TELL ME, WHEN IS YOUR WEDDING TO TAKE PLACE? MY ONLY REGRET IS NOT HAVING TIME TO SAY GOODBYE. SEND ORION OUR BEST.

“Fuck you.” She threw the tablet on the bed and flopped onto her bruised back next to it.

She’d been sending him so much fucking info. Whatever she thought she safely could, escalating the sensitivity of her data dumps with every transmission. Maps, flight paths, resource procurement, all this shit she didn’t care about, all to help him do his stupid job. Instead of acknowledging or using any of it, he was fixated on her wedding to the monster she was stuck with. Did he even *have* a plan? How long was he gonna string her along?

Of course he had a plan. He always did. If he was doing this—fixating on her marriage—it was for a reason, and she should play along. It took her a few minutes to calm down enough to accept it, but it was true.

Kaia grabbed the tablet and punched out a reply.

RECIPIENT ID: A35R109-09

FROM ID: CCLSL-25109

DATA: FIVE MONTHS. RIGHT BEFORE THE EXPEDITION. I CAN’T WAIT.

It was bold and probably stupid, mentioning specifics of *Colossal’s* expedition timeline. It hadn’t been something she’d bothered with before, thinking Loran’s machinations would get them moving well before that happened. He wasn’t a patient man. But she needed him to understand the urgency of

the situation, because she didn't know how much more of this she could take.

The answer, surprisingly, came almost immediately.

RECIPIENT ID: CCLSL-25109

FROM ID: A35R109-09

DATA: THAT SOUNDS FASCINATING. TELL ME MORE.

So that was it. He wanted to know more about the expedition. Kaia supposed it made sense; the chaos of such an event could provide opportunities to worm his way onto the ship. At least now Kaia had a solid direction in which to go digging, and just the right source into which to pitch her shovel.

Paradoxically, the memory of Orion shaking as he refused to look at her and sent her away made her pause. He hurt her, bad. But he had stopped. *Made* himself stop. How hard was that for him? What did it mean? Was she more angry at him for acting on his nature, or at herself for almost, *almost* wanting him to?

Orion was not a good man. Shit, not hurting her should *not* be the bar here. So why did the idea of using him for expedition intel make something in her chest twinge? Kaia was just too hyped up from what happened. Too emotional. She'd get over it.

She shoved the tablet back under her mattress and thought through her approach.

CHAPTER 29

ORION

Back in his suite, Orion stayed in the shower longer than was responsible in terms of water usage. At first it was to cool himself off—to get his head off the thought of going to her cabin. When that didn't work, it was to stand under the stream pattering his head, shoulders hunched forward, neck craned as his hand tugged at his dick in impatient strokes.

His breathing came in labored pants, and as much as he tried to think about something other than *her* as he jerked himself off, those fearful eyes and small, plush lips kept invading his goddamn brain.

He spat the exorin that pooled in his mouth like metallic drool. His oversensitive tongue was spiked in his arousal.

Orion's cock jerked in his fist, and the telltale sign of release pressed against his palm in the form of hard spines emerging at the underside of his shaft. Not sharp enough to pierce, but they sure did hurt. The pressure on the protrusions sent exquisite pangs of punishing pain. He wondered what it'd feel like to have her tight little snatch squeezing them, punishing them both.

The silvery exorin leaking from the spikes slicked his grip on his overheated, swollen skin. He tightened his hold, a strained groan escaping his throat at the ecstatic ache of it. A droplet of precum leaked out and across his forefinger. Orion seized the wall high with his other hand to hold himself up as visions of green owl eyes staring up through wet lashes invaded his brain.

A few more rough thrusts and the first rope of cum shot into the ceramic tile before him. The rest spilled over his fist in thick spurts. The cloudy white of it mixed with his exorin, coalescing into pale silver swirls.

Later, in bed, Orion decided to up Kaia's calories. He was distracted, checking her tracker every hour, fixating on her training at the expense of his own duties. And now, wasting water. He had to get her out of his system, and this shit needed to go faster.

The next day, Kaia was waiting for him outside the entrance to the command center before his first morning meeting. This never happened. Her studies were in the same part of the ship, but they rarely ran into each other. Nor was she ever standing there, waving.

"Kaia." He acknowledged as he approached. Her arms drifted up in a familiar motion, hugging her tablet to her chest like armor. But she paused, then dropped her hands resolutely to her sides.

"Hi," she said.

He cocked his head. He had expected her to avoid him after the previous day. She'd been scared, rightfully so.

"I..." She paused, closed her mouth, then opened it again. "Wanted to thank you."

"Thank me?" Orion glanced at her throat, spotting the hint of purple-blue skin peeking from the collar of her long-sleeved shirt. She shifted, pulling the fabric up higher over the mark, which revealed another bruise on her wrist.

"For not... I know it must've been hard. For you."

Orion glanced at the door behind her. He did not need to think about that again right now. He'd been doing nothing *but* exhibiting self-control this entire fucking time. And now she notices? When he was on the edge of fucking collapse?

"I wondered if I could ask your help." The strange placidity in her voice brought his attention back. She stood meek before him, wringing her hands.

Help? Kaia? His little “I want nothing to do with you and you terrify me” bitchy scavenger? Was his little display of restraint enough to soften her up?

“What kind of help?”

“We’re learning about *Colossal*’s prior expeditions at the academy. You know, Prime Galaxy, Elsie Galaxy, Noranor... I have to report on where it might make sense to go next. And your mom’s planning another...”

“They’re teaching you that shit? Why?”

Kaia shrugged. “I guess so we can have informed opinions?”

“You don’t need an opinion,” Orion said. “You won’t have a say.”

Her expression clouded. “I didn’t say I plan to suggest... Fuck it, never mind. Dunno why I asked you.”

That tablet was pressed firmly against her chest now, and she was spinning on her heel to make an escape.

“Wait.” He caught up with her in one easy stride, grabbing her arm to twist her back around. She flinched and hissed through her teeth, but he didn’t let go, even though he knew what was under that sleeve. “I said wait. Look...”

It took him a few moments to chew on the words he was trying to force out. “I’m sorry.” *There we go.* “I’m not having the best luck getting Mother to listen to my own fucking opinion lately.”

Kaia’s face was blank, eyes dark and refusing to meet his. Goddamn it, she was so volatile. At any sign of tension, she shut down.

“Look. You want to know more about the plans, yeah? I can’t tell you everything. But as a future commander’s spouse, I can tell you a lot.”

She glanced at him. “Yeah, okay.”

“And only for informational purposes. Off the record. You can’t put this shit in your report.”

“I wasn’t gonna,” she stammered, mistrust fading in favor of some small hope. It made something in his chest do a little swoop. “I just wanted to know more about the whole process, you know. Everyone else already knows a bunch of this stuff, and I—”

“I get it.” Orion did not “get” the purpose of the exercise, that’s for sure, but understood her motivation. She wanted to be on equal footing with everyone else. “Let’s meet this evening. My suite.”

It was stupid. He shouldn’t be near her so soon after... After what happened the day before. But he’d be a fool not to use her unprecedented request for a favor to his advantage.

“Oh. I thought we could do it at the canteen,” she backpedaled.

“I can’t talk about this in the open. It’s sensitive.” He leaned in a little closer with a small smile. “I won’t bite, Kaia.”

I hope.

The little knot between her brows was adorable, and it didn’t disappear even as she hesitantly nodded her acquiescence. “Okay. Twenty hundred hours?”

“Make it twenty-two. Need to hit the gym beforehand.”

She didn’t look happy about the time, but she wasn’t about to push her luck either. “Okay. See you then.”

See you then, princess.

CHAPTER 30

KAIA

As she walked to Orion's cabins at 2150, Kaia was already long past regretting bringing this up in the first place. But it was too late to turn back, and no point in it anyway. She did have a job to do.

Which is why she found herself at Orion's door at 2203, having already showered and pulled her hair into a haphazard bun atop her head. It was getting too long for her liking, but she hadn't had the occasion to find some shears. Alina had mentioned someone she called a "hairstylist," which seemed like a weird label, considering Kaia didn't intend to put a dress anywhere near her hair. All she wanted was to chop some of it off.

When the door opened, the hair dressing confusion was forgotten, because the wall of half-naked man in front of her was impossible to ignore. She had expected this to be awkward, but she hadn't expected him to not bother putting on a damn shirt.

Orion wore loose gray sweats and nothing else. Her cursed eyes gravitated to the line of black curls leading up from the waist of his pants, framed by two straight ridges of muscle tapering toward his hips on either side. Higher, the ladder of his abs glistened with drying droplets of shower water. The broad pecs rippled with striations as his arm scrunched a towel over dripping hair, head tilted to the side.

Kaia dragged her eyes away and took a small step back.

Orion stood aside. "Come in."

Kaia didn't know why he met her at the door. All he had to do was instruct it to open for her—he wouldn't even need to speak with that thing in his brain.

She entered, skirting close as she could to the frame to avoid brushing against him.

This was her first time seeing his cabins. She'd expected his living area to be larger than hers—Per Halen did apologize for the size of her quarters, and of course the colony heir would have an even more lavish space than that. So the fact that she saw three doors branching off the space she found herself in wasn't surprising.

Neither was that faint, ever-present musk of coffee and mint that she'd grown almost used to. She'd never admit it, but sometimes when she smelled traces of his passing in the hallways at the bow, she caught herself taking a deep breath to inhale the scent. Kaia was surprised to have developed this unwelcome positive association to it—the opposite of her association with its actual owner.

The space was dark. Whereas the walls of her cabin were a bland beige-ish white, these were a warm-tinted charcoal. Her cabin's lighting seemed sterile against the white fixtures, white bed, white tiles in her bathroom. Here, the light was a dim, dark orange washing over the space.

There was no bed. So one of the doors must've led to a separate bedroom. She stole small peeks into those open doorways. Not long enough to really see anything, as the other areas were unlit.

“Let's go to the office.” Orion tossed the towel he'd been drying his hair with into a hole off the side of the wall. Kaia knew what that was now. Her cabin didn't have one, but she'd seen them around the common areas: a laundry chute, which sucked dirty clothes down into some designated chamber where they'd then be cleaned and returned. Must be nice to have a private version.

“The office” was smaller than the first space, and more intimate than she would've liked. It contained a desk with a single chair, but Orion didn't lead her there. Instead, he motioned for her to sit on the long cushion with a padded backrest against the wall. A low table sitting before it was strewn with physical printouts.

“Paper? Why?”

Paper was expensive, and Orion had his Neurosync. The NS could show him anything he needed to see without the need for antique copies.

“Had to get some of this shit straight in my head.” He gathered the strewn page, shuffling them together and shoving them in a drawer slot in his desk. Kaia had just enough time to glimpse diagrams, tables, maps of some sort.

“Is that related to the expedition?”

“Sort of. Sit.”

She did, sliding onto the cushion and folding her legs under the glass surface of the low table, ignoring their bruised protests.

Orion sat next to her, and she had to resist shuffling to the side for more distance. They got closer than this when sparring. But that was different. It was harsh and adversarial enough to block out any semblance of intimacy. Every other time they’d been this close, things ended badly—either with her finding out he was part uhyre, or with him forcing a non-kiss kiss to her mouth.

Now they were alone, and Orion was half-naked, and his eyes were shifting behind his closed lids. He must have been doing some NS op because a second later, an image appeared on the frosted tabletop. Kaia looked up, spotting a projector embedded in the ceiling right overhead. Looking back at the image, she began to make sense of what she was seeing.

Three columns of data and a bunch of stats she barely understood.

“These are the planets Mother has shortlisted for potential exploration. Well...” He flicked the first column out of the way with a gesture. “She’s ruled this one out.”

Kaia stared at the table. It was a bunch of gibberish. She was sure if she looked closer and longer, she’d figure some of that stuff out. What had made her pause was the realization that these two planets, condensed into a lump of data, represented this colony’s next great hope.

It was futile, of course. But *they* believed. That was why *Colossal* and every other colony ship existed: to wade through space, gathering resources and preparing for voyages to search for a new Earth. Now the hopes of thousands of people hinged on two columns labelled X1s-B and X1s-C. She wondered what Orion thought about all this.

“You don’t really believe that crap, do you?” She looked up at him from the projection.

“What?” He shook his head a little.

“You know. Another Earth.”

When he looked up at her, the wide-eyed uncertainty on his face took her aback. “You don’t?”

It made her falter. She could tell him what she really thought—that New Earth was a bullshit pipe dream for rich people who had nothing better to do. Instead, she found herself softening the blow. “My brother did.”

It was the right thing to do. She needed to stay on his good side. That was why she did it.

“How likely is it,” Orion searched her eyes, “that there was only one planet like it? One perfect little orb in the whole entire universe?”

“It’s just that it’s been so long and—”

“And we haven’t found it yet,” Orion finished her thought for her. “I know. I know we likely never will. But that doesn’t mean it’s not there.”

He watched the projection on the glass while Kaia recalibrated her image of the man next to her. Orion seemed to hate the prospect of being back on *Colossal* so much. She’d just assumed he thought this whole New Earth mission was as ridiculous as she did. But the childish hope in his eyes reminded her of Ahton, only Ahton was eight and Orion was a grown man who had no excuse for fantasies.

Kaia resisted the hasty urge to give him something—anything—of comfort. The entire mission was stupid. Wasteful. Idiotic. She wouldn’t pretend otherwise just because

the sad faith on Orion's face reminded her of her dead little brother.

“So why does your mom think it's one of these?” She changed the subject to something safer.

Orion waited, staring at the glowing rows of data. He seemed to be deciding how much to tell her. Finally he looked back at her and leaned in a little, too close, so close that the bitter warm scent of him swathed her breath.

“That's what I'm trying to figure out, Kaia.”

“What do you mean?”

Once again, he hesitated, eyes lingering on her as if searching for secrets. Kaia couldn't afford to let that happen, so she kept his gaze with all the confidence she could manage.

Finally, he decided to divulge: “I don't know why Mother chose these planets, or even this galaxy. We barely know anything about them, and nothing that would lead us to believe they may be the new Earth. All she has is stories.”

“What kinds of stories?”

“A colony ship, *Elysian*, disappeared years ago. Apparently, a scout they left behind got the last transmission from the ship. The scout claimed data about the planets' terrain, carbon, moisture content, and climate. All, apparently, fit.”

“On which planet?”

“One of those three. Mother culled the first for size. The specs in this supposed transmission matched Old Earth too closely, so it's more likely a planet closer to Earth in size is the one.”

“So... that's cool, right? You just go over there and take a look around?”

Orion's chuckle was hollow. “Right. In theory. This galaxy is a two-year trip one way. Uncharted, of course, except for this scant data from *Elysian*. And *Elysian* disappeared in the vicinity.”

“So it’s dangerous.”

“These missions always are.” Orion sighed, looking restless in his attempt to make her get his point. “But usually we go into the danger based on some concrete data. Something more than a hunch and rumors.”

He slumped into the backrest. “I shouldn’t even be telling you this. You’re not—”

“If I’m meant to be your wife, I’m supposed to know, aren’t I?”

“You still don’t get it. It doesn’t matter. You can’t do anything about this. Shit, even I can’t seem to do anything.” He squeezed his eyes shut and ground his knuckles into the lids.

Kaia straightened her back, irritation blazing, though what she was so irate about she didn’t know yet.

“One of my responsibilities is to help shoulder your burdens. That’s what your mom said. It’s what your dad does for her. So I’m supposed to know. Be your sounding board or whatever.”

The guilt twisted its knife in her stomach as she insisted on a role she had no intention of fulfilling. But that would pass. It would all have been worth it once she was with Ahton.

Orion leaned his head against the backrest. His eyes were shadows in the dim lighting. She couldn’t make them out, but she knew they watched her from beneath half-closed lids.

“Right,” he muttered. “You’ve been gaining weight.”

Kaia shifted in her seat. “Not much.”

“I can see it. And you’ve been improving with sparring.”

“Not good enough, judging by the other night.” Kaia’s skin prickled with warning.

“The idea was never to have you actually beat me, Kaia.” Orion didn’t move as he spoke, remaining hunched and shrouded in shadow. “It was to get you a head start. Something to help you... manage.”

“I should go.”

“We’re not done.”

“I think I have enough information now. Thank you.”

Kaia began to slide past him on the cushion, but a long leg clad in heavy cotton extended, blocking her way. She paused, staring at his knee.

“Kiss me, Kaia.”

There it is.

“I can’t.”

“You’re scared.”

Fuck off.

“I’m not. I just—”

“You know I’m going to fuck you soon.” His voice was so quietly matter-of-fact she knew it was true. It *was* going to happen. It was always going to happen. And maybe if she just gave him a little bit, just a taste, he’d let her have more time.

Kaia leaned back on her heels, shuffling her knees one by one to face him. She knelt between his legs. There was a little glint in the shadows when his eyes traversed her form, managing to make it feel like a violation even beneath her loose clothing.

Kaia held her breath when she scooted forward, shrinking the distance between them. She didn’t need his smell in her head now. Orion didn’t move, but he watched. She couldn’t see his eyes, but she felt them—burning through the bruises beneath her long-sleeved shirt, to the skin and bone.

She looked at his mouth, set in a neutral line that gave nothing away. When she closed the gap and brushed hesitant lips against his, he remained a statue.

Kaia wanted to pull away after that light touch, but that wasn’t the kind of kiss he’d meant and she knew it. She didn’t *want* to open her mouth and feel for the seam of his lips. She didn’t want to feel his tongue slide out to meet her. She didn’t want his teeth on her lip, tugging. She didn’t want the deep,

hot, bitter breath mingling with hers. She *definitely* didn't want their mouths to part further, their tongues to press flat against each other, the uhyre spikes on his hardening against her.

The spikes came first. The addictive exorin came after. But judging by the strained sound he breathed against her mouth, it might very well be soon.

Alarm bells rang when the first trace of it melted on her tongue, but she couldn't pull away yet. She had to make sure she'd done enough to satisfy him for a little while longer.

Finally they drew back in unison. Kaia took care not to allow herself an instinctive swallow.

The warmth that had begun to pool between her legs was crawling up her spine, and somehow she was sure he knew.

“Good girl,” he rasped, bringing a hand up to sweep a thumb over her burning cheek. “This could be so much more with an NS, you know. Like being plugged in.”

The fucking Neurosync again. Whatever arousal she was beginning to feel drained out of her, so she supposed she should be grateful. He must've seen her eyes shutter because he sighed and dropped his hand, then moved aside the leg blocking her exit. Kaia slid past him and hurried from the suite.

The first thing she did when she was out was spit whatever she could onto the floor. She didn't notice any silver tinge, thankfully, but she'd *tasted* it, and that was a risk.

When she was back in her cabin, she wasted two shots of her precious water to swirl in her mouth and spit into the sink. Just in case. She'd heard too many stories about how exorin would make people crazy and drive them up the wall for it. She couldn't let that happen and risk having it jeopardize her mission.

She should encrypt and send what she'd learned straight to Loran right away. Kaia still hadn't replied to his message to tell him more about the expedition, nor to the follow-up that he'd sent the next morning. She was *going* to. Soon. It's not that she was stalling—she just had to be careful not to overdo

it. If she got caught, her transmissions intercepted and encryption broken, they'd be fucked.

Kaia couldn't deny the fact that Orion's show of naïve belief in the colony's mission had a gnawing effect on her. He'd tried to hide it, but she saw the glimmer of hope in his eyes when they were talking about the probabilities of a New Earth being out there, and it was familiar. When Loran got his claws into *Colossal*, how bad would it be? He was used to picking ships, and people, apart and spitting out the bones to get what he needed. How much chaos would he wreak on *Colossal* and its expedition?

Not that it matters.

Kaia crawled into bed and spent an hour perusing footage of her brother, who—she reminded herself—was alone and waiting. But she didn't have a clip of the scene she replayed in her mind now, treading old grooves in her memory in self-flagellation. She remembered how he looked that last night, with the giant Upload headset strapped onto his tiny head. They'd just been playing as colony explorers that morning—Ahton commanding her, the lead navigator of the stick that was their “colony,” to the coordinates of a promising planet he'd detected. He'd been fine. They'd been laughing. How had he deteriorated so fast?

That night he was gone, and she made her promise to reunite with him in Heaven. A promise she was determined to keep. She just needed to keep her head on straight.

CHAPTER 31

ORION

Orion barely focused on his meetings the next day. After admitting his doubts about the expedition out loud to someone other than his mother, his qualms had grown even more concrete.

There was something Mother wasn't telling him. She may be dying, but she was nothing if not logical. Cold, hard facts: that was what drove her. No matter what state her body was in, she wouldn't send them so far out based on nothing.

There had to be more, and he was sifting through docs in his NS vision for clues.

“Mr. Halen?”

“Hmm? What?” He glanced at old General Loris, who was tasked with running him through several defense simulations.

“How would you respond faced with this situation?”

“The situation of us getting attacked by all the other colonies at once?” Orion blinked. “I'd respond by saying this is a bullshit simulation because that would never happen.”

God, he just wanted to be in Crimson Spa, soaking. Not worrying about his mother's fucking expeditions or training for stupid scenarios.

“It is always wise to be prepared, Mr. Halen. Nothing is impossible.”

“Well, then I'd probably surrender considering the other colonies are as armed to the teeth as we are, so if they all gang up on us, we've got no chance.”

The general frowned so hard his wiry eyebrow hairs twined together. “I can see you're not in the proper mood for this training today, Mr. Halen. Shall we continue tomorrow?”

Orion shrugged and pushed out of his seat. “Sure. Sounds great.”

What he really wanted to do was get to the bottom of whatever his mother was up to. Because she *was* up to something.

He was perusing scout logs in his NS vision at the shitty bar on the other side of the ship when Bretton appeared in front of him, a blur behind the augmented visuals.

“Didn’t expect to see you in this shithole.” Orion cleared the docs to bring Bretton into focus. “Pilot’s bar kick you out?”

“Just felt like a change.” Bretton shrugged, and Orion didn’t miss the way his eyes flicked to the plump little server behind the counter.

“Right.” Orion knocked back the remainder of his shot.

“How’s married life treating you?”

“Not married yet, brother.”

Bretton smirked. “Great, so you’re still a free man.”

“Always,” Orion said flatly.

So why have I only felt like fucking one highly unavailable little psycho since I got back?

“Good. Then you can join the festivities tonight.”

“Festivities?”

“Heard word *Zenith* is doing a fly-by. They’ll be around long enough to set up an ‘official social function.’ That means kerogel on tap for us masses. Probably some fancy vodka or something for you lot. You know how they like it, with their parties.”

Orion did recall something about a social liaison thing earlier that morning—a notification he had dismissed immediately. *Zenith* was one of the most prestigious colonies in the business. Often credited for finding the most ice planets to mine, they had resources and used them freely. Some were

beginning to think they'd forgotten the primary mission in favor of drunken debauchery. To each his own, Orion supposed.

"Anyway, I've got a mission report to deliver. See you there?" Breton clasped his shoulder.

"Probably."

A mission report. He and Breton had both learned to fly when they were younger on *Colossal*. The difference was that Breton was allowed to continue his training and become a respected pilot. Orion's flying, in the meantime, got him banished to Mars and banned from setting foot in a cockpit.

He mulled over his waste of talent—he'd been damn *good*, and he knew it—over his third shot of kerogin. He wondered if Kaia missed piloting that hunk of junk she left behind. She'd gotten a taste of the needlefin's controls in their escape, and she was good. That side of her—the forbidden, unlicensed side—was part of what made her so damn enticing.

Now she was probably in class somewhere, learning some fucking nonsense. Tied down and castrated so his mother could turn her into a good little commander's wife. If it were up to Orion, her only responsibilities would be to fatten up, spread her legs, and provide him with some much-needed distraction with that sharp tongue of hers.

A genius idea came to Orion as he downed another shot. He tipped the bar and headed back to the bow.

CHAPTER 32

KAIA

She was dozing off to Sutton's lecture about the mechanics of *Colossal's* on-board algae farm when Orion walked in like he owned the place. For the briefest moment, Kaia was relieved at the intrusion, which spoke exactly to the extent of the torture by boredom she was being forced to sit through. Then her brain caught up with the fact that he was probably there for her and decided she'd rather take the torture.

"I'm gonna steal Kaia for a few hours."

"Uh, I think we were just about to learn about the hydroponic sy—" Kaia tried.

"Fuck it. Colony liaison duties come first." He glanced at the lecturer, whose nose hairs bristled. "I'll make sure she catches up. Let's go." He flapped a hand at her impatiently.

Kaia wouldn't say she knew Orion well, but it *had* been over a month and he looked looser than usual. In fact, he looked a little like he did when she first met him, at the bar on Riker 109. Obscenely confident and a little bored in that "I'm the most important thing in this world" kind of way.

The eyes of her course-mates burned holes in her skin as she traversed the rows of desks to the door and follow Orion into the hall in silence.

"Mind giving me a bit of space?" She talked up at him as they walked. He was following so closely behind her, she could feel the impatience oozing off him. He backed off, but only for a few seconds before his smothering presence loomed over her again, and Kaia decided complaining was futile.

Besides, she was a little curious... Not that she was confident in her ability to *read* him as well as she could Loran, but Kaia thought she'd learned to recognize when Orion was in one of his no-go moods. When his scary alien energy came to the surface, it dripped off him like bittersweet molasses, its

thickness almost palpable in the air around him. She wasn't feeling that now. He was more... excited? Restless? Kaia noticed a spattering of people standing next to the wall as they walked along the port side of the ship.

"You planning on telling me what's going on?" She tried.

"Here." A forearm curved around her waist from behind, steering her to a stop facing the hull. When the black wall flickered out of existence, Kaia flinched, hands grabbing instinctively for the stability of the arm still cinched around her midriff. She chastised herself. She'd been out of a cockpit so long she wasn't used to the limitless vastness of space anymore.

Ashamed, Kaia tried to straighten and step away, but he squeezed her closer and leaned into her ear. "Watch."

A few more people trotted to the area, hushed murmurs rising. By the time it happened, the hushed excitement all around had infected Kaia as well. She stared ahead so long that she started seeing things. Something was wrong with the space, as though a kind of deformation morphed the void. She rubbed her eyes and looked again. Then, with a brief flicker, it appeared: the barely visible curves solidified into existence.

"Holy shit," she whispered.

The cyan hull was a teardrop shape, ending at a sharp point. It was hard to judge the distance, though it had to be smaller than *Colossal*. Smaller but a million times more beautiful than the dark rectangular offshoots and limbs of the utilitarian giant that was *Colossal*.

"It's the *Zenith*," Orion said behind her. "C'mon, we've got a job to do."

Walking through *Colossal* with the shields down and thermaview on, Kaia felt naked. This kind of complete exposure must have been a show of trust between the two colonies. But if anyone else knew there were two vulnerable colonies in such proximity... shit, if Loran knew it was even a thing that happened... He was definitely going to like her next data drop.

Orion led her to the docking bay, where small Ariel-class vessels were already prepped. Pilots in shiny black suits loitered near their craft. Next to them, a few fighter ships she hadn't recognized had mechs crawling over them, scanning, tightening, sweeping for faults. Farther still, larger transport craft were being maneuvered into place by dock crew pilots.

“Why is it here?”

“Colony liaison business. They go over here, we go over there, and we all get shitfaced.” Orion led her to one of the Ariels, nodding at the shifty-looking docksman standing next to it, scanning something in his NS vision with faraway eyes.

“She's all yours, boss,” he slapped the black carapace hull and left them alone.

“You fly?” Kaia asked.

“Not anymore. But you do.” Orion pressed his palm to the reader near the cockpit hatch. He sucked the pinpricks left by the sampler, as was his habit, licking a remaining droplet of blood from his lip. “Get in.”

Kaia's brows shot up.

“How did you get the auth—”

“I'm about to run this place, princess. I have my ways.” He smirked. “Besides, you're in training. Just don't kill the heir, please.”

He climbed into the open cockpit. Kaia followed after a moment's hesitation.

Orion strapped himself into the copilot's seat, so Kaia took the pilot's. She scanned the controls. They were different, but not unfamiliar. The Ariel's primary use was for private transport flights between ships and stations. More modern than *Ahton's Take* was, but not in itself unique.

“One more thing.” Orion bent to his right, rummaging for something beside the seat.

Kaia's hands flew up by instinct to catch the object he tossed at her. She looked down at her helmet, tracing the familiar dents in the chipped orange skull.

“We ran out of the non-shitty ones.” Orion winked. She snorted at the joke. The grin felt uncomfortable on her face, too big in its display. Kaia cleared her throat.

Relax.

She hastened to pull the helmet over her head, clasping the chin strap. Orion did the same, pulling a much more modern looking black helm from the dash.

“All right,” she declared into the dock comms. “Ready to roll.”

“What?” a muffled voice on the other end snapped.

“Ariel-Twenty-Four requesting departure,” Orion corrected from the copilot’s seat, shooting her a look, amusement in his eyes beneath the narrow visor. Kaia was glad he couldn’t see her cheeks turn red under the helmet.

“Clear to go. Follow lane six, Ariel Twenty-Four.”

Orion glanced at her, and Kaia nodded.

“Roger, Ariel Twenty-Four,” he said.

She zeroed in on the white stripe on the floor, stamped at regular intervals with the number six and clasped the yoke with both hands.

It was a nerve-racking fifteen minutes to maneuver around all the other craft already in motion. But once she was out of the dock and faced with infinity behind just a couple inches of transparent polycarbonate, Kaia felt she could breathe for the first time in a month.

“Take a lap.” Orion’s voice crackled in her ancient helmet earpiece.

“A lap?” She turned to him, and his chin jerked in the opposite direction from the other craft, making an orderly beeline for the *Zenith*. “Take her around.”

“For real? We won’t get shot down?” Kaia had heard far too much about *Colossal*’s numerous automated defenses in class, ones that would shoot first and ask questions never.

“No one’s gonna shoot down the heir, princess.” Her stomach tightened at the low chuckle in her ear.

The craft was tiny, almost as small as *Ahton’s Take* in the cockpit. But seeing the black expanse all around them made this feel like the biggest place in the world. *Colossal*’s hull scrolled past them on the starboard side, a massive anchor guiding their way.

Kaia tried to keep her wits, paying attention to the externals of the ship—the data may come in useful later. That only lasted a couple of minutes before she forgot her vigilance and found herself enjoying the view.

The thermaview only worked one-way: they couldn’t look inside *Colossal*, though shields were down and all inhabitants of the ship could see out. Its sleek black exterior was a behemoth compared to the *Ariel*, yet the empty space all around them reminded Kaia that in the end even *Colossal* was just a speck within a speck in the fabric of the universe.

“It’s true, what you said,” she muttered as she leaned back, staring at the expanse ahead.

“What’s that?”

“It’s impossible that there’s no other planet like Earth somewhere.”

His helmet tilted toward her and down in her peripheral vision, and she sensed he was watching her through the visor.

“It’s just that we’re so small... I don’t know if we have it in us to find it.”

“Some of us will. Eventually. Maybe not my mother, or me, or our children. But maybe our children’s children.”

Was Orion capable of thinking that far ahead? An uncomfortable pang cloistered in her chest. He thought there’d be “our children.” It was time to change the subject.

“You said ‘not anymore’ when I asked if you flew.”

“It’s a long story.”

They hadn’t even reached *Colossal’s* stern yet, and Kaia tapered the propulsion. “I think we’ve got some time.”

He stared straight ahead for a minute, eyes closed behind his visor. Kaia leaned back in her seat and propped a shoe up on the dash—definitely not something a licensed pilot would ever do, but hey... She wasn’t one of those.

“When I was a kid, I went to school and learned a little of everything. Had to know all the jobs. Had to at least be able to fly a shuttle in an emergency,” Orion began. “Flying was my favorite, so I spent as much time as I could in the docks, training on one of these first, then working up to needlefins. Mother thought it was a good distraction, so I didn’t get in her way.”

Kaia could imagine a younger, though no less intimidating Orion spending his days in the dock. She smiled at her own memories of being taught to fly, even if for her it was a necessity rather than a passion. The old battle-hardened pirate whom Loran had assigned to her for instruction had drilled her until she could fly one of the old beater ships with her eyes closed. Never taught her to land though.

“We were on an expedition. Noranor. I was sixteen. One day I was in the dock and overheard mentions of a leak in a crew sector. The repair teams were busy on the other side of the ship, hardening the comms. We’d just gotten into position next to N3 Prime, the planet the scouts were meant to descend to later. So I took a repair vessel and went out there with some patches and shit. Didn’t tell anyone, just overrode the exit.” He held up his palm.

“And did you repair it?”

“Oh, yeah, was a piece of bread,” he said. “And got a fucking great view of the planet too. Beautiful.”

“But...”

“Mother flipped on me. I’d never seen her so furious. Cancelled the whole goddamn expedition on the spot just so

she could send me to Mars for who knew how long, where they—”

“Where they can’t fly,” Kaia finished for him.

“No spacecraft on Mars.” Orion clicked his tongue. “Funny thing was, I thought my little mission was going to impress her. I still have no idea why she freaked out so much.”

“You are the heir to the colony. If anything happened to you...”

“Nothing fucking happened,” Orion snapped. “I was solid. Everything went right.”

“Yeah, it does sound like bullshit,” Kaia conceded.

She didn’t say it, but she wondered if there was another reason Orion’s little unauthorized repair excursion was so problematic. Mare Halena didn’t seem like the overreacting type.

“So your mom’s cool with what we’re doing here?”

“What’s she gonna do now? Send me away again?”

Was Orion about to get her in a bunch of shit with his mother for this? Kaia’s grip on the yoke tightened, making the craft flinch upward with a jolt.

“Sorry,” she muttered.

But Orion only laughed in her earpiece. “Come on, let’s get back on track. Don’t wanna be late for the show.”

The what?

CHAPTER 33

ORION

His mother was already on the *Zenith* when they arrived, having chastised him when they were back in subvoc range. Fortunately she had other things to worry about, like a slew of meetings with the *Zenith's* commander. She began to suggest that Orion shadow her for this work, but he deemed it more important to show his wife-to-be how inhabitants of two colonies customarily approach their cultural interactions: by getting really wasted and fucking each other's brains out.

A young female liaison was there to greet him when he debarked.

“Who is your guest, Mr. Halen?” Her smile wavered as she glanced at Kaia, and Orion wondered if they already knew each other.

“This is my fiancé.” Orion dragged Kaia against his side. She felt more solid under his hand now. Muscle underneath his grip.

Good.

“Oh!” Sharp eyes widened. “Then you shall be sharing a suite.”

“We shall,” Orion concurred.

“Oh, I don't think—” Kaia began.

“*We shall.*”

As they followed the liaison's perky ass to their suite, Orion muttered low into Kaia's ear, “We have to put on a united front here. Appearances must be kept.”

It was only partially bullshit. It wasn't uncommon at all for commander's families to sprawl across separate cabins when visiting another colony. They could afford it. But this was also the first time Kaia was introduced to the world as Orion's

future wife. Not even the inhabitants of *Colossal* had gotten an official announcement yet. Mare Halena kept putting it off, and it was beginning to get on his nerves. After tonight, there would be no doubt of it in anyone's mind—including his mother's.

The suite was lavish, as was everything on *Zenith*.

"It's too bright," Kaia grumbled, loitering in the entrance after the liaison left them alone.

"It is." Orion nodded, flopping into the bright cyan bean bag in the middle of the floor. He stretched his arms over his head and arched his back, spine cracking with satisfying intensity. "I suggest you get some coffee. It's gonna be a long night." He motioned to the hydra station.

"What's going on?"

"Well, first you're going to get some caffeine in you. Then you're going to drink a shit-ton of H₂O. Then, we're going to pre-buzz on some proper high-class whiskey, which I know for a fact the *Zenith* has a nice stockpile of. And then we go party with the masses. In some clothes that don't smell like we just flew across two colony ships in them."

God, she looked miserable. When she picked at the edge of her singlet to give it a sniff, he failed to suppress a cackle.

"Go look at the closet and pick something out. They usually stock them pretty well."

They did stock the closet well.

Orion had sent for two glasses of whiskey while she was picking through the garments in the bedroom. They preferred less structured, silkier styles on the *Zenith*. Each colony was a cultural microcosm. They didn't meet often enough to cross-pollinate like this, so each ship had its own quirks.

Colossal's personality was size... strength... utility.

The personality of *Zenith* was sex, in one word. In a few more words, Orion might call it a hedonistic bohemian vibe. He couldn't even blame them for dragging their feet with their expeditions—they had everything they needed right there and weren't afraid to enjoy it.

When he shoved the whiskey into Kaia's hand, she wrinkled that cute little nose at the smell.

"It's the most expensive alcohol in the known universe." Orion cocked an eyebrow. "At least try it."

After a few grimacing sips, she'd loosened up. Orion reclined on the plush round bed, admiring her ass, which had filled out with noticeably rounded muscle, as her fingers picked through the hangers. She'd taken a few of the flowy garments and placed them gingerly onto the bed as if they'd break with one careless move.

"Okay," she stood with a hand on her hip, another bringing the glass to her whiskey-wet lips. "Maybe one of these."

"Put it on."

Orion had already changed into a pair of brown leather trousers and a synthsilk white button-up. The clothes felt too light for his liking—he preferred the rough structure of synthleather, or rigid carbon fiber.

"Umm..." Kaia was looking around. "Where?"

He took a slow sip of his own whiskey, wanting to say one thing but forcing himself to say another. He'd get his chance. No use making her shut down before the night had even begun. "Here. I'll wait in the lounge."

He retreated to the main room, smiling at the sound of ice clinking in her glass as she took another sip.

CHAPTER 34

KAIA

Kaia's cheeks were still on fire, and she blamed it on the whiskey and the kerogel that followed it. It was definitely not from the way Orion had stared or his appreciative grunt when she came out of the bedroom in the outfit she'd begrudgingly chosen.

The strapless green dress hugged her body like a second skin. The material was so light as to feel like it wasn't there at all. Its plunging neckline continued as a weaving gash down her sternum and veered to the left just above her pelvis, turning into a slit that exposed a generous sliver of her leg. The rest of the dress was a sheath around her, hugging her down to the middle of her thigh. It was the most modest thing she found in that stupid closet, yet she still felt stripped bare under the searing intensity of Orion's gaze.

The walk to what Orion had called the theater was a blur of color and people, all vying for the recognition of a select few individuals, Orion being one of them. The other magnet of attention seemed to be a waifish young woman parting the river of bodies with nothing but a smile as she glided through the space, silky fabric shifting in the air around her.

When they finally pushed their way into a massive chamber, they were led upstairs to a glass booth overlooking a circular stage. The booth was positioned in such a way as to be a sort of stage of its own: transparent in full view of the crowds below. Foam cushions littered the space, and through her haze, Kaia registered a group of seven coming in, the waif included. She let Orion tug her to a cushion at the front alongside him, slipping her onto his lap. It was a very firm, very warm lap.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, Kaia thought she should probably be scrambling off him and making room between them. But her attention was diverted by a glass of something alcoholic being nudged into her hand. It fizzed on

her tongue and in her brain, and she leaned her side into the very firm, very warm wall behind her, unable to recall quite what it was she was considering worrying about before.

Watching her wall tip a fizzy glass of his own to his full mouth, Kaia found herself fixating on the bob of his Adam's apple as he swallowed.

She reluctantly turned back to the stage below when the lights went down and a hush fell over the crowd. A spotlight beamed onto the edge of the stage to reveal a girl with long white hair. She wore a short black gown that looked like a giant bird's nest, and she swung her arms about wildly, making her dress flutter.

Kaia propped her hands onto Orion's thighs to lean forward, craning her neck for a better view. She batted away the offer of another glass as strange music rose from a bare whisper to a loud, bone-penetrating hum that resonated through the entire chamber.

She'd never heard anything like it, and her suspicions were confirmed when a platform moved up from the floor along the side of the stage, with dozens of instruments in different shapes and sizes operated by men and women in white suits.

"They do love their orchestras," Orion murmured in her ear, and Kaia waved him away. Nothing, *nothing* was allowed to interrupt this. Tears prickled at the corners of her eyes, then spilled over. Before she could bat at them with the back of her hand, Orion did it for her, fingertips tracing a slow line of heat along her cheekbone. She couldn't quite think of a reason not to tilt into that warmth, nor did she try very hard or maybe at all, as her eyes remained fixed on the performance.

Over the course of the two-hour show, Kaia saw people flying, contorting themselves into impossible shapes, and singing notes no human should be capable of. She sensed there was an overarching storyline in the music and the display—electronic wisps began to thread their way through the acoustic orchestra, exquisite voices and bodies tinged with aggression in mock combat. Otherworldly clothing melted together with utilitarianism that reminded Kaia of *Colossal*.

The show never did come to a formal close. It morphed into some twisting, dark, electronic thing that grew with the escalating voices of the crowd. More kerogel packets were being passed around down there, and eyes kept turning up to the booth. She felt both like a voyeur and an animal being watched in that position, and when she spotted a man ripping off someone's shirt, exposing a flash of pink, Kaia drew back. Her back collided with a hard chest behind her, and only then did she remember that she was still seated on Orion's lap—Orion, who was handing her another glass of the fizzy stuff, only this time it wasn't golden but a bright, shimmering cyan, just like his eyes. She took it.

Kaia's head thrummed with the music and goosebumps prickled her skin as a deep bass line built. The skin at her plunging neckline grew hot as she threw back her head and swallowed the sweet liquid. Twisting to look over Orion, who had reclined beneath her, Kaia found the waif's group. They writhed in uncoordinated movements that nevertheless somehow matched the psychedelic beat hammering the air. They looked like the sound was moving through them. Kaia wondered what that felt like. She gnawed her lip, thinking faintly that she probably shouldn't stare like that, and yet continuing her unabashed observation.

Orion bent toward her, a hand splayed on the small of her back. He brought his mouth to her ear. "Let's go."

CHAPTER 35

ORION

Orion pulled Kaia to her feet, supporting her meager weight as she stumbled on wobbly legs. He guided her down the chute into the crowd below. The energy of the throng hit him immediately, making his spines itch. It was different up in the box—you were in it, but not *in it*.

And Kaia wanted to be in it.

Orion led her through the manic crowd. She moved in that dress like it was designed just for her, and she didn't even know it. Her hips swayed with the music under the snug fit, ethereal fabric shimmering green along the slender curves of her body in the strobe-lights.

Despite her hard edges and sharp tongue, all reminiscent of his home colony, Kaia's body was made for the *Zenith*.

He slid his hands to her waist and tugged her closer. Her head lolled back to peer at him through half-lidded eyes, and then, with a small giggle, slumped forward into his chest. He took the opportunity to let his hands wander over her ass, exploring while she remained loose against him.

She shivered as his lips found her ear, then traversed down to nip at the tender spot right beneath her jaw. He breathed in her arousal and squeezed her closer, their hips meeting. The way her sloppy hands came up to interlock at the back of his neck, agitating the spikes there, made black seep into the edges of his vision. He closed his eyes, picturing his forest. Pines against a clear sky.

When someone bumped into Kaia, jolting her to tense and bring her head up in groggy alarm, Orion swung out and smacked the idiot in the head. The man careened backwards into the throng of bodies.

“Wha—” She blinked at the spot where the guy had been a second before.

“It’s nothing.” Orion traced a finger down her jawline until she focused once again on what she should have been focusing on all along: him. He smoothed a strand of wild red hair from her face, a little moist from the sweat glistening on her brow, and her pink lips parted in a silent sigh.

Orion shuffled them toward a glass column shimmering technicolor a few feet away, positioning her against its surface. Her pupils were already blown out in that way he liked. He took the invitation, because that was what it was. What else could it be, when she licked along her bottom lip like that? When the droplet of sweat running down her throat broke as she took a hard swallow? When the red flush creeping up from that dress was just begging for teeth?

Orion dipped down to that redness, savoring the goosebumps that rose to meet the spikes on his tongue. She shuddered beneath him, and her fingers, still around his nape, plucked at the inflamed spines there. She was careless. He felt her skin break under his sharp tips. She would be bleeding, but she didn’t seem to care. Even through the blackness encroaching on his vision, Orion had the wherewithal to be impressed.

When Kaia tipped her head to bare her neck for him, a keen growl rose in his throat. He pushed his hand beneath the delicate hem of her dress, sliding up her inner thigh. She yelped into his shirt, her cry muffled by the music and the fabric against her lips, but relaxed with a slow quiver as his mouth trailed up her jawline.

When his fingers found the heat between her legs, her arousal had soaked through the fabric of her panties. He found himself clenching the side of her dress hard enough for a long ripping sound to indicate its destruction.

“You’re drenched,” he muttered into her cheek, breaths coming sharp against her face.

She was shaking beneath him, and Orion pulled back just to see what this was doing to her. Whether it was lust or fear that made her shake, he would be witness to it.

He glanced to the side, where a starfield of hungry eyes watched the scene. “Look. Everyone sees how hot you are for it.”

She looked, and he didn't think his cock could get any harder, but there it was, swelling at the perverse flash in her eyes.

When he snatched her panties aside and slid a finger along the length of her slit, she cried a sharp yelp that he caught with his mouth. He forced his tongue between her lips, and though she tensed, her hips rolled forward against the thumb he'd pressed to her clit. His spikes raked against her tongue, interfering with whatever the fuck she was trying to mumble as she crumbled against his hand.

She was starving for it, her slickness coating his fingers.

“Mmm... W-wait,” she tried to stammer against his lips, but her body made a different request and one that he much preferred to her damn mouth. It was writhing, chasing the pressure of his fingers against her pussy.

“Orion!” she gasped, teeth tugging at his bottom lip with a sharpness that made him slide his finger against her opening, prepared to plunge it into her heat. “Wait.”

“You want this, princess. You're just about ready to come already, aren't you? In front of all these people.”

Her response was a sharp whimper that escalated until she bit him again, hard, at which point the sound in her throat turned into a growl.

Everything went white as something struck his temple. He reeled, swinging at whoever the fuck just attacked him. It was only after he knocked out a few of the onlookers, with the others quickly jostling out of range, that he realized it was Kaia who had decked him. Kaia, who was standing there holding a shaking hand to her jaw as she stared at his fist.

The teary look on her face made his fury deflate, just a little and for only a moment, before coming back with a vengeance.

Orion rounded on her. His hand curled around her throat, hoisting her into the air. All those eyes gave him was rage and loathing as she grabbed his wrists, smearing blood from her fingertips on his skin, and delivered a sharp kick into his groin.

Just the way I taught her, Orion thought with an untimely pang of pride.

Wrong place, wrong time.

Another vicious kick to his stomach and he flung her to the ground, though she landed on her feet, crouched like a little evil thing.

“I told you to fucking wait!” she yelled over the blaring of the music, shrinking back as he approached. He kept coming, threads of black tension cinching his ribs with each heavy step, tighter and tighter until he couldn’t breathe anymore. Not as himself.

“You know what to do, don’t you?”

But instead of doing that, she straightened her spine and swung. Her palm landed wetly on his cheek with an emphatic crack.

Then she disappeared into the crowd.

His prey was finally running.

He gave her a few seconds’ head start, though it was hard to resist. He didn’t know the *Zenith* well to guess which way she might run, but he didn’t need to. He sensed her like she was on the other side, a string tied around his rib, drawing him after her.

As Orion forced through the crowd, he savored the trail of adrenaline she’d left behind. His only disappointment was that he couldn’t sense her mind. If she had a fucking NS, he could have. He could’ve tasted the chase so much better that way. But no—she just had to be a stubborn bitch at every

opportunity. The metallic taste melted into the roof of his mouth.

Out of the theater, he rounded a corner at full speed. He filtered out his own footsteps and honed in the slapping of bare feet ahead. She must've kicked off her shoes. Yes, there they were, flashing past his vision in a blur. And there was her silhouette, arms pushing in the darkness, hips working underneath the skintight dress she had no business running in. She was panting, breaths coming out as little raspy coughs. He closed in. And just like that, all he had to do was reach out and grab a fistful of the fire atop her head and yank. Her head snapped back and she let out a hiss, staggering backward against him.

He redirected her trajectory, pulling her sideways against the wall, and finally saw that flash of fear he'd been waiting for.

“Why do you have to be so fucking difficult?” He smashed himself against her back. With one hand still tangled against her scalp, the other slammed into the wall by her cheek. “Hmm?”

As soon as the words left his mouth, whatever weakness she had betrayed was replaced by an iron rod straightening her spine, hardening her face even with one side of it squeezed against the wall. The knot between her brows smoothed into a canvas that anyone else might think was blank. But Orion wasn't anyone. He was an uhyre, and he saw it—the field on fire with a madness that shut out the world.

“What are you waiting for, Orion?” Her words were a cold, steady breath that wormed into his ears. “You wanna hurt me? Just do it. Get it over with.”

Orion smiled. “Oh, but that would be too easy.”

He pitched forward, head dipping until the pulse in her neck drummed against his lips. “I know what you're afraid of.”

She didn't move. Didn't flinch. Didn't give anything away. He was impressed by her restraint, even more so when she

looked back at him as best she could. “I’m not afraid.”

Liar.

“Prove it.” Orion pushed himself back, releasing her head. He flicked his finger into his mouth and onto his tongue, where his spikes already wept metallic nectar. Her eyes widened and fixed on his finger, which glistened with the silver substance.

“No. Please...” That was when she finally cracked. She writhed, fighting to squeeze herself out from between him and the wall in a futile struggle.

Orion smirked, pressing the bulk of his body harder against her. He brought his finger to small lips, smudging them with exorin. Her face twisted in disgust, all traces of earlier arousal long gone. She was terrified, yet she refused to fucking admit it. Why wouldn’t she just admit it? Why couldn’t she just beg *a little*?

She couldn’t have it both ways: pulling away from him, yet pretending he didn’t scare her. Pretending she just didn’t *want* him. Because he knew she fucking did—he knew she was as wet as he was hard after their sparring sessions, just like back there in that theater. And who was she to be making demands here anyway? She was his. She’d agreed to this, yet she was still fighting it.

Time to stop fighting.

Orion pushed a knee into the small of her back to secure her in place. Her hand flailed back to his wrist, grabbing it uselessly.

“So weak,” Orion rasped, pressing his fingers into the crease of her lips, which she had forced into a tight, resistant line. “Why does it make me want to break you all the more?”

The small sound she made caught behind her teeth until he locked his other hand around her jaw and squeezed, forcing her mouth open. The guttural whine that finally escaped her throat filled him with satisfaction. She scrunched her eyes shut as he pressed the exorin to her tongue, all spit and metal and teeth on his fingertips. She tried to bite—*good*—but he kept

the hinge of her jaw firmly forced open in his grip. If he wanted, he could crush it.

He pressed his forehead to her temple. “Fifty-fifty shot, princess. Swallow for me now.”

Orion increased the pressure on her mouth, threatening to break bone as she resisted to no avail. He wiped the remnants from his finger on her tongue on the way out. He cupped her chin, leaving a smudge of saliva and silver on the pale skin. She looked good like that, all messed up. His thumb slid down her lower lip, pulling it down, making it flush under the pressure.

He’d been hard for hours, ever since he had her in his lap earlier that night. His knee had slid from her back and his legs were on either side of her instead, pressing himself into the tight curve of her ass.

“Swallow, Kaia,” he repeated. “It’s over.”

The protest draining from her watery eyes was the most delicious thing he’d ever seen. He parted his own lips, peering hungrily into her open mouth as the column of her throat moved, taking down his exorin. Seeing her take it threatened to rip whatever remaining shred of self-control he was fighting to retain.

Maybe he should just do it. Fuck her here, where anyone could run into them. Maybe take her back to the theater, put her on display.

But he had pushed far enough, for now. He shoved himself off her, flicking his hand to cast off the remaining spittle and exorin from his digit as she slumped to the floor, shoulders shaking in silence.

“You’ll be sleeping in my cabins from now on.”

Blood and black threads pounding in his head, Orion left while he could still force himself to let her go.

CHAPTER 36

KAIA

She didn't know how long she sat there, only that it was long enough for the wall to dig bruises into her spine and for her legs to go numb as she hugged them to her chest. It was long enough to register people leaving the chamber from before, most either not noticing her in the side passage or glancing and not paying her any mind. Too fucked up to care.

“Kaia, right?”

She saw the silk slippers first and looked up despite the ache in her neck to see the waif from before standing over her. Someone loitered behind her, craning their neck. With a flick of the waif's wrist, they disappeared.

Kaia didn't react as the girl bent down, crouching at eye level with her hands on her knees. Her open-legged stance looked strangely incongruent with her elegant demeanor. Kaia knuckled at her eyes to wipe away the traces of dried tears.

“Hey.” Her voice was soft as she reached out to cover Kaia's hand with hers. “I saw what happened.”

Kaia clenched her teeth, extracting her hand. “Which part? The part where he forced himself on me, or the part where I let him?”

The waif shook her head. “The part where you fought.”

“A lot of good it did me.” Kaia barked a dry laugh. “Who the fuck are you anyway?”

“Cyphea. I kind of run this place,” she smiled.

Kaia's eyes snapped to her face, studying the young, unlined features. “You're *Zenith's* commander? How old are you?”

“Old enough to understand.” The girl—no, woman—reached out to brush a finger along Kaia's cheek, and Kaia

really wished she would stop touching her. “*Colossal* is the only colony running on uhyre blood, girl. You signed up for ___”

“I know I fucking signed up for this,” Kaia snapped.

“You signed up for a challenge. And I’m sure you were expecting this to happen, eventually. Now that it did, you can move forward.”

“Oh yeah? How’s that? Give in and let him break me?”

It was the commander waif’s turn to frown. “Oh, no. You don’t break. Not ever. Sometimes you just bend a little to get what you want. An uhyre’s passion is violence, but it’s also power. If you’re smart, you can play him like a fiddle. You look smart to me.”

“What the fuck is a fiddle...”

Cyphea smiled, rising back to her full height. Without deeming to elaborate on what a fiddle was, she rejoined her people, leaving Kaia alone.

When the sounds of life around her died down, Kaia stretched out, rubbing each numb limb. The motion reopened the tiny spike-pricks on her fingertips, but she barely felt the sting of them. She held onto the wall as she wobbled to her feet. Her dress was nearly nonexistent, strips of weightless fabric shredded on her body. She realized her panties were not on her anymore, and knowing they had to have been ripped off, it wasn’t worth looking. The moisture between her legs had all but dried, thank god, and all that was left was a dull ache in her gut.

As she limped through the now dimly lit station, Kaia recognized nothing. But somehow she ended up at the vaguely familiar door of the suite she’d been assigned. She froze outside of it.

He’d be in there.

She turned around and kept walking. She briefly wondered if there was an airlock she could throw herself out of, then told herself to fuck off with the pity party. She found herself in what she supposed had always been the only place to go.

Kaia slinked through the rows of vessels in the docking bay until she found the one. It was locked, of course. She curled up at the belly of the ship, hiding her eyes from the dim overhead lighting by nestling against the curve of the hull. The dock was cold, she could tell from the goosebumps on her arm, but she didn't feel it.

You just have to bend a little to get what you want.

She'd been bending for over a month and this is what she got.

It was time to break shit.

CHAPTER 37

ORION

In his haste to leave before things escalated further, Orion had forgotten Kaia didn't have an NS to guide her through the Zenith. By the time he was done meticulously punching every inch of his guest suite until his swollen knuckles cracked open and bled all over the floor, it was well past midnight, and she still hadn't arrived.

When he stalked back out to the spot where he had left her, Kaia was gone. He'd stormed the ship in search of her. When a guard blocked his way near the bow, Orion was ready to punch the man. Until the door of the suite behind the unfortunate man opened and Cyphea Zena stepped out in a transparent silk robe that left nothing to the imagination.

"Orion," she said matter-of-factly, putting a calming hand on the guard's shoulder as she tiptoed past him. "Are you looking for your pet?"

"My fiancé," Orion growled. "You think someone could help future colony royalty find her way to her fucking suite around here?"

Cyphea rolled her eyes. She was one of the few who would dare to, in Orion's presence. Other than Kaia, who had done so often.

"I'm fairly certain we weren't the ones who attacked *future colony royalty* and left her sobbing on the floor, Orion."

He was so goddamn sick of commanders lecturing him. Kaia had known what she was getting into. She knew what he was. So why did he feel the weight of Cyphea's words? Why was he so wound up, itching to pick a fight just to stop fucking thinking?

"She'll be fine, Orion. I suggest you give her space. She can't exactly run away from a spaceship now, can she?"

Orion glared. What was he supposed to do, just let her fucking wander around the place half-naked? He jerked away from Cyphea Zena's hand on his shoulder.

“Relax, Orion. She's a strong one. You can make it up to her tomorrow.”

Clamping a hand to the back of his neck, Orion craned his head to the ceiling, releasing a slow, hissing breath.

He needed his forest.

So that's what he thought of, when he returned to his destroyed suite and reclined fully clothed in the bed. He forced his mind to the forest, and the way her eyes had looked like the depths of it, and the way her green dress had looked like leaves sparkling with morning dew until he ripped them to pieces.

He stood in the docking bay the next morning, looking down at her pallid form curled against the black hull of the Ariel they'd arrived on. She looked blueish and frozen, and if it weren't for her breath shifting a thin strand of hair in her face, he'd be checking for a pulse.

“Found her like this at zero four hundred hours. Figured you'd want us to fetch you.”

Orion nodded without sparing a glance at the *Zenith* dockmaster who'd fetched for him.

The girl who'd come to get him early that morning apologized profusely for waking him. Didn't matter—he hadn't been sleeping.

Orion shrugged off his jacket and draped it over her. She didn't budge.

How she'd managed to sleep on the freezing floor of the dock, Orion had no idea. There was that weight again.

I did this.

Orion dismissed it and opened the hatch to the cockpit. Bending down, he slid his arms under her limp form, taking care not to dislodge the jacket.

Her skin was ice against his bare arms as he climbed the short set of stairs into the cockpit. He linked his NS up to the ship's CPU and signaled the copilot's chair to recline. She muttered something against his skin as he positioned her in the seat, securing the jacket around her sides.

"I'll fetch a pilot," the dockmaster said behind him.

"No. I'll fly."

The man looked pained as he floundered. "I don't think your mother would wa—"

"Last I checked, my mother has no authority over the *Zenith* dock." Orion's voice was low as he eyed the man.

After a few moments of strained silence, the dockmaster stepped back and closed his eyes, subvocalizing something into his NS. When he opened them again, he looked a little more relaxed.

"All right, sir. She's all yours."

CHAPTER 38

KAIA

The pain in her skull forced her awake, but all Kaia wanted to do was shove her face deeper into whatever softness she was lying on and never open her eyes again.

She flopped onto her stomach and scrunched her hands into the fabric underneath her, hugging it against her chest. Except it wasn't just the headache. She was hot—too hot. She kicked her leg out from under whatever heavy thing covered her, only to realize there was nothing there. She was boiling all on her own.

Ugh.

She peeled her eyes open, squinting in preparation for whatever light was about to pierce her eyeballs.

Instead of eyeball-piercing, she saw dim, blurry outlines.

She was in a bed. An unusually firm one. Was she back on Riker 109?

No. This bed wasn't lumpy enough to be Riker 109.

Shit... the *Zenith*. She must be back in that suite. How long had it taken before he found and hauled her back there? And what had he done after?

Kaia's head throbbed as she pushed herself upright, slowly taking in the surroundings.

It was the warm charcoal walls that first jogged her recognition. The *Zenith* was bright white and cyan, blinding. Her cabin on *Colossal* was a light eggshell. But these walls—she'd seen these before.

Her monster had taken her back to his lair.

High-pitched ringing rose in her ears. She curled a fist into her sternum as her chest constricted. Air wheezed down her throat, but didn't seem to fill her lungs. Her eyes were glued to the open doorway.

She stayed like that for an eternity, listening for anything past the sound of the buzzing in her ears or the pounding in her head. Was he out there? Was he waiting?

It turned out he wasn't. When she forced her aching body out of bed to limp around the suite, she found it empty. Kaia's throat was a parched husk. She'd never been so thirsty—getting used to drinking all that H2O had her hooked, wrecking her well-honed ability to survive on minimal hydration.

She took the liberty of getting a shot of water from Orion's hydra station and downing it at once, followed by two more. She didn't much care about his drinking allowance right now, or making Orion run out of it.

Now that she was up and not lying in a pool of her own sweat, Kaia realized the room was actually pretty cold. She looked down at the oversized T-shirt that came down to her knees. She didn't want to think about how he'd gotten that on her. And she was sure it was him... Orion wouldn't have the decency to have Alina do it. The coffee-mint scent of it made a sick lump rise in her throat. It brought back flashes of being chased, and pinned, and of his metallic finger in her mouth, eyes burning, locked on her tongue as he made her swallow his exorin.

Fifty-fifty shot, princess...

With a strained sound in her throat, Kaia bolted for the bathroom. She kneeled over the sink and retched up the watery contents of her stomach.

How would she know if it happened? If she got addicted? She didn't feel cravings yet at least. She didn't feel much aside from shame. Not just at the thought of letting him force her to swallow him like that, but at the memory of herself wet and grinding against his hand as he...

Kaia threw up again.

The door was locked, of course. He probably expected her to hide, abandon the whole arrangement. Was that even still an option as far as he was concerned?

Clearly not, she thought, glaring at the door.

Kaia did two rounds of each room, opening nooks and crannies, checking possible hiding spots for anything interesting or useful. She was smart about it—replacing each item carefully to its original place. She found nothing of interest except for a few physical pages tucked haphazardly under the cushion in his office, and she wasn't up to trying to decipher them at that moment.

When she was back in the main room, all but done with her fruitless sweep, her eyes fell to the coolbox beneath Orion's hydra station. She'd checked its contents already of course, but she now focused on the two-inch gap between the bottom of it and the floor.

Not hopeful but wanting a sense of completion, Kaia got on her knees gingerly, trying not to agitate her bruises, and peered into the gap. She saw a vague outline of something in the near-blackness and squeezed her hand far as she could into the small space, feeling for the object.

She finally managed to get a grasp and slide it out, and what she found made her grin.

The knife was dusty—likely forgotten down there, or so she hoped. She twisted it in her hand, running the pad of her thumb parallel to the blade. Nice and sharp. That might come in very useful indeed.

Done with her search, all that was left for Kaia to do was return to the relative comfort of the bed and try not to panic about whatever was about to happen when Orion returned.

She climbed under the thin sheet bunched on the other edge of the bed, and something hard jutted against the back of her thigh. She rummaged until she pulled out her tablet.

Thank fuck.

He'd brought it. What was this? Something to keep her busy while she awaited her fate? Either way, she was going to take full advantage of it. She'd known what her next move would be since she'd curled up at the dock the night before.

Kaia scanned her retina into the passlock and scrolled to the comms module. She found the last message from Loran and hit Reply.

RECIPIENT ID: A35R109-09

FROM ID: CCLSL-25109

DATA: LORAN, COLONY LIFE IS DIFFICULT. MOSTLY I MISS MY FRIENDS. FAMILY. YOU WERE ALWAYS LIKE THE BROTHER I NEVER REALLY GOT TO HAVE. IF I ASKED TO HAVE MY ONLY FAMILY TO BE AT MY WEDDING, WOULD YOU COME?

Comparing Loran to her brother disgusted her on a molecular level, but it was important. Kaia had been sending over data dumps when really, she had a perfect excuse to get Loran onto *Colossal*. Their fake-friendly transmissions over the months could be used as backup of their friendship should anyone intercept them. And no one would blame her for missing her makeshift family after what Orion had just put her through, very publicly, on the *Zenith*. With a wry smile, Kaia had to admit that maybe in a way, he'd done her a favor.

She thought through the new plan over and over, repeating it like a mental mantra. She would play her part. Get enough influence and goodwill with Mare Halena to invite Loran to *Colossal* for the wedding. Once Loran got his claws into *Colossal*, he'd have the means and power to exploit and dismantle Orion. Would it happen at the expense of the colony? Maybe. Kaia might even feel some remorse about that, if she were alive to see it. But she'd be long gone, in Heaven with her brother.

The chime of an incoming transmission came quicker than she expected, and when she read it, she smiled.

RECIPIENT ID: CCLSL-25109

FROM ID: A35R109-09

Data: I WOULD BE HONORED.

CHAPTER 39

ORION

She'd barely stirred when he left her in his suite on *Colossal*. Mother freaked out, of course, when she'd learned he piloted the Ariel back on his own. Shit, she wasn't cool with Kaia piloting it either, but the prospect of Orion flying again after she explicitly forbade it over a decade ago wasn't something she could handle.

"How dare you jeopardize the bloodline of this ship!" She had chastised him in her suite that morning. "Have you learned nothing since your return?"

"Calm down, Mother. Emotions don't suit you."

He was fairly certain *Colossal* was short one docksman by the time Mare Halena was done systematically interrogating whoever may have been involved in allowing this to happen. But she couldn't send him away again. Not this time. This time, she needed him to be there because soon enough, she sure as hell wouldn't be.

Orion beat the shit out of the punching bag at the gym that night before returning to his suite. It was, of course, to work off his pent-up energy. Make sure his head was clear after the clusterfuck of the last couple of days.

It wasn't that he was stalling. He knew what he'd face back at his suite: the broken pieces of whatever progress he'd made with Kaia. He could already picture her stare, if it was anything like the look she gave him before slapping him on the *Zenith*. That was why Orion followed up his gym session with a few shots with Bretton at the pilot's bar.

"You all right, man?" Bretton probed as Orion fidgeted with his shot glass, sliding it in circles on the synthmarble bar top.

"Yeah."

"This about what happened last night?"

Orion leveled him with a stony stare. “What do you think happened last night?”

“Oh, come on, it’s no secret you two got into it.”

“She knew what she was getting into.”

“Damn right.” Bretton gave his beard a scratch. “Something’s off about her too.”

He didn’t fucking know her. “Jealous she outshined you back there?”

“Nah, man... Just something was weird. Haven’t worked it out yet. You should be careful.”

Careful? Me?

Kaia was the one who had to be careful. She was testing his limits in ways no other woman would’ve dared.

He shoved his untouched shot over to Bretton, no longer in the mood for it.

By the time Orion did get back to his suite with a large container of fries in-hand, it was midnight. She was asleep, curled up in a tight ball at the edge of his bed. Orion stashed the fries in the coolbox beneath the hydra station, then stood in the bedroom doorway. She had his sheet held against her face. He observed an empty glass on the floor. Good, she’d drunk *something*.

He thought he might need to blow off whatever meetings he had earlier that day to watch her, but the doc he’d fetched gave her a fluid drip and said she’d be fine. Not having to see the look on her face when she woke was a relief, and Orion attended each of his duties with a diligence he’d rarely felt.

Orion turned off the lights in the suite. He didn’t need them. Aside from the NS painting rough outlines of objects in front of his eyes, his vision was better than most in the dark. Perk of the genes.

He stripped off his clothes, piling them on the floor. When he got into bed, he attempted to be quiet about it. It wasn’t that the sight of her finally in his bed didn’t make him hard. If he woke her up, the fight would start, and he was tired. So he lay

motionless on his back, hands folded beneath his head. It was when the soft sound of her breathing paused that he knew she was awake.

“Are you hurt?” he asked, staring at the ceiling.

“No.”

“Well, good.”

The silence hung between them like a void that just kept expanding. The longer it lasted, the harder it was to break. So when her voice came again, the rip in the fabric of quiet jarred him.

“You knew what you were getting into too.”

He hummed a begrudging assent.

“Are you disappointed it didn’t work?” she asked.

“What’s that?”

“The exorin. I don’t think I’m addicted. You missed.”

Orion had expected her to be angry, or to cry, or something. He wasn’t prepared for this hollowness in her voice. And he didn’t like the way she was putting him on the spot.

“That wasn’t the point, Kaia.”

Although having the chemical addiction take hold would sure as hell make his life easier going forward, and probably even hers, that wasn’t why he did it.

“What was it, then? Why did you force me to...”

She trailed off when Orion turned his head, watching her rough outline shimmering in his augmented vision in the darkness. “Because you ran.”

She shifted, the outline of her face turning toward him. “I don’t believe that.”

Doesn’t she?

She couldn’t be that clueless.

“So what’s *your* theory, princess?” he asked.

Her silhouette shrugged.

She was wrong, of course. He did it because he could. Because the chase was in his blood. The same blood that was responsible for keeping everyone on this ship alive. If it were up to him, Orion would have been born normal. Fully human, like the rest of them.

The silence that followed wasn't charged like before, nor heavy like a boulder on his chest.

“You need to eat—” He didn't finish his thought. When he turned to look at her again, she was fast asleep.

CHAPTER 40

KAIA

She woke up freezing. Kaia opened her eyes and recoiled at the sight of the uhyre sprawled out in front of her. The realization that he was naked followed, snapping her attention back up to his face.

Kaia shifted the flimsy cover she'd cocooned around herself and slipped out of bed. Carefully, she extracted her tablet from under her mattress and padded, shivering, to the next room with the cover.

It wasn't any warmer there, and Kaia had no clothes in the suite, so she decided to do the only thing that would warm her up considering she was locked in her violent alien fiancé's cabins: she took a hot shower. While standing under the steaming water, Kaia took stock of her body. She was used to seeing the marks by now, first from the sparring, then from the... other thing that had happened. So she didn't bother dwelling on the bruises. Instead, Kaia searched for any signs of addiction she'd read about. Trembling, jitteriness, increased heart rate.

Still no cravings. No hunger. Well, not *that* kind of hunger. She was actually really fucking hungry, having not eaten since before the Zenith. Seemed like her dear fiancé was more concerned with keeping her locked up than keeping her alive.

She grabbed a towel from the rack and scrubbed it over her hair, giving the steamy bathroom another onceover. Orion's suite was mostly tidy, except for the regular signs of life and everyday use, like the weird-looking spatters she noticed on the shower wall.

When she came out in the same oversized shirt she'd been wearing, he was up. She hesitated in the doorway as Orion buttoned a pair of black low-slung jeans over his hips and jerked the edges of a white shirt down over a flash of abs.

“So are you gonna keep me prisoner in here from now on, or what?”

He glanced up at her, working the last button on his jeans. “I don’t know. Are you gonna run off on me?”

Kaia raised her arms, gesturing around her. “I don’t know, Orion. Where do you think I’m gonna run?”

“Oh, trust me, this ship has plenty of hiding spots. Here.” He walked to the hydra station and opened a compartment beneath it, pulling out a box of fries. “They’re cold.”

He stuck them out at her like some kind of offering. Making sure your trapped fiancé didn’t starve to death wasn’t a very high bar, so Kaia chastised herself at the momentary surge of gratitude.

“Thanks,” she muttered.

“You can get a proper breakfast in the canteen.” Orion was already at the door, preparing to leave.

So he was letting her out, after all. Did he decide she couldn’t run far enough to bother cooping her up? Whatever it was, Kaia didn’t press her luck. She focused instead on the droplet of water in this fucked up situation. Orion’s cruelty had only reminded her of what she was here to do. She wanted revenge. Show the asshole what a huge mistake he made fucking with her. But revenge was a missile best launched from a safe distance, and when she was in Heaven, none of it would matter. *That* had to be her focus.

Kaia gave Orion a thin smile as he left. She should probably be more upset, or scarred, or something after what happened on the *Zenith*. She sure as fuck wasn’t letting Orion off the hook for what he’d done. But even she was surprised by this lightness inside her.

She couldn’t prove it, but she felt it in her very bones: she was immune. Orion’s exorin had no effect on her. Part of it was logic—she’d perused the ship’s virtual library on information about exorin the previous day, while locked in Orion’s suite. She went through all the material she could get her hands on. Papers from Old Earth, video footage of humans

after exorin administration, textbooks on the issue. There was an approximately fifty percent chance of getting addicted to the substance, either via oral ingestion or sexual transmission, per incident. But even if one dodged the bullet in one instance, there was always an intoxication aspect. An arousal and suppression of inhibitions that were measurable and faded over the course of the next two to twelve hours.

Kaia had felt no such thing. She tried to find the caveat. Did prior ingestion of alcohol interfere with the effect? But no—exorin bulldozed over whatever substance one had in the body, quelling any existing effects that had wrought and taking its place.

It was so effective that on Old Earth, doctors had begun to use it as a way to combat drug addiction. A dependency on exorin seemed better than one on something more deadly and damaging to the organism. That was until they realized the uhyre would not keep providing the stuff out of the goodness of their hearts and they were left with a bunch of exorin-addicted people scrambling for their next hit.

Kaia thought it all through as she downed the box of cold fries on the couch, following that up with a generous shot of H₂O.

No... Her experience with the alien substance was not standard. She just had to decide what that meant, and how she could use it to her advantage.

When Kaia asked for a meeting with Mare Halena, she wasn't expecting to be invited to her private cabins. It wasn't Kaia's preferred location—the things she wanted to talk about weren't personal, and her request had made that clear. Was Kaia not deemed worthy of being seen in a dedicated meeting space? But maybe it was a good opportunity. If Kaia was to get Loran invited onto *Colossal*, she'd need to start building *some* level of trust with the woman who ran the place.

“Kaia.” Mare Halena rose from her seat when Kaia entered. “I was pleased to receive your request.”

“Thanks.” Alina had helped her pick suitable clothes for the meeting, yet Kaia still felt too casual in the presence of the cabin and its inhabitant. Mare Halena fit into the decor like she was part of it. Her structured synthleather blouse blended with the black walls and sharp lines of the minimalist gray furniture. The gold buttons on her shirt were the only flash of color in the space.

Kaia had put on a cotton sheath dress, long sleeves and a hemline draping to her knees, covering most of the marks Mare Halena’s son had left on her. Yet even though the dress was constructed from heavy fabric, it still felt too sloppy compared to the rigidity of her surroundings.

“I’d offer you hydration, but I’m afraid I have a critical meeting in ten minutes. We’ll have to walk and talk. Come.”

Kaia suppressed her frown until Mare Halena’s back was to her, leading her into a blood passage unlocked by a quick press of the palm.

It was obvious now. Mare Halena was blowing her off.

Whatever approach Kaia had prepared before coming was now scattered all over her brain as she fell in step with the commander and tried to pick up the pieces of her plan.

“Yes. It’s about—”

“Spousal responsibilities. Your note said as much. What about them?”

Kaia gritted her teeth. “I’ve appreciated the training you’ve arranged for me for the last month and a half, and it’s made one thing clear: this expedition stuff is a huge deal.”

“I’m so glad you figured that out,” Mare Halena said wryly.

Shit. I have no idea how to do this.

“Well, I realized I’m just dead weight around here, and... okay, I was skeptical about finding New Earth before, but the

lessons have shown me that it's... well, I think it's possible. And I want to help."

Mare Halena ushered Kaia through another door, this one opening to a public corridor. "How nice. Right now, the best assistance you can provide is to keep my son happy and satisfied."

She paused, facing Kaia for the first time. "I don't say it to offend, Kaia. Orion has been away from *Colossal* for a long time. He's only seen one expedition in his lifetime. And he's getting... antsy. What he needs right now is something to keep him busy. And God knows he doesn't seem interested in any of the other women on this colony. My son does not form attachments easily. But he does form obsessions. You can be that for him."

How bad would punching her be, really? The last time they met, Mare Halena seemed almost nice.

This is her being nice, Kaia realized. Mare Halena wasn't trying to insult her; she was just being practical.

But why was Orion's mother trying to get him out of the way of the expedition? She was the one who forced him back to *Colossal*... She'd been pulling him into meetings on a daily basis until the man looked like he wanted to claw his eyes out. Now she was telling Kaia to be a distraction.

As if reading her mind, Mare Halena deemed it appropriate to elaborate. "I'm busy keeping this ship alive with the little time I have left here, Kaia. Orion does not understand the gravity of this situation or the importance of this journey. I don't have time to babysit. But you have all the time in the world."

Oh, if only she knew.

It wasn't the additional responsibility—or relationship-building access—Kaia had hoped for. But it was something she could use.

“Hey,” Kaia began in his suite over lunch that afternoon. “How’s your handover prep going?”

Orion’s chewing slowed as he considered her. “Why do you ask?”

Kaia made a show of looking uncomfortable. She was no actress, but she’d gotten so used to being uneasy around this man that she could play that part quite well.

“I met with your mother, hoping to get more involved with the expedition. To help, you know. Maybe we’d also get some info about why she picked this galaxy. These planets, like you said.”

Orion looked skeptical, and rightly so. Not forty-eight hours ago, he was assaulting her and forcing her to drink his drool.

“I just figured... I figured I’ve been kind of a bitch to you lately.”

Kaia cringed at the words she forced from her mouth. Not that it wasn’t true, just that he fucking deserved it.

“Anyway, it doesn’t matter.” She munched on another fry, licking the salt from her fingers. “Your mom made it clear that my only job is to keep you nice and distracted.”

“What do you mean, she wants you to keep me distracted?”

Maybe she wasn’t so bad at this after all.

Kaia shrugged, extracting another fry from the box between them. “She just said I should keep you... *happy*, you know. So you wouldn’t ask too many questions, I guess.”

Orion’s nostrils flared. “She’s been shutting me out of those meetings. Something fucked up is happening here. She’s hiding something.”

“Well, I got that sense too, but I didn’t want to assume...” Kaia prodded the opening. “I just thought you should know.”

Orion narrowed his eyes. “Why? You seemed to get along just fine with my mother before.”

“Orion, I’m not an idiot. I know she’s just using me. I do really think she wants what’s best for you though. Or at least for everyone on this ship.” Kaia hastened to add. She couldn’t be *too* disparaging. “But I’m on your side here. You’re gonna be the one running this place when she’s gone, not Mare Halena.”

Shit, was that too much? Too out of character? Orion considered her for a few excruciating seconds.

Suddenly remembering the apparently crucial part of the conversation, Orion turned back to Kaia. “So how were you planning on keeping me happy?”

Kaia rolled her eyes, setting the empty fry carton aside.

CHAPTER 41

ORION

Something was different, and Orion was quite certain he knew what it was. Kaia had just needed a firm hand to guide her to reason. What he did on the *Zenith*, showing her how good he could make her feel and punishing her swiftly and decisively for insubordination, had put her in her place.

It wasn't that she liked it... maybe not consciously. It was just that she responded to a dominant approach. He felt like an idiot for not having figured it out sooner. So much time wasted.

Now she was blushing at the thought of keeping him "happy" in a way that pleased him immensely.

Orion caught her gaze, enjoying the way her face grew redder still. The corners of her eyes tightened when he reached out to palm her cheek, but she didn't withdraw. She focused instead on a point at his wrist as he stroked her freckled skin.

So she went to his mother asking to help. Did she truly develop some faith in their mission? Or did she just want to look like a good little wife-to-be? Didn't matter. Maybe he could use the help. Luckily for him, his mother punted her back into his very willing arms. The fact that Kaia went back to him with a full report only grew his confidence.

Orion had a feeling Kaia would soon be making him *very* happy indeed.

CHAPTER 42

KAIA

It was her second week sleeping in Orion's suite, and Kaia was miserable. The man seemed to prefer living in an ice box rather than an actual cabin. But she wasn't about to complain. Now that she didn't have to fear addiction compromising her dedication to Ahton, she could handle anything. Now she hoped she was safe.

She was *pretty sure* she was. But "pretty sure" wasn't sure enough. And she'd been delaying the crucial next step—finding out—by about two weeks too long.

Orion was already asleep. Seemed to be anyway. If Kaia could just extract some exorin without touching the man, she damn well would.

She thought back to the way he grabbed her days ago. How he had debased her in front of all those people. Forced himself in her mouth, watched with that demented gleam in his eyes as he made her swallow him. Then, he had left her cold and alone on the floor all night. Kaia's stomach turned at the shameful memory. The last thing she wanted to do was this.

But she had to know.

Kaia slid closer to in the bed, moving slowly so as not to wake him because she wasn't yet fully committed to what she'd just decided to do.

The nearer she got, the more obvious the heat radiating off him became. The man was a damn furnace. After an eternity of slow-motion shifting, Kaia was propped up on her side beside him. She held her breath lest he should feel it and studied his features in the darkness.

Kaia had to admit the man was beautiful. She didn't think she'd ever seen him entirely relaxed before. When he was awake, there was a permanent undercurrent of cold discontentment in the sculpted features of his face. When they

sparred, or fought, or kissed... There was a flash of something demented and alive in there.

But now, there was only peace. Thick lashes swept over broad, chiseled cheeks. Strands of dark hair splayed over a relaxed brow. Mouth devoid of tension, his lips turned up a little at the corners. Naturally set into a small, content smirk. She was so focused on his mouth that she didn't realize he'd opened his eyes until his hand was in her hair. She balked for a moment as he pulled her to him.

Their lips joined in fire, and so did the rest of them. Even with the oversized shirt she'd been wearing, Kaia felt him burn through the fabric. Neither of them made a sound. All there was were their breaths, their mouths, and the pounding in her ears as he worked his fingers through her hair, against her scalp. It was still sore there, from the way he had yanked her back on the *Zenith*. But the caress this time was nothing like that, the pain only a phantom left by those same hands in a different mood.

It was a strange sensation to feel the spikes on his tongue take shape as he deepened the kiss. She broke away, pausing for breath.

“Can I see?” she whispered.

Keeping his eyes locked on hers, Orion tilted his head back a little and opened his mouth to show her.

It was visceral and wrong and so, so weird, the way the spikes pulsed into hard protrusions on the surface of his tongue. Her gut clenched at the sight.

Kaia was about to ask for permission for what she did next, but realized *fuck that*—he didn't ask her permission the other night.

She slid the tip of her finger past his lips, pressing the pad against one of the spikes.

Gross. Isn't it?

It was slick with saliva and not sharp enough to hurt, but so *hard*. A droplet of silver leaked out from under her fingertip. Glancing back at his eyes, her breath hitched at what

she saw there: a helpless blackness, a hungry void staring back at her.

She did that.

She slid her finger down his tongue, just like he'd done to her. It came away with a streak of silver glinting on the pad. She looked into those black eyes as she brought it to her mouth and sucked off the substance.

It was only a test, of course. It didn't taste bad, but she wasn't *into* it. She was just doing her best to suppress the disgust of it all.

But for it to be a proper test, she needed more.

When Kaia dipped back toward him, he squeezed both hands against her cheeks, shoving his tongue into her mouth with a rabid growl. It was an invasion of heat, iron, and bitter caffeine enveloping her senses. Kaia fisted a hand in his hair hard, maintaining the pressure she'd need if he started getting too rough.

And when he tried to flip them over and roll her underneath him, she planted her knees into the bed on either side of him, staying firmly straddled atop him.

"Fuck." It was more of a whine against her lips as he pushed his hips, jolting her up with the movement.

So much exorin was seeping into her mouth that she had to swallow quickly as they devoured one another. Still, it spilled over to her chin, dripping onto jawline, sliding along the taut cords in his neck. Oh, God, why was she licking it from his throat as he drove his head back into the bed underneath her? Why did the way his hands burned her face make her grind back against him?

Kaia had to end this. She got what she needed. She was certain it was enough for her test.

She began to pull away, but he tightened his hold on her face, painful fingers digging into her skin.

Kaia worried if she didn't get him off now, she wouldn't find the strength to do it later. Her own arousal was sleek

between her legs. Her body thrummed from her core to her chest with each roll of his hardness against her. Was this the intoxicating effect of the exorin?

Just for a moment, she almost wished it were. That would at least be an excuse.

Kaia twisted her torso away, jutting an elbow into his ribcage just the way he'd shown her at the gym. But she was too gentle about it, scared to get him even angrier. He grunted, but wasn't deterred. He clawed up the back of her thigh, lifting the hem of the shirt over her ass as he grabbed for flesh. Kaia hissed through her teeth, shuttering her eyes as she tried to resist rolling back against him with the pleasure shooting through the nerves under his grip.

The knife she'd found under Orion's coolbox earlier was what did it. When she slid it from beneath her pillow and put it against the side of his throat, Orion froze. They both did.

His black eyes narrowed, and she thought he might fight. Fuck, she *wanted* him to fight. Give her an excuse to plunge that blade into his neck. He winced as she pressed the weapon harder to his skin.

"All right," he said in a gravelly voice. He took his hands off her and held them to either side of him in a gesture of surrender. "All right."

"It's not all right," Kaia snarled.

The arousal that thrummed through her body was morphing into something else. She had her chance now to get some semblance of payback for what he did to her. That wasn't part of her plan. She'd only intended to test her immunity to the exorin. Yet here she was, watching his throat bob in a swallow as the blade dented his skin. Was he scared? "It is *not fucking all right*."

Orion had his head tilted back and was watching her. Kaia was in some deep shit, and she wasn't sure the knife would really stop him once his patience ran out.

"Do it then." His voice was hoarse as he tried to remain still. "Get it out of your system, princess."

Kaia sucked her lower lip into her mouth, clenching her jaw as her fist clamped harder in his hair. He didn't protest.

"You'll kill me," she said.

Shit. She was distracted with searching his eyes as he grabbed her knife-wielding hand in his own, taking her by surprise. She jerked back, but he held her firm.

"We're not that different, Kaia. You know the funny thing? I think in some ways you're more fucked up than I am. More vindictive, that's for sure."

"Fuck you," she spat. "You started this. If anything, this is a lesson."

"Teach me then. I insist." Kaia resisted as Orion increased the pressure on her hand, but it was no use. Their hands shook with the silent fight, but of course, he won. A streak of blood seeped around the edge of the blade.

It was all wrong. This wasn't revenge or a lesson at all, because he was inflicting it on himself. Forcing her into it *again*.

With a snarl, Kaia yanked Orion's head to the side by the fistful of hair she still held. He released her as she leaned forward and repositioned herself over him. Squinting with concentration, she positioned the knife at the underside of his chin. She didn't flinch as the point broke new skin. She drew it up along his jawline, then down the side of his neck.

"Good girl," he whispered.

"Shut the fuck up." This wasn't for him. He didn't get to praise her here.

The act of retribution was less satisfying than she'd have hoped, especially when she realized he was still fucking hard beneath her as she straddled him. She was positioned over his abs, but his cock jutted up against her inner thigh.

When she was done, Kaia kept the point of the blade at the center of his throat, panting as she stared at the trail of blood she'd left. She crawled off him slowly. Only when he made no

move to stop her did she withdraw the bloody knife, keeping it in hand.

“Feel better?” he asked up at the ceiling.

No.

“Yeah.”

They lay on their backs, coming down from whatever perverted high they were just on. Kaia drew the back of her forearm over her mouth, wiping the last traces of exorin from her lips.

She definitely felt *something*. She felt herself wanting friction between her legs. She felt herself getting wet. She felt her nipples pebble in the cold now that the heat of him was gone. But she didn't feel that buzz she'd read about. That exorin chase. She didn't feel *drunk on him*—only incredibly, incredibly desperate.

It wasn't ideal. She shouldn't be turned on by the uhyre who assaulted her two weeks ago. But it was better than the other thing. And she was confident she could deal with it.

CHAPTER 43

ORION

When Orion entered the commander's office the next day, he was a little distracted. So it took him a moment to register her hastily swiping projections off the thermaview as a man in a lab coat straightened from hunching over her desk.

Orion halted, brow cocked, as he took the man in.

“Orion. You may remember Ptolin Geeson, head of gene tech.”

“Afraid not,” he said as the man shuffled past him and out the door, all among a few seconds of tense silence.

When they were alone, Orion slumped into the swivel seat across her table.

“Mother.”

“What happened to you?” Mare Halena glared at his neck. What she would be seeing, the same thing Orion saw that morning in the mirror, was a crude carving running down the side.

He shrugged. “Nothing important.”

“Well, go get it taken care of.”

Orion wasn't sure he wanted to. Kaia hadn't cut him deeply enough to scar, but he'd found something about having her mark on him satisfying. She was so nervous about it until he forced her hand. Just like he figured—once he started doing it for her, she tried to wrestle back some illusion of control by finishing the job herself.

“You're aware Kaia came to me yesterday?” his mother asked.

Was she testing him? Seeing how much Kaia would've divulged?

“Of course.”

“Seems the academy has been good for her.”

“A good distraction, you mean. Like the one you have in mind for me?”

“I hope you don’t resent her for it, Orion,” Mare Halena sighed.

“For what?”

“The flying. You know commanders can’t be pilots.”

“Especially not if their mother sends them to a planet where they can’t fucking fly.”

“You still don’t understand any of it, do you?” Mare Halena was shaking her head.

“Understand what? That your paranoia caused all this? That you alienated your only son over a fucking repair job?”

“It was not just a repair job, Orion.” Mare Halena sighed. She looked old. Older than he’d ever seen her. “It may as well have been a suicide mission. There was a reason I was waiting to send someone out there. It takes time to decide who’s disposable to send to certain death.”

“What are you talking about?” Was she bullshitting him? He was fine. It’d been easy. Their crews had done that kind of patch job a thousand times before.

“We’d just detected a radiation storm incoming from the planet we were scoping. Not something any of our scans had picked up before. Made it unsuitable for life, of course. When I realized you were out there... Damn it, Orion, you were right in the middle of it. Turns out our blood afforded you resistance. Maybe just enough. But you could have died and left everyone on this ship to die with you.”

After so many years, this was the first time Orion had heard any of this. Why hadn’t she told him before, opting instead to send him off with no explanation?

But he knew why—things with Mare Halena were on a strictly need-to-know basis, even for her son. And all he

needed to know as she'd doled out the punishment was that he'd fucked up.

"Were you protecting me or the colony?" He asked.

"Oh, please, Orion. I don't have time for your childishness right now. I should be managing the H2O tanker delivery from Arvex."

"Sure, Mother. You do that." He had his answer.

Orion spent the rest of the afternoon in the ship's physical library, in the stern. It was a place anyone rarely visited, but one that kept an extensive collection of old navigation records. All of them were available through virtual access, but his mother's secrecy made him doubt his own approach to his research. If his mother knew he was up to something to the point of trying to get Kaia to distract him, he wouldn't put it past her to implement some virtual access tracking.

Seemed she'd implemented some physical access tracking, though, in the form of his father. Per Halen entered the private reading cabin just as Orion was clearing away his records.

"Orion. I didn't expect to find you here."

"Oh, I doubt that."

His father did a quick sweep of the documents Orion was stacking and setting face-down. "Ah, well. Your mother did ask me to check on you. She said you'd been... unfocused."

"Doesn't seem like she wants me to focus, Father."

"She wants you to focus on the *right* things. Learning how to take over this ship once... once the unfortunate time comes." The wet glint in his father's eye almost made Orion feel something. He had no idea how their marriage had worked for so long. How his father could tolerate Mare Halena's iron grip and single-minded obsession with the ship, nor how his mother handled Per Halen's meek demeanor. She hated weakness, and this man oozed it from every pore.

“Let’s focus then,” Orion leaned back in his seat. “What does the head geneticist have to do with the expedition?”

“Ptolin? Oh, that’s unrelated.”

Orion thought he saw an uncustomary alertness in his father’s gray eyes. Something he wasn’t used to seeing in Per Halen.

“You missed a lot when you were gone, Orion. This will all be part of your handover training, should you perhaps begin to take that seriously.”

“Oh, I am. While I’d love nothing more than to be at the bar right now, the red flags all over this expedition will be *handed over* to me soon enough, whether I like it or not.”

Per Halen pinched the bridge of his nose, a tired sigh bowing his shoulders.

“How’s Kaia?” he changed the subject.

“Good.”

“Did she do that to your face? You should take care, Orion.”

“Really? You’re gonna give me fatherly advice about being *careful* of my five-foot-two-inch girlfriend? Did you forget what I am, Father?”

He was the uhyre in this relationship. *He* was the one at risk of snapping her in half. How clueless could Per Halen be?

“Ah, yes, I forgot you missed this part in your years away ___”

“You mean my years of banishment.”

“We... your mother... has run a full genetic study on Halena genes. With the help of Dr. Geeson, actually. He’s confirmed your uhyre genes are diluted enough to not pose a significant uptick in violent tendencies compared to humans.”

Orion couldn’t help it. He laughed. “Have you *seen* me, Father?”

“Yes, you’ve always been quite... formidable. But it just so happens that this is due more to your ancestor’s careful selection of physically privileged human mates than your uhyre blood. Something your present choice may throw a wrench into, I might say, but that’s neither here nor there.”

At least it was clear to Orion that his parents hadn’t been spying on Kaia. If they had, they’d have recognized that she actually had a *significant* physical advantage. The speed at which her muscle developed was testament to that, and it surprised even him—not that he’d tell Kaia that. She spooked easily with mention of her growing strength, knowing what it would lead to.

Though judging by the previous night, he may have chipped away at that particular barrier. His tongue spiked at the mere thought of waking up to her straddling him, watching him. The knife was unexpected, but admittedly effective.

“I’ll leave you to it, my boy.” Per Halen fell back into his usual bumbling manner.

Orion had no idea what his father had been implying. Obviously the percentage of uhyre in him was low, but the telltale dominant traits of the genes were still there. He’d just gotten tunnel vision and chased his fiancé down in a dark hallway. He left her bruised and broken all alone while he went to punch dents into some walls. And he loved every goddamn minute of it. What was his father suggesting? That it was all him? That he was just completely fucked in his completely human head? Not to mention the exorin Kaia had so willingly swallowed the night before.

And why had she done that anyway? She was so scared of getting addicted to him before... She dodged one bullet on the *Zenith*, and now what? She just didn’t care anymore? At first he thought what he’d done snapped her into submission. But the stinging cut she’d left told a different story.

No... His fiancé was keeping a secret of some sort.

He'd found her in the simulation rig that afternoon. She was strapped into the makeshift Raptor cockpit, the observation glass all around silencing whatever expletives she was mumbling to herself as she stared at the radar display. Orion leaned his elbows against the rail surrounding the rig, where a couple of others loitered, including a guy he'd seen in her class a few times. He reeked of animosity as he glared at Kaia in the rig. Orion made a mental note to follow up on that later.

The interior of the rig flashed red as she crashed into whatever obstacle she was meant to be navigating. The glass was one-way, and he huffed a chuckle as she threw her head against the back of the seat, grimacing her frustration. His amusement was cut short by a mirror snicker next to him.

It had come from a brunette Orion had recognized as another of Kaia's classmates.

"So silly, isn't it?" the girl chirped with a small smile. "Radar nav isn't *that* hard. Poor thing."

Orion cocked an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

The brunette shifted closer. "It's so admirable, you bringing that girl here, Orion. Giving her a better life, you know? And your mother letting her play pilot like this is so generous."

Who the hell is this bitch, and why does she think we're on a first name basis?

"Do I know you?" Orion asked.

"Not yet. Isabelle." She stretched out a hand.

Orion didn't take it, instead looking back at the faltering smile on her face. "*That girl* saved me and one of our best pilots from an attack on the way here, Isabelle. I suggest you fuck off and pray I don't catch you talking shit again."

Her flinch as she began backing away barely registered; Orion's attention was already back on the sim rig. Ripping off the monitoring electrodes on her temples, Kaia punched out and climbed out of the cockpit.

“Tough run, princess?” Orion leaned over the railing, hands dangling off the edge. She looked surprised for a moment as she spotted him, then pivoted in his direction.

She looked incensed at the nickname, of course, but her shoulders slumped when her eyes flicked to the cut on his neck. “Yeah, I guess. About that. I... Orion, I’m...”

“Sorry?”

No. The flash in her eyes told him his little princess wasn’t sorry at all. The fake-sheepish look she gave him almost made him laugh. She hadn’t realized yet that he’d fucking loved getting that side of her. It proved she was ready to play.

He bit back a knowing smirk as she offered him a thin smile and nodded. “Yeah...”

Liar.

“How’s it feeling?” she asked.

“Fine. You done?”

“Would you care if I wasn’t?”

“No. Come on. I’m showing you something.”

Kaia pushed her sweaty hair from her face only to have the curls fall back in front of her eyes moments later. When she came closer and wrapped her hands around the railing on either side of his elbows, the scent of her adrenaline pulled at him to lean forward.

“Can I shower first?” she asked.

“I’d rather you not,” he said seriously.

“Eww.” Kaia wrinkled her nose, but didn’t argue as he steered her from the rig and toward an elevator.

CHAPTER 44

KAIA

Kaia had never been in an elevator. It just wasn't a thing, either where she grew up on Artega Seven or on Riker 109, which relied purely on creaky iron staircases. So when she followed Orion into the cramped smooth-walled box, she was apprehensive.

“Why does it have mirrors?” Having her reflection stare back at her from three sides was startling.

He shrugged, sucking away the droplets of blood he'd donated to authenticate their access. “Tradition, I think. Old Earth elevators had them.”

The contrast between them, now that they were both reflected in a mirror, was startling. It wasn't just the fact that he was a 6'7" giant looming over her, or that he looked perfectly put together in his synthleather outfit, whereas she was disheveled and sweaty in a pair of shorts and a wrinkled singlet. It was their postures. Orion's back was straight, shoulders back and relaxed, chin up high. He looked at ease in his own skin.

By contrast, the Kaia in the reflection was hunched in on herself. She was already small next to him, but the way she huddled made her look and feel even smaller. She pushed her shoulders back, watching the way her spine straightened and brought her up a couple of inches. It felt weird at first—like she was trying too hard, pushing her chest forward in that awkward way the whores on Riker 109 used to do. It created a curve in her lower back, jutting her butt out more than she was comfortable with.

Noticing Orion's amusement in the reflection, Kaia cleared her throat and turned to face the elevator door, which was already sliding shut.

She bent her knees and sucked in a breath when her stomach swooped with a falling sensation. She

counterbalanced against the slight rocking beneath her feet.

“Relax.” Orion put a hand on her waist. “We’re going up.”

About half a minute later, another tingly swoop marked their arrival as the capsule came to a halt. If Orion hadn’t told her, Kaia would have no idea if they’d gone up, down, or sideways. But once the doors slid open and she stepped out, it was obvious. There was nothing above and around them but endless space. She’d gotten used to the small spaces and cabins of *Colossal* and wasn’t prepared for the sudden view.

“Oh!” she gasped, reaching for something to stabilize her as her head spun. The first thing her hand found was Orion’s back in front of her. His bulk shielded her view from the front, but not for long as he shifted sideways, nudging her past him with a palm on the small of her back.

The space was even more cramped than the elevator. His chest was flat against her back as they maneuvered into a comfortable position. Well, “comfortable” was optimistic. No part of having herself pressed against him like that was comfortable.

But the awkwardness was soon overshadowed by the sight before her. Kaia had a three-sixty view of the entire top of the ship beneath them, all five thousand feet of it stretching to her left and right.

“There’s... no shields here?” She frowned. There couldn’t be since they had a clear view of everything around them, except for the circular floor delineating the extent of the small space.

“That’s why it’s so small,” Orion’s breath whispered against her ear. “Smaller attack vector.”

Kaia tensed as he wrapped his arms to the front of her stomach, shuffling them around in the capsule to turn her the other way.

“Holy shit.”

A massive craft hovered next to *Colossal’s* starboard side. Some kind of tube, a thick, ribbed cable, ran from a bulbous protrusion on the craft’s end—Kaia couldn’t tell if it was the

bow or stern—into a circular port inside *Colossal's* hull. The tube pulsed and jerked, and when she took in the whole scene, she noticed it was semi-transparent.

“Is that...” She narrowed her eyes.

“Water.” She realized Orion had put his chin atop her head; his tenor vibrated against her back.

“That’s what an icebreaker looks like?”

She felt him shake his head against her hair. “Icebreaker stays on world. This is an H₂O transport tanker. From Arvex.”

All that water... Was that entire bulb filled with it? Was it all going to *Colossal*?

“They’re restocking for the expedition,” Orion continued. “See that speck on the right? That’s a smaller trade transport bringing supplies. Nutrigel rations, oxygen, meds, stuff like that. The expedition isn’t for another four months, so they’re early this time. But sometimes it’s like that, with the scheduling ops.”

Kaia hummed her acknowledgment. She couldn’t get much more out, awed by the sheer size of the operation.

“All that for one ship.”

“The one ship supports thousands of civilians,” Orion said. “With an expedition, we’ll be off-grid for years. It’ll take us two Old Earth years to get to X1s, another two back if we don’t find anything. That’s why *Colossal* has to be so big. It’s not because we love living in luxury—”

“Yes, you do.”

“Fine, maybe I do. But we need the space to store the rations needed to support ourselves while we explore for humanity.”

Right. For humanity.

He sounded invested in this endeavor now. A far cry from the whining he did when she first met him. Kaia had already realized Orion cared more than he had originally let on.

A couple of months ago, Kaia would've scoffed at the thought of silly colonies acting like they're doing "humanity" a favor. A real favor would be to share some of this massive amount of water they were siphoning for themselves. Send some of those ration transports to places like Artega Seven or Riker 109, where people scraped by in a chronically dehydrated state and lived off nutrigel their whole lives. Where they died from radiation poisoning while digging for what little food they could find in a dangerous desert.

Now Kaia was almost starting to see where these people were coming from. She wasn't sure if she liked her newfound sympathy, but she was at least willing to admit she had some. The thought of *Colossal* spending years preparing for this huge journey to chase New Earth, and the residents taking that massive risk... Well, she had to give them some props.

"It's what I think about, you know." Orion's voice drew her out of her thoughts.

"What?"

"When I need to calm myself down. When that part of me takes over and I can't let it. I just think of forests. An actual sky that isn't all black."

Was he thinking of that when he was doing what he did on the *Zenith*? Did it fail, or would it have been worse if he hadn't?

"I hope you find it."

His arms tightened around her, squeezing her closer against him. "You mean we. You hope we find it."

"Yeah," Kaia muttered, blinking the sting from her eyes. "That's what I meant."

CHAPTER 45

ORION

Kaia's docility on the way back to his suite unsettled him. They'd slept in the same bed for two weeks already, yet that night somehow felt like it would be the first. He had her clothes brought by from her old cabin, but when she emerged from her shower, it was his old tee she wore, and he liked that.

They stood on either side of his—their—bed, loitering like awkward teenagers. Kaia moved to action first, peeling off the bedspread and picking at the blanket underneath. She didn't look at him as he stripped off his sweats and got into bed next to her. For a moment he watched her bundling herself in, pulling the thin cover to her chin.

Orion blinked at her, considering a suspicion for the first time.

"Have you been freezing this entire time?" he demanded.

Kaia stared at him, bewildered. "I thought you knew..."

"Goddamn it, Kaia, you fucking tell me if you're not comfortable. Why are you rolling your eyes?"

"*Comfortable?* After how I ended up in your damn cabins in the first place, you wanted me to assume you cared about how comfortable I was?"

He could argue. Tell her not only did she get her payback for that, but that if it weren't for him doing what he did, she'd still be cooped up in her cabin, resisting her fate for no good reason. Didn't she see how much better things had gotten since he put his foot down?

But sometimes Kaia was stubborn. And sometimes he'd let her have that.

Orion got out of bed, pulled his sweats on, and stalked out of the suite.

He returned ten minutes later with a heavy blanket. He billowed it out over the bed, and the relief on Kaia's face as it covered her made his gut wrench. Yes, she should've told him she was cold. But she was supposed to be his responsibility, in some ways even more so than anyone else on this ship.

"I forgot you're normal," he muttered when he was lying under the blanket next to her, with the suite lights already dimmed into nothingness. It was way too warm. His skin was already overheating under the textile. He had every intention of kicking it off himself later.

Kaia made a sound that had him do a double-take. Was that a fucking giggle? He'd never heard one from her before.

"I think you're more normal than you let on, Orion." He picked up the grin in her voice. "Even if you are a furnace."

What did that even mean? But it didn't matter; just hearing amusement replace her usual wariness made him relax.

"Thanks for taking me up there today," she murmured. "It really... I mean, I get it now. The scale of it all. What you're trying to do."

He believed her. He knew she thought the whole colony thing was stupid when they met. Hell, he thought it was stupid too. Not because he didn't think it was possible, but because he didn't want to have that responsibility forced on him. Seeing the H2O tanker pump their lifeblood into *Colossal's* hull affected him too. Sharing it with Kaia, to his surprise, had made it even better.

She sobered a little when he turned to his side and put a hand on her shoulder. He liked the feel of her beneath the fabric of his shirt, having her wearing his scent.

He inhaled slowly, closing his eyes against the visions at the edges of his mind. He thought instead of the forest—pine needles crackling underfoot, craggy bark beneath his hand. He pictured hills and valleys as he traversed his palm down her side, grazing the outside of her breast. He couldn't feel her ribs so much anymore, not the way he could when he first pushed her against the wall in that hallway on Riker 109. She shifted

slightly, but not away. Her breath came shallow. It made him harden. She was nervous, and he fought the urge to pick at it, agitate that disquiet.

He leaned forward and dipped his mouth to her collarbone, exposed under the oversized neckline of his shirt. Her skin was salty on his tongue. Would there be an ocean on their New Earth? What would it smell like? Books said it was salty. Was it like this?

When his hand came to the edge of the shirt and fell against her bare thigh, the burning of her skin was incongruent with the goosebumps he felt there. The muscle of her leg shifted under his touch. She was stronger now. Much stronger. The other night she put a knife to his throat, and she'd do it again. He didn't take it away from her. She needed it. But now he needed something too.

His hand trailed over the top of her leg, strafing toward her inner thigh, gravitating to the heat there. Orion was on thin ice. He knew that. Its thickness was building, but gradually. Soon it may even be enough for him to stomp around on. But for now, he had to be careful with the fragility of it. He couldn't take her the way he wanted, the way he throbbed for just yet.

Orion never realized he had so much self-control. Enough to prevent himself from pinning her down and shoving himself right inside. But not enough to give it up completely. The way her breath hitched cinched the deal.

He rolled and plied her legs apart, kneeling between them. There was a bit of resistance at first, but no fight. He couldn't see her expression, but he heard the uncertain whimper catch in her throat when he raked his nails none too gently down her sides, over the bones of her hips, along her thighs.

“I'm not going to hurt you.”

He meant it that time.

The augmented NS outline of her face granted him the tiniest nod. He lowered himself between her legs, fingers sliding against the flat plane of her belly down to her center.

The wetness he felt there made him doubt for a moment whether he could keep his promise.

How many moons would their New Earth have? How long would the nights be, to take and own and do all the hidden things that people did at night?

There was a groan, and it was his own—he only realized it after it left his throat. He brought his lips to her inner thigh, and it shook under his hand. There was that whine again. The glowing outline of her hand fisted the sheet next to her hip.

“Shh,” he whispered against her leg, his tongue pressing to the searing hot skin as he trailed his way up. He slid his other hand between her and the bed, squeezing the full mound of her asscheek. She arched her back, grinding her rear into his palm. He paused, willing the impulses firing from his dick to his eyelids to calm the fuck down.

When he bent to her again, it was to run the flat of his tongue up her slit, long and slow, and it made her roll like a wave beneath him. The hand curled into the blanket was suddenly in his hair, pulling a fistful of it in a demanding yank. Orion complied, burying his face in her soaking warmth. He nipped at her clit gently, then hard enough to draw a hoarse yelp that was followed by the shoving of her hips at his mouth as his tongue worked against her.

He moved his other hand underneath her to join the first, now grabbing two handfuls of her ass to pull her closer.

“Orion, I—”

“Quiet.”

Hearing his name from her lips like this threatened to break him. Shadows of violent threads constricted around his ribs, and he couldn't afford that. He was already digging his fingers into her flesh to what was surely the point of pain. He couldn't wait to see the bruises.

His tongue and lips and teeth worked at her, coaxing her forward. All of her trembled like a humming, buzzing thing, poised on a precipice she was still afraid to face.

He'd make her face it.

She cried out when he shoved two fingers inside her, but just as fast she contracted around them. He propped himself on an elbow, maintaining an even rhythm, and shifted to work this thumb over her swollen clit with each thrust.

“You’re going to come for me, Kaia.”

Her outline shook its head vigorously, and he responded by intensifying his thrusts.

“Stop fighting it. I can make you.”

She was ready for it now, he could feel by the way her drenched walls spasmed around him as he finger-fucked her. Orion moved back down, pressing his textured tongue against the nub of her clit.

Her long, desperate moan, when it came, did so through clenched teeth when she finally let go. Her legs slammed closed around the sides of his head, securing him in a trembling vise as she bucked into him. He grunted in surprise when hot liquid splattered his face, but kept working her cunt with his fingers, adding a third as she ground herself into him, riding out her orgasm. His lips were latched to her clit, licking, tugging, drinking her release. The surrounding air hammered with the rhythm of her pulse.

At last, her legs loosened from his head, falling limp, and she released the death grip she had on his hair.

“Damn, had no idea you were a squirter,” Orion mumbled against her soaked pussy before pushing himself up to collapse on his back beside her.

This just kept getting better.

He adjusted his erection, the spikes there already protruded and beaded with exorin. He closed his eyes, fighting to calm his ragged breath.

Would there be fields on their New Earth to roam and hunt? Would there be wind in the fields, whipping the flames of her hair around her face like a violent halo?

“You’re different.” Her voice cracked when she finally spoke.

“So are you.”

Orion took a couple of minutes to bring himself down, savoring her juices on his lips. The silence stretched between them until he thought she might be asleep, but he couldn't help himself. He had to ask. “Why aren't you scared anymore?”

She turned to face him in the darkness.

“Because I think I'm immune to you, Orion.”

CHAPTER 46

KAIA

“I don't think I can be addicted to your exorin,” she said.

Kaia felt his stare even through the blackness.

It was true. It had to be. She felt him doing it, pushing his fluid into her with his fingers mere minutes ago. Her pussy clenched at the thought of it—the fullness she'd felt as his hand filled her up. And she wasn't afraid, because she knew.

Something was changing. Kaia would never let him know it, but she'd never forgive Orion for the *Zenith*. She couldn't afford forgiveness. But it was useless denying her attraction at this point. The evidence was all over her, drying between her legs.

Kaia may not need to worry about getting physically hooked on him anymore, but there were still the other parts. That she knew it was hard for him not to snap and take what he wanted. That it excited her even though it shouldn't. That he resisted. She was playing with fire, and part of her wanted to get burned.

But maybe now it *could* just be a game. Without the addiction, her commitment to get to her brother couldn't be compromised. She'd retain full control over her head. She could play this game, and she could sure as fuck win it.

Her tablet chimed under her mattress, and her musings ground to a halt. There was only one person it could be. Orion would've heard it, and he'd know it was a comms transmission. But he didn't ask, allowing Kaia to clamber for a distraction.

“Are you disappointed?” she blurted out.

Orion didn't answer for a long time. His breathing had slowed by then, and now it was long and even.

“I don't give much of a fuck. Your pussy's all the same to me, princess, addicted or not.”

When she woke the next morning, Orion was already gone and she'd overslept. Kaia checked the message that had come in from Loran the night before while raking her hair into a haphazard bun on top of her scalp.

RECIPIENT ID: CCLSL-25109

FROM ID: A35R109-09

DATA: DEAR KAIA, DO YOU HAVE ANY UPDATE ON THE DATE OF YOUR WEDDING? LOOKING FORWARD TO MY INVITATION.

She pondered a reply while pulling on a loose dress from the collection of clothes Alina had brought by.

She'd fucked up. She was meant to be getting on Orion's good side. Instead, she gave away her cards and expressed her relief at being safe from the addictive part of him. And that after attacking him in his bed with a knife. Though he seemed suspiciously blasé about that part, if not a little excited. Impulse control was never Kaia's strong suit, but she needed to get her shit together. She had to move faster.

Kaia grabbed a bagel for breakfast. She was long used to having her stomach be perpetually full of solid food. The nutrigel cravings had stopped a few weeks prior. A dry tongue was no longer the norm, and having something salty after a workout—like fries—brought a deep satisfaction she'd never attributed to food before.

She wondered if Heaven would have simulated taste sensors somehow. She'd often speculated on what the actual *experience* of it might be like. What was Ahton seeing and feeling? Was it a perpetual paradise? Or was it a flat, colorless imitation of life that may as well not exist? Kaia hoped they could both taste fries when she got there.

Her bagel was only half-finished when she slid into an empty seat in the back row of the lecture room.

“We’re taking what on Old Earth they’d have called a field trip,” Sutton announced.

“A field of what? Metal?” Kaia mumbled through a bite.

“An outing. To the Common Residential Deck.”

“And here I was, hoping we’d take some *field trips* out to space sometime. You know, in an actual cockpit.”

“Oh, chill out, princess,” that bitch Isabelle, whom Kaia had seen chatting up Orion the day before, piped up. “Looked like you need a few more practice rounds to use a radar anyway.”

“What did you just fucking call me?” Kaia rounded on her.

“Can only your precious alien call you that?” Isabelle rolled her eyes.

Kaia was halfway out of her seat when realization hit her like a hunk of space junk. Isabelle was frowning, one foot tapping an agitated beat on the floor. When she looked over at Kaia and registered the amusement on her face, her cheeks reddened. Whatever Isabelle tried with Orion yesterday, he must have rejected her.

The satisfaction Kaia felt at the thought should probably have concerned her, but all she could do was ease back into her seat and throw the bitch a knowing smile.



The Common Residential Deck was, apparently, where the “normal people” lived. Kaia hadn’t been down there yet. The place they stepped into had no hallways. It was one giant open space, packed with bodies. People milled about, some dressed the same way she would’ve been on Riker 109—old clothes, unwashed hair.

“How much water allowance do these people get?” she asked Sutton, raising her voice as they straggled through the crowd.

“Depends on present rations. The current allotment is fifty mls for drinking, fifty for bathing,” he said.

Kaia felt disgusted with herself. She'd come from less than this and jumped a rung straight to H2O luxury.

Some of the other students seemed just as new to the CRD as she was, and it made sense. It was mostly high-ranking officials' kids training in the bow at command level. There was one exception. Peter had that relaxed air of someone who was intimately familiar with the place. He moved through the throng like he belonged there. Kaia shoved through to catch up to him.

“You're from here.”

He shot her a sideways glare. “I live here, genius.”

“What's it like?” She ignored the sarcasm. For now, Isabelle had nothing of use for her, but Peter's insight about the CRD could come in handy one day.

He shoved his hands in his pockets and jutted his chin toward a row of metal doors lining the wall they'd been strafing. “Those are residences. Two families per unit. It's loud. Satisfied?”

Kaia chewed her inner cheek. One of the doors opened with a manual push from the inside, revealing the glimpse of a carpeted space. The smell wafting through it made mouth water: sugar and warm dough.

“Smells better than where I'm from,” she said.

“Didn't know it was a competition.”

Kaia grunted as someone shoved past her, sending her stumbling back.

“Did you just roll your eyes?” She scowled at Peter when she caught back up with him.

“You don't know how to move down here. Gotta go with the flow, princess.”

Does this asshole want to die?

“Hey!” Kaia jumped in front of him, blocking his way. “You don’t get to fucking call me that.”

Peter sniffed, sidestepping her. “Sorry. Isabelle’s right, only your monster boyfriend gets to do that.”

“What the hell is your problem?”

Peter glared, but Kaia was mostly just confused. She’d barely interacted with this jerk. What was his issue?

“Your in-laws’ suicide mission is my *problem*,” Peter snapped. He pointed, and Kaia followed him to a quieter place near the outer wall. She kept an eye on the rest of her course up ahead. She shouldn’t let them get too far; this guy didn’t seem stable.

“Wanna tell me what the fuck you mean before taking it out on me?”

Peter looked off to the side, his jaw working like he wanted to turn his teeth to dust.

“I don’t have all day, Peter.”

“My dad’s Uploading before we leave,” he said, looking past her. “He thinks this expedition is some conspiracy. Doesn’t think he can live through the stress of another one.”

“How’d he get the chips for that?”

Shit, don’t sound too excited, Kaia.

Peter gave her a perplexed look because of course she missed—or ignored—his point.

“Life fucking savings, Kaia. My dad used to have a good job up on the command deck. Was a planetary archaeologist. Now he’s leaving me alone down here because your ‘royal family’ decided to take us on an expedition that makes no sense.”

Forget the fact that these people were *not* her family, or that none of this was her fault. Peter was presenting her with a golden opportunity. “Why doesn’t it make sense?”

Peter shrugged. “Hell if I know. He’s a real enthusiast for Earth hunting. Tried to contact Mare Halena a bunch of times,

telling her not to send us into that fucking galaxy. Thinks there's something bad there. Won't tell me what. He wanted *me* to off myself instead at first. Do you realize how fucked up that is? Having your father try to convince you to..." He trailed off.

It *was* fucked up. But more than that, it was interesting.

"When I said no," Peter continued, "he said he'd do it himself. Said he doesn't think we're coming back from this, so he doesn't want to take his chances."

Kaia leaned against the wall, processing. The man was probably crazy, but Orion had also questioned his mother's choice of destination. And Mare Halena seemed very set on keeping Orion out of the way of those plans. Were Peter's father's theories just the work of an unhinged mind, or could they be based on something real?

"Sorry to hear about your dad," Kaia finally said. "But don't blame me for it. I didn't pick the destination. I got no say in what goes on up there. I'm just surviving this shit, like you are."

"Right. Absolve yourself of all responsibility like the rest of them. I thought maybe you of all people would be different with your history. But hey, a taste of the rich commander's life and you're all over it, huh?"

"You know shit about my history, or what I've—"

But Peter didn't wait for her to finish before slipping back into the crowd, like a fucking Old Earth fish.

CHAPTER 47

ORION

Orion only half-listened to his mother lecturing about the colony's resource stockpile that morning. He didn't bother trying to question her again. His mind was occupied with other things.

Like the bruises adorning the curve of Kaia's ass when he woke, captivating beneath the tangle of blankets from which her leg had been poking. But more importantly, the disappointment of the bombshell she'd dropped on him the night before.

He'd been wrestling with the realization that Kaia hadn't been "converted" into compliance by his handling of her. She hadn't learned anything at all, choosing instead to delude herself with this magical exorin immunity she'd dreamed up. He tried to keep his mind off that while perusing files in his NS overlay as his mother droned on.

Orion glanced up when the head of communications, Portia-something, asked about the wedding.

"That can wait," Mare Halena waved her question off. "Many aspects remain to be seen."

"Aspects?" Orion cut in.

Mare Halena shot Portia-something a displeased look, as if it were all her fault this box of bolts had been opened. "Honestly, Orion, you know you have options here. Take your time to decide."

"I decided, Mother. I sense you're having difficulty understanding that. Are your cognitive abilities declining?"

Finally she was giving him some real satisfaction in the matter. She may have been acting casual about it, but she loathed the idea that he picked some random scavenger to be his bride. The more she tried to delay the issue, the sweeter his triumph.

She dropped the subject and continued droning on about whatever the fuck. When the meeting came to a merciful end, Ptolin Geeson was waiting to enter in the hall. He nodded at Orion as he passed, the door sliding shut on him and Mare Halena with a decisive hiss.

Orion didn't remember seeing this man around when he was on *Colossal* as a teenager. But apparently he was responsible for convincing his mother that the effects of their uhyre genes were less potent than one may expect. Orion would need to sort out that mess later. For now, he had the expedition to worry about.

Many things had changed since Orion was away, and the level of investment he now felt in catching up on everything he'd missed annoyed him. This was exactly the kind of shit he wanted to avoid, yet now found himself unable to ignore. Mostly because he knew he'd have to live with whatever mess his mother got him into before her Upload.

"Orion." His father's voice coming down the hallway made him pause. Per Halen seemed to be wandering the halls aimlessly, as usual.

"Father."

"How are you doing, my boy?" His father slapped an awkward pat on Orion's shoulder. "How is Kaia settling in?"

"Well, apparently she's immune to me, so just fine I guess," Orion muttered, making to brush past him.

"She's what?" Per Halen raised his brows.

"Never mind. What's with Mother's sudden interest in genetics?" Orion peered at the closed office door.

"This ship does run on your genes, Orion. You know that." Per smiled.

"Yeah, and the colony designers made the gene code uncrackable, even by us. She's never taken an interest past 'reproduce' before." Why was Mother wasting her time on this when she should be preparing for her last expedition?

“I’m sure you’ll get to that part of your handover training when you’re ready. But you know how your mother gets. She’s trying to make sure everything is in order before her departure.”

Per Halen didn’t linger to chat, thank fuck, making for the door to join the meeting. Orion could just picture him in there, smiling and nodding at whatever his mother would say. Even as a kid, Per Halen followed his wife to all the meetings, all the functions, like a lovesick puppy. Maybe it helped him feel useful.

Orion supposed no one could predict how someone would approach the last months of their life. His mother clearly approached them by spreading herself too thin in nonsensical directions. This was worrying. Orion would be the one picking up the pieces once she was dead.

He intended to focus on doing more digging, but his mind once again gravitated to the buzzing fly in his head that would just not leave him alone. He checked the location of Kaia’s comms bracelet.

Orion paused when he realized she wasn’t on the upper deck. He frowned as he traced her signal to the CRD.

CHAPTER 48

KAIA

Stutton had been yelling into the roar of the square with some stupid factoids about how the weight distribution of bodies on the CRD affected *Colossal's* navigation in minuscule amounts Kaia would never have to care about. She wasn't about to be a fucking colony ship pilot, steering this behemoth. She wondered if anyone else in her cohort had their eyes on that particular job. Sounded like hell, being responsible for so many souls.

The back of her neck prickled, prompting Kaia to do a sweep of the crowd. There it was. A familiar figure slumped against the smooth wall of the public sandbath house. Orion loomed two or three heads taller than most of the people passing him by, giving him a wide berth.

Were they scared? Kaia wouldn't blame them. To an uhyre, they may as well be Old Earth cattle—animals humans had raised for consumption.

Orion's expression was not subject to interpretation. He was waiting.

"What are you doing here?" she asked when she was finally jostled into earshot.

"I should be asking you that, princess." Orion dragged her out of the stream of bodies and pulled her closer, then into a secluded nook between two makeshift constructions. "You shouldn't be down here."

"Why not? Scared of all the commoners?" Kaia began to roll her eyes, but quickly remembered she was supposed to be buttering this man up. Fuck.

"I'm not," he said. "They wouldn't dare touch me. But *you* should be. We have enemies, Kaia. Even in our own colony. A future commander's wife can be used against us."

Well, that was rich, considering nobody even knew she was a future commander's wife.

“Did I miss an engagement announcement where people suddenly know who I'm supposed to be?”

She hoped he didn't pick up on the trace of sarcasm in her voice because she was trying really fucking hard to control it.

Kaia had resisted bringing forth the topic for weeks. Something felt off. Until it was announced to everyone in the colony, the whole marriage plan could collapse any minute without anybody being the wiser. Which would be just fine for her if her grand plan didn't involve using that event to get Loran onto the ship.

Orion considered her.

“You know what, princess?” he finally said. “You're right.”

Kaia didn't have time to brace or get her bearings as she was dragged into the packed square surrounded by makeshift market stalls. There was a raised platform in the middle, coming into view as the throng parted for Orion.

“Orion, what are you—” He grabbed her waist with both hands and hoisted her onto the platform, above hundreds of heads.

Eyes were beginning to turn, the rumble of the crowd somewhat muted as they noticed Orion Halen and the outsider he was manhandling above them.

He hopped up after her with one long stride and turned her to face him. Rough hands burned into her sides as he hauled her close. Kaia craned her neck to meet his eyes for a clue, but didn't get a chance to ask again what the fuck was going on because he was already pulling her up and slamming his mouth to hers.

Orion had this way of possessing her when he wanted. He'd done it before after the dinner with his mother, in Kaia's old cabin. He pried her mouth open with a forceful shove of the tongue. It was all teeth and pressure. Uncomfortable and unyielding. The way his hands roamed up and down her sides

in front of all these people made her burn with shame. Kaia winced as his hand moved to her rear and squeezed, igniting the bruises from the previous night. He wasn't deterred, gripping harder until she released a pained whimper.

“What's gotten—” She tried to curl away, but his hold was iron. His other hand raked up, and she had to pull her dress down as the fabric followed his grasp.

“Nothing's gotten *into* me, princess,” he said darkly, mouth harsh against her jaw. “You don't care though, right? You can take it. Because you can't get addicted, can you?”

His voice was sickly sweet, a mocking contrast to the metallic exorin she already tasted. He didn't believe her, she realized. And yet he was still punishing her, his hand now shoving down the front of her dress to clasp her breast in the vise of his palm, threatening to expose her.

Kaia didn't hear the crowd anymore, only the blood and pounding in her ears. She tried to look around from the corner of her eye, and that was when his mouth split into a smile against her.

“Yes, they're all watching,” Orion rasped against her lip, then caught it in his teeth for a tug. He was rubbing and ripping and grabbing like she wasn't even a person. Just a toy for him to fuck with. That's all he ever wanted. Her cheeks ignited, a physical manifestation of the heat in her belly as charged prickles of want skittered along her skin at the thought. He hummed against her, the thumb beneath her dress flicking over her pebbled nipple.

“What a good little slut you'll make for me, Kaia,” he murmured. “Tell me, are you loving this? All these eyes?”

Kaia wanted to both stab him and fuck him right there, and she wasn't sure which impulse was winning. She was shaking, and she wasn't sure what from—the fear, the loathing, or the need?

Her gasp hitched, giving her away. Fuck. Kaia tried to get herself under control, even though her body was swaying with the ache to melt into the hard bulk of her tormentor.

“I said tell me. Or don’t. Happy to fuck the admission out of you right here.” Orion began to shove her dress up over her ass with his other hand, and she scrambled to keep it in place, pulling it down.

“Wait, wait. I…” Kaia moistened her lips and swallowed, trying to smooth her voice through her dry throat. She didn’t know what he wanted her to say. Fuck, she didn’t even know what she was fucking feeling.

His pupils were pins, tiny and darting between her eyes with an intensity she hadn’t seen even when they sparred. She sensed that they were both poised on the precipice of something—that he was waiting for her. *Had* been waiting for her.

“I don’t know why I want this.” The admission came out in a rushed whisper.

Orion reached up to cradle her jaw with an enveloping hand. His palm shifted, the grip intensifying until he had her held firm. He bent forward to growl in her ear: “It’s because we’re the same, Kaia.”

Her stomach lurched as he turned her head forcefully toward the now silent crowd. Hundreds of eyes watched as Orion pivoted her on the platform, having her stumble in a circle.

“Get a good look,” he muttered, his mouth at her ear skittering lightning under her skin.

The faces blurred together for a moment as Kaia met all the upturned eyes. Did they see how hard she was breathing? Did they notice her nipples under her dress? She was naked under their scrutiny, as though they’d look right through her clothes and know how wet she was.

“This is my fiancé,” Orion’s booming voice came muffled through the rush in her ears. “Take a look at her. In less than a year, she will be your commander’s spouse.”

A murmur burst the bubble of silence at those words, rising voices blending like their eyes.

Kaia was pretty sure he wasn’t supposed to say that.

But Orion was already hopping off the platform, lowering her to the ground. The volume escalated, the crowd unsure whether to part or get closer as the questions began. Orion pushed past them, keeping her shielded with his body as he hustled her forward, sweeping the people out of the way with massive arms.

The river of bodies was only getting denser, but everything was a blur, muted behind that primal need pumping in her core.

“What do you mean less than a year?”

“What does that mean, Mr. Halen?”

“Is Mare Halena Uploading?”

Orion slapped his palm to a gene reader. It took moments for his blood to be tested and the door to slide open. He shoved her into the blood passage, slinking in himself as the entry snapped shut behind them.

When Kaia had enough space to turn around and look at him, he was sucking the blood casually from the pricks on his palm, staring at her from beneath hooded brows.

“I don’t think that was a good idea... I thought your mother’s cancer was a secret.”

“It was time.”

Kaia backed up until the wall of the passage was at her back. The sudden, complete silence invoked a dreadful apprehension. There were no more eyes or murmurs. But it was all still there, that thing she’d admitted to, and she had a feeling he saw it in her like it was a fucking beacon lighting his way.

He was on her with inhuman speed. Hard hands pulled her up for another brutal kiss. Their tongues met in a hungry assault as her mind took a back seat while her body responded. Seams protested, then snapped. Her dress was ripped and discarded. The cool air of the passage prickled her skin. She winced as her fingers caught on the spikes at the back of his neck, drawing blood.

He slammed his hips against her, grinding her against the wall as her red-slick fingers found purchase in his shoulder. It was slippery, just like the exorin oozing from his tongue into her mouth. She found herself compelled to take his tongue between her lips, suckling the substance like it was water.

This was a bad idea.

But he was already shredding her panties and casting them aside.

“Orion, I—”

He swallowed her moans and rewarded her with his own. His hands moved lower. Metal clattered as he fumbled with his pants, and a moment later the searing flesh of his spiked cock pressed flat against her slit.

This was bad. So bad. Really, really bad. Because while it had been the exorin and the hurt she'd been worried about all along, Kaia was just lucid enough through her haze of unthrottled desire to realize that the real thing she should've been afraid of snuck up on her like a dagger to the back.

She cried out when he entered her, punching her into the wall. Too big for comfort, he stretched her open with a pang. He didn't stop when his thickness mandated her to conform to him. Sweat and skin bunched under her nails as she reacted by instinct, clawing and coming forward to clamp her teeth into his shoulder through a wet hiss as her body was forced to mold around the intrusion.

Orion persisted, each unyielding shove of his cock opening her up a little more. The raw ache of it twisted into something other. Hard hands dug into her ass and thighs, holding her up, and her body didn't seem to give a shit about the terrifying realization her mind just had. It parted its legs, wrapped them around the waist of rock-hard muscle. It devoured with its eyes the ladder of bulging abs rippling between them. It gazed up to his face, lines of shimmering silver dripping down his chin through parted lips, droplets splattering to her chest.

Her body clenched tight at the sight of the thickness sliding between the lips of its opening. It whimpered with the

friction of the spikes pummeling along her insides, and it sucked at the silver slickness coalescing with its own juices.

Because it wasn't her.

She wasn't the one baring her throat for the uhyre teeth that bit and branded, the breath that burned. She trembled under the tongue lapping at her skin, dripping sweet silver as he curled his bulging shoulders over her. It wasn't her bringing her hands up to dig her nails into his face, leaving red trails from her bloody fingertips. She wasn't the one pitching forward to bite his lower lip until he grabbed her jaw to pry her away, punched his hips into her with an inhuman growl.

And it was definitely *not* her finding the cyan glow behind his eyes and falling into it, pinprick pupils fixing her in place as she came apart, shattering to pieces beneath Orion's assault.

CHAPTER 49

ORION

Orion hadn't felt more himself in a long time. He pinned her in place as she broke beneath him, holding her gaze in a way only his kind could. Her hoarse breaths muffled in his ears as everything slowed, zoomed into a sharp relief that blurred out the edges until he had tunnel vision. Until all he could see was every little cell of the thing he was destroying. His primal parts unfurled through his bones as he forced himself inside the body. Its cunt squeezed a vise around his cock, making his balls tighten with the rush of impending release.

The exorin on his tongue needed to be on hers. He slid his hand up her bared, bitten throat, thumb tracing the line of taut tendon until it pitched itself right beneath the jaw. Her lips were already parted for him, forest eyes tracking him just as his did her. The way they followed his every move with a meticulous intensity betrayed her as a predator. She wasn't wide-eyed prey surrendering to his consumption. She was a hunter too, relishing in her kill as they devoured each other in this demented ouroboros.

A gravelly grunt punched from his throat as she tilted her head up and extended the flat of her tongue for him. He let a string of silver ooze from his mouth. The exorin pooled on her offered tongue, and the way her eyes half-closed in spent satisfaction was enough to take him over the edge. He hilted himself in her cunt, balls pulsing against her slit and her thighs as he filled her with his seed.

When he was empty, Orion pressed his forehead to hers, catching his breath. Then, he supported her limp form as she slid to the floor on trembling knees.

"Let's see just how immune you are, Kaia," he said, giving her cheek a gentle pat. "Next time we do this will be when you're begging for it."

She'd been exposed to so much of his exorin now—there was no way she wouldn't get hooked. She needed proof she wasn't exempt, and she would have it. She might try to hold out or deny it. But Orion looked forward to making her beg.

He pushed the chunks of curls from her face, matted with sweat and silver. His gut tightened with satisfaction when he nudged her face up with a finger under her chin, looking her over. She didn't meet his eyes, wet lashes clumped and heavy over shining cheeks.

Her chin was smudged with exorin. A trace of red was drying in the seam of her mouth, which was what made him register the string in his left shoulder, where he suspected he'd have marks for a while. The side of her neck was lined with marks of his own, blue suction from hungry lips and indents from his own teeth.

He was still admiring his handiwork when the NS subvoc came through.

Come to my quarters. Bring her.

Sighing, Orion rose and held out a hand, interrupting her motion to pull her knees against her chest on the floor.

“We have to go.”

Orion may have made a tactical mistake.

“You damn fool.”

Those were the first words out of his mother's mouth when Orion sauntered into her cabins. Kaia, he was pleased to see, mimicked his posture, keeping in close step beside him. When he'd taken her back to their cabin to clean up for a few minutes, she hadn't seemed in any state to meet anyone. She'd looked like she wanted nothing more than to crawl into some corner and stay there.

That was all right—she'd get used to it. She couldn't fool him anymore about not wanting this, and he was pretty sure

she couldn't fool herself, either. Her admission back there was still coursing through his veins, as much as the excitement of actually fucking her. It was the raw confusion in her voice when she said she wanted him. It may very well have been the first honest thing she said to him. He had seen the denial collapse behind her eyes, and it only took a firm shove for the rest of her to crumble too.

It was proof that he'd made the right choice. Kaia could be more than just a tool for revenge, or some free-wheeling scavenger to make his life a little more interesting. All those times in the forced, tense moments when he sensed her feeling out the space between them even as she tried to resist and pull back... She couldn't avoid it anymore. The cut she left on his neck had been the start of the collapse of her defenses. A first *real* glimmer of what she was capable. And he couldn't fucking wait to splay her open and see the rest.

She'd recovered somewhat by the time they reached Mare Halena's cabins, and was now standing firm beside him. He didn't know if she was faking her confidence, but he liked it.

His father sat perched on a cushion in the corner. He and Mother exchanged glances before Mare Halena tossed a glass of whatever-she-had back and slammed it on a table. Of course, she could sense it on them—the stench of fresh pheromones didn't wash off easy. Hell, she could see it, too—the evidence was painted right on their bodies in red and blue.

“They had to be told eventually.” Orion gestured Kaia toward a foam cushion, pleased at the immediacy with which she followed the instruction to take a seat. He sat beside her, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees, hands hanging loosely between them.

“They had to be told when *I* told them,” Mother barked hoarsely.

Orion shrugged. “Well, now they know when I told them.”

“Orion...”

“Yes, Father?” It was rare for Per Halen to get in-between Orion's and his mother's spats. He preferred to lurk in the

shadows, having no real opinion or input on much of anything at all. His attempt at a disparaging tone with the son he hadn't lifted a finger to raise was laughable.

“Maybe it's a good thing...”

Two pairs of ice blue eyes swiveled to Kaia, followed by Per Halen's delayed reaction time. Humans were slow.

“Please, Kaia with no last name. Please tell me all about your very informed opinion of the situation.” Mare Halena's smile dripped malice, eyes cold and unblinking.

“Don't talk to her like that.” Orion hadn't moved, maintaining his relaxed posture. Mare Halena glanced between them, calculating.

“I only mean...” Kaia looked to Orion, who nodded at her to continue. She straightened visibly in her seat at the encouragement, lifting her chin. “I mean, people are starting to talk down there. If they didn't find out the truth now, worse rumors might spread.”

“Talk?” Mare Halena was still as a viper poised to strike, and for the first time Orion got a little worried about where this was going, because he had no idea what Kaia was talking about. Was she bluffing?

“Apparently some people think there's something bad at X1s. Something we shouldn't be messing with.”

Mare Halena watched Orion. “And by some people, you mean my son.”

“No,” Kaia hastened. “People down there. At least one... I heard it today.”

“Who?”

Kaia turned to Orion again. His mother would notice even the slightest shake of the head, and he had to tread carefully here. Fuck, he wished Kaia had told him this first. If she hadn't been so stubborn about not getting a Neurosync, they could've just subvocalized directly and not had this problem.

But to his relief, Kaia seemed to understand. “I'm not at liberty to say.”

“Kaia...” Per Halen butted in again, in that same warning tone he’d tried on Orion.

“Mr. Halen, their reasons may be legitimate for all I know. It’s not my business to give out secrets.”

“Oh, but it very much *is* your business,” Mother snapped. “You are intending to become part of this family, no?”

Kaia shrugged. “Sure. But until Orion told everyone today, you seemed happy to keep me hidden away up here.”

That’s why I picked her.

It was her big mouth. Her willingness to bulldoze through whatever idiotic authority demanded things of her. Sure, that included him. But it included everyone else, too. She was a goddamn weapon, and he liked when she was on his side.

“Are you totally sure about this...” Mother wagged a finger between him and Kaia, “match, Orion?”

“I thought I made that clear enough times to you by now, Mother.”

“Then the wedding needs to be moved up. Thanks to your little stunt, we predict an influx of leavers.”

“Leavers?” Kaia asked.

It was Orion who answered: “Those who had Uploads booked. There’s usually a wave of suicides right before we make the jump, before we get cut off from the network. Of course, they get synced up when we return. But there’s always a risk we don’t, especially if people think they’re being herded to a dangerous galaxy for no good reason.” He shot his mother a pointed look.

This seemed to affect Kaia—her pulse picked up next to him, apprehension imbuing her immediate aura.

“Don’t worry, princess. It’s normal around here. They don’t die, you see,” he muttered the platitude.

“I know that,” Kaia snapped.

Mare Halena arched a brow at her. “You know, do you?”

“Yes, because I’m not an idiot. Everyone knows what Heaven is.” She looked up at Orion. “What do you mean *jump*?”

“*Colossal’s* hyperdrive enables one jump per year, and we use it for expeditions to get us to the edge of the known universe with what’s essentially a one-way gate. Lets us shorten a ten-year trip to two,” Orion explained.

The tech was shrouded in mystery, a secret closely guarded by the colonies. It was a unique sensation, having all your particles taken apart and put back together.

“And this means the wedding... has to happen sooner?” Kaia looked confused.

“And grander.” Orion leaned into her side. “Isn’t that right, Mother?”

“Why?”

Mare Halena looked like she’d eaten an expired nutripack when she nodded. “You panicked people. Now you need to give them a distraction.”

“You think a party is gonna make them stop worrying about being sent to their deaths?” The way Kaia gaped at his mother was almost funny. She was so adorably clueless.

“It will.” Orion’s fingers smoothed a stray curl behind Kaia’s ear. “We do this before every expedition. Free kerogel always helps people relax. And this time it’ll be even bigger—the first commander’s wedding in hundreds of years. No way will people want to pass that up.”

“We will do it in one month.” Mare Halena dismissed them with a flick of the wrist.

As Orion was guiding Kaia outside with a hand on the small of her back, she called out, “You know what would bring people even more hope? An heir to the Halena line. Maybe get on that.”

CHAPTER 50

KAIA

Shit was getting bad.

Three days after their meeting, Mare Halena's distraction machine was in full swing. It was impressive how quickly the commander could get things to happen.

Things were moving too fast, and Kaia needed more time. She slammed a fist into the sim cockpit as her virtual craft collided with debris for the dozenth time. At least she made it through the full test, only taking a bit of damage to the hull. She'd been in the simulation rig all day, long since desensitized to the stench of her own sweat in the cramped space. It was the only place she could stop thinking about everything happening *out there*. Everything that happened.

Flicking the reset switch, Kaia took a few breaths as the sim rebooted.

She was sore all over. She'd woken up with a bruised back the day after... after what happened. She hadn't realized how hard he was punching her into the wall until then. His marks dotted her neck and jawline. Her fingertips had just begun scabbing over the sharp points the spikes at the nape of his neck had torn into her flesh. Her pussy was sore. The spikes in that part of him weren't that sharp, but coupled with the rest of him, they pushed her to her limits. Orion was a creature designed to hurt, take, and leave plenty of evidence.

So why was she rubbing her thighs together as she thought of it?

"Shit."

Kaia let out a shaky breath. It didn't have to mean anything. It wasn't *her* back there. Just her body. A body she'd discard soon enough. Besides, she could use this. There was something there. What passed between them up on that platform wasn't just a moment of involuntary arousal, like when they sparred. It was more fucked up, but also more

useful: the realization that they both saw the twisted, ugly things within each other. And they didn't want to look away.

Maybe that had its hooks in him too. Maybe it was something she could use. Maybe, maybe, maybe.

At least she left the experience with one critical advantage: Orion thought she must be addicted now. He said he wouldn't touch her again until she begged. That should at least grant her some reprieve from having to fuck him again, considering she still felt nothing.

Her tablet chimed, and Kaia glared at the screen—yet another pushy message from Loran. It'd been getting worse over the past two days. He'd clearly gotten the hint with her tentative invitation. Now, he was showering her with “brotherly love” and regaling her with familial stories of *Riker 109*, asking for updates about her wellbeing. She didn't have the time or energy to deal with him right now.

“Ariel Sim Twenty-Five, advanced debris maneuver scenario seven. Pilot, reminder to refrain from toggling thermaview.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Kaia muttered into her helmet as instructions were parroted out.

Then there was the new attention now that the whole station knew about her and Orion's engagement. She saw the holographic announcements on the thermaview in the passageways that day for the first time, and it made her want to shoot herself straight out the airlock. A stylized, much neater-haired version of her face was plastered all over the ship. It beamed with adoration at Orion's determined face above. They didn't make *his* hair look any different from real life... but it also wasn't a perpetual mop on top of his head.

Kaia had pulled it back into what she hoped was a semi-neat ponytail for the duration of the day, feeling self-conscious.

She drew the yoke, narrowly avoiding the jagged chunk of metal blinking toward her on the nav screen. She was way too distracted for this. Kaia shut down the sim and shook out her

hands. She leaned into the headrest and closed her eyes for a few moments, steeling herself to go back into the fray out there.

She needed to chill. She had what she needed. The hook. All she had to do now was act natural and play it out.

CHAPTER 51

ORION

Kaia had been avoiding him for three days. Spending late nights in the sim rig or the gym after lectures. Anything but be around him after what happened, and his patience was wearing fucking thin.

“That story about people getting worried about something dangerous in X1s, was that bullshit?” Orion splayed an arm over the back of the couch in his cabin. He’d waited up for her past midnight, refusing to put this conversation off any longer.

He’d expected Kaia to come to him sooner. He was going to get it out of her then. But he didn’t have any more time to wait for this particular answer.

The bathroom door was open, affording him flashes of her movements, a small sliver of a view. She dropped the towel she had wrapped around her chest and he cursed himself for telling her he was going to wait for her to beg. He couldn’t let her win by going back on that now. Bare flesh was quickly covered by a large T-shirt. At least it was still his shirt.

If she were anyone else, he’d have fucked her six ways from Sunday by now. But she had his exorin at least four times now, and one of them had to have been a hit. All he had to do was sit back and await her delusions of immunity to be proven wrong. She would be feeling it by now. The cravings. The fact that she clearly had self-control wasn’t about to change that. Any day now, she’d come crawling with that little twitch in her fingers. She’d beg for it, any way he’d give it. Orion rubbed his jaw and smiled as he watched her through the door. Maybe he’d make her work for it a little. Or a lot.

She came out of the bathroom with her hair wrapped in a towel. “I used up all your water.”

Fuck.

“The story,” Orion pressed. “Was it bullshit?”

Slowly, Kaia came to perch on the couch next to him. Something had changed in how she moved around him. He suspected she didn't even notice, but she existed in his space like it was normal. Was that a sign of the addiction taking hold? When she slumped back into the couch, Orion curled his arm around her and she didn't move. And when she folded into his side all on her own, a little jolt of something thrummed his nerves. She was now a strong bundle of muscle more than skin and bone, nice and solid against him. The weight of her felt like it belonged there.

But she was going to have to give him an answer.

"Kaia. I don't want to have to ask you again."

"Not really... I heard someone say it."

"Who?"

This wasn't optional. He'd been spending his days trying to put two and two together, figuring out what drew his mother to X1s. He felt like he had all the pieces, or most of them, anyway. But he was stuck at a dead end with no more data to peruse. He needed any lead he could get.

"Peter, from the course... He blew up at me on the day we took that... valley trip or whatever."

"Field trip. What do you mean, he blew up on you? What did he do?" Orion sat straighter.

"Nothing, he was just scared. His dad has some theory that there's something *bad* at X1s. Said his dad's been trying to warn your mother about it. He tried to get Peter to kill himself and Upload, before you... we... set out. When Peter refused, his dad decided to do it himself."

"Something bad? Bad like what?"

"I don't know, we didn't really get that far into our pleasant *chat* about it, Orion," Kaia propped a foot up on the cushion. The touch of her knee against his leg was faint, but the awareness of yet another channel of contact made him buzz in heady elation.

“But I haven’t seen Peter since that trip down to the lower decks,” Kaia said. “He hasn’t been attending lectures or practicals.”

“I’m gonna find him tomorrow. Could be a lead.”

“I’ll come too.”

“I’m not bringing you down there, Kaia. I told you it’s not safe. Especially now.”

“With you it is, isn’t it?” And goddamn it, she was getting good at manipulating him, because the way she put her hand on his arm and peered up at him made any protest fall away.

He pressed a palm to her cheek, running his thumb across her little lips.

“Yes, princess. With me it is.”



They went down to the Common Residence Deck early the next day.

“You look like you’re preparing to rob a place,” Orion said when Kaia had emerged from the bathroom in a long-sleeved skintight black bodysuit and her hair pinned back in a clip. The bodysuit’s turtleneck was stretched high over her chin.

She looked over his own outfit: leather boots, khaki jeans, and a white synth silk sweater.

“I thought we should be inconspicuous,” she said.

“First, I guarantee that getup will draw more attention than anything else down there. Second, I dwarf the average colonist on this ship by three heads, Kaia, and our blissful wedding portraits are plastered all over the hull. How inconspicuous do you think we can get?”

She sighed. “I’ll change.”

“No time. Let’s go, little thief.”

Grumbling something under her breath, she followed him out the door.

Orion had his NS pull up the resident database and direct them to Peter's cabin through the narrow blood passages surrounding the CRD. When they slipped into the bustle of the main deck, Orion grabbed Kaia's hand, keeping her close. He ignored the eyes trailing them as they stopped outside their destination. Orion was lifting his palm to the gene reader set in the door when Kaia stopped him with a tug on his sleeve.

"No, Orion." She shouldered him out of the way.

"What? I'm permitted to enter."

She stared at him like he was an idiot for some reason. "This is someone's home. Private space. You don't just barge in like that."

She sure had some weird hang-ups about using her newfound privilege, or allowing him to use his. But he humored her, crossing his arms on his chest as Kaia first looked for a chime—there wasn't one—and then resorted to banging on the door three times like some sort of commoner.

When there was no answer, she knocked again, louder this time. Finally, she slumped a little and glanced back at Orion shyly. He cocked an eyebrow. "Got that out of your system?"

"Fine. Go ahead." Kaia stepped back, letting Orion take over and unlock the door.

"Stay behind me," he muttered, stepping into the darkness of the cabin.

Orion first assumed the place must be empty, but when he got his NS to bring up the overheads, the guy from Kaia's class was hunched over on a ragged foam couch in the corner. He was leaning forward with his hands threaded through his hair.

"What are you doing here?" The guy raised his head. His eyes were blue on the outside and red on the inside. Swollen in that way that they get after someone cries and doesn't rehydrate for too long. Must've used up his ration.

“You look like hell, Peter.”

Orion blinked at Kaia. For someone insisting on politely knocking on doors, she sure as hell didn't seem bothered about insulting a guy. She strode to the couch, bending down to stare into Peter's gaunt face. “Did he do it?”

The lines in Peter's face deepened. “Yes.”

“When?”

“What's it to you?”

Kaia gnawed her lip, shooting Orion a quick glare that told him it was his turn. She really wasn't very delicate about this... It's like the woman had no ability to fake a little empathy. He cleared his throat and took a step forward.

“We came to talk to your father about his research,” he said. “But I see we're too late.”

Peter turned his eyes to Orion, his face wrenched into an angry mask. “Oh, suddenly you're interested in his crazy theories?”

“Maybe not so crazy.”

That didn't make Peter look like he felt any better. He was shaking his head, slumping back against the backrest with that hollow look on his face. “It was all bullshit. He knew enough to make plausible sounding stories even when his mind went downhill.”

“We'd love to learn them anyway,” Kaia said, more softly this time, mirroring Orion's vibe.

Despite her attempt, Peter's hands curled into fists. “Now? You want to hear them *now*, after months of my father trying to get through to you people?”

“I didn't know before. Not until you told me,” she said.

“How the fuck not?” Peter's wail bounced off the bare walls.

“That's enough,” Orion said, stepping between them. He nudged Kaia behind him, glaring at the broken man. “She didn't know because she isn't privy to colony business.”

“And you, then? Not *privy* either?”

“Whatever, man.” Orion was trying hard not to punch Peter’s extremely punchable face. “Your dad’s dead now. This is a waste of time. Let’s go.” He motioned to Kaia and started back for the door.

“Wait,” Peter said, a flavor of desperation in his voice. Orion rolled his eyes, but halted when Kaia turned. This one was broken, wasting their time. If he could’ve subvocalized, he would’ve told her to keep moving. Instead, he was gritting his teeth and staring at the ceiling.

“My father kept records.”

All right... Maybe this wasn’t such a waste after all.

CHAPTER 52

KAIA

They went back to their cabin with reams of binders stuffed with yellowing printouts. Turns out “records” was an understatement on Peter’s part. His father had kept detailed notes, scribbles, journals, and everything in-between stashed haphazardly in a cabinet in the bedroom that doubled as his “office.”

Peter didn’t seem to expect much as they gathered up the material. He seemed to just want it gone.

Back in Orion’s cabin, they inhabited his office. Orion was on the couch, arranging the pages on his glass table. Kaia had offered to help look, but he didn’t trust her to know what to watch out for, since he was the only one who’d already gone through a mass of existing data from the ship library.

So she sprawled on her stomach on the floor, chin on her hand as she studied Ariel engine specs for the academy.

“Let me know when you find anything interesting,” she muttered.

She had just memorized the series of controls to bypass the Ariel’s overheat gauge when Orion coughed to get her attention.

“Got something?”

“Nah... our wedding planner wants to see you for a fitting.”

Kaia blinked up at him. “Our what for what?”

“The wedding planner. A dress fitting. You know, the thing you’ll wear when we get married.”

“There’s a wedding planner? Whose job it is to... plan weddings?”

“Now, Kaia.”

Her brows shot up. “Now? Have her reschedule.”

“She already rescheduled.”

Kaia glared.

“She wanted to do it yesterday, and I pushed it to today since you were in the sim rig.”

“And I didn’t need to know any of this, huh?”

Orion shrugged. “Forgot.”

Kaia should’ve been angry that he was even planning her time without her knowledge or input, but... hell, the man planned her fucking diet. This was nothing new.

“Next time, you can contact me directly instead of fetching me through my fiancé,” Kaia said once Alina showed her into the wedding planner’s office.

“My apologies. I couldn’t find you in the NS database,” she smiled, rising from her plush white cushion.

“I don’t have a Neurosync. You can chime my hardware.” Kaia held up her bracelet.

“I thought you’d have all the latest tech by now.”

“Yeah, not interested. Can we get this over with?”

The woman went to action. “Of course. Please follow me to the fitting cabin.”

A door Kaia hadn’t noticed slid open. She followed the planner into a bright cabin full of white cushions, white carpets, and white walls. In the middle of it sat a raised white platform and a set of three large mirrors framing it in a semi-circle. A silver clothing rack stood to the side with three hangers, each holding a covered garment. Kaia jumped when a pair of small hands appeared, pushing the clothes apart. A round face popped out between them.

“Hey, girl!”

Kaia startled. Was she supposed to know this person?

The woman bounced from behind the racks and held out her hand in the customary colony greeting.

“Petal,” she chirped as they shook hands. “Designer.”

“Oh.”

Petal stepped back, tilting her head and curling a forefinger over her chin as she appraised Kaia.

“Nice proportions. A bit bony, but still enough curve for the shapes I was thinking, and we can take the waist in a little... Mmhmm... All right, now strip.”

“What?”

“Your clothes. Down to your underwear. Unless you want to try these on *over* that emo outfit?”

Kaia bristled. She had no idea what an “emo outfit” was, but she had a feeling it was a jab at her blending-in attire for the trip to the CRD that morning. Honestly, Kaia wouldn’t mind trying on the dresses over that if it got her out of there faster, but it would probably have the opposite effect. She turned her back to the women and removed her black boots and bodysuit, self-conscious under their nonplussed eyes.

The makeup was way too much. The planner, Orel something-or-other, insisted on it. Trying out a “look,” as she called it. She said *of course* there’d be makeup at the wedding. As beautiful as Kaia allegedly was, “Every girl should look otherworldly on her wedding day.”

Kaia wasn’t used to seeing brown kohl turning her eyes into big, elongated orbs, nor the peach and purple eyeshadow over her lids. Luckily, Orel hadn’t insisted on touching the rest of her face, save for covering a few blemishes with a skin-colored cream. She said Kaia’s cheeks were naturally flushed when she was nervous, and she’d be nervous at her wedding. Her skin also passed the test—Orel claimed freckles suited

her. At least growing up under the harsh UV rays of Artega Seven was good for something, Kaia supposed. She got lucky. All she got was freckles. Her brother got the full shebang.

The first dress was a masterpiece of galactic proportions that Kaia hated. White as the room, with a rigid fitted bodice puffing out into countless layers of synthsilk that could serve as a portable sitting cushion. The skirt glittered with thousands of sparkling stars that could be used as a weapon to blind the enemy. Kaia's forearms rested on top of the skirt like a shelf. It carried their weight with ease.

"This one's fine," Kaia said.

Her tormentors exchanged looks in the mirror.

"Okay, this is obviously not it." Petal waved her off the platform, reaching to unzip and unclasp the appliances holding the dress in place.

"Why not?"

"Because no dress that you think is just *fine* can be it, Kaia." The planner uncapped a pen and marked the hanger cover with a small black cross.

The second dress was fine, too. A bright yellow number that consisted of hundreds of disjointed horizontal straps wrapping and crisscrossing Kaia's body in intricate swooping patterns. It was tight from the hips down to the knees, fanning out into a pool of liquid gold around her feet.

"I think I'm just not a dress person. Any of them will do, honestly." Kaia was itching to get out of there.

Petal tutted and began unlacing the delicate fabric as Orel unzipped another dress from the confines of its protective sheath.

Kaia barely registered the red material Petal had been working around her. She had learned her lesson. No matter what, Kaia was not about to say it's fine.

So when Petal spun her around to face the mirrors, her mouth was already spreading into a wide smile, ready to gush over the piece and convince the others that this was it, and she

could go now. But the smile crumpled, and a lump assailed her throat when she peered at her reflection. Kaia forced it down as she scanned herself from head to toe.

The crimson straps were thin as threads atop her shoulders, tapering into a delicate V-neck bodice that scooped around her chest. The silk was weightless, shifting with each breath. It turned semi-sheer beneath the chest, melting into the color of Kaia's skin as the dress tapered into a soft, cinched waist.

Kaia glanced into the rear mirror that Petal had rolled up behind her, bringing her back into view. The top of it was open, exposing her ribs and spine. From the side of her bosom, the fabric dipped into a smooth line that arched over her lower back. The skirt formed a seamless gradient from opaque fiery red to sheer, glistening with crimson and gold details like a spray of stardust at her feet. In the front, two vertical slits exposed her legs to the upper thigh, affording a sliver of flesh to break up the fire of it all.

A fist clenched in Kaia's sternum and squeezed. She was a stupid kid with a trembling lip and a throat constricting around a sob. It escaped when she finally had to choose between drawing breath and passing out, wrenched out of her like an ugly thing demanding to be free. She bunched the dress in her fists and stared down at the reflection of her feet—God, they put her in such ridiculously high nude heels. How was anyone meant to walk in those?

“Oh, honey.” Kaia directed her blurry gaze to Petal in the mirror. “This is the one. I knew it. You look so happy.”

Happy?

Kaia batted away the tears as they spilled over her cheeks. They thought she was crying with happiness. Kaia didn't even know what the fuck she was crying over, but it sure as Heaven wasn't that. All she knew was that she was in the most beautiful stupid dress she'd ever laid eyes on—the kind of thing nobody in her family could dream of ever even seeing in person. They'd have been so happy if they could see how much better her life *was* now.

If they weren't dead. If everyone weren't fucking dead. Ahton was all alone out there because of her. She owed it to him to keep herself together. Her brother was more important than fantasies of a life she couldn't even fathom.

Kaia realized someone was wailing, and that someone was her, and now Petal and Orel weren't looking so happy anymore because they realized these were not happy tears and that something was wrong. Kaia took gasping breaths as she tried to get herself under control, her chest tight and her throat prickling and dry even though her face was wet with salt.

"I... uh... Stay right there. We'll be right back, honey," Orel patted her awkwardly and the two women made a hasty retreat.

CHAPTER 53

ORION

Orion was deep in the binders they'd scavenged when a yellow notification appeared in his vision. He blinked it away, returning to an old paper published by none other than the man himself, Peter's father, Paul Creaton.

The name rang a bell, but that wasn't what caught Orion's attention. The interesting part was the fact that Paul Creaton's byline listed him as not *just* an archaeologist, but one specializing in uhyre artifacts.

Either this was all a waste of time, since an archaeologist was unlikely to know much of anything about geophysics and suitability of specific environments for habitation... Or Paul Creaton's concern about what Orion's mother was dragging *Colossal* into was of a different nature than he'd assumed.

The notification chimed again, this time a deep, intrusive orange. With a flash of irritation, Orion opened the comms.

I think you might want to get here, Mr. Halen. Miss Kaia's having a... well, I don't know what she's having. The subvoc came with a burst of nervous emotion.

When the planner pointed him into the fitting cabin with a worried expression, following close on his heels as he entered, Orion had expected to see Kaia in her natural state: uncooperative. He didn't expect to find her standing quietly on a platform with her back to him, wrapped in glorious fire.

Orion stopped in his tracks, brain scrambling to recalibrate his expectations. That was when he noticed the tremble in her shoulders and the white-knuckled fists grasping the red fabric.

He waved away the two women who'd followed him in. When they were alone, he approached Kaia without hesitation.

He sensed pain tinged with a splash of something bitter as he stepped onto the platform and came up behind her. She was fraying, her aura crackling with the taste of falling apart.

The pink of her cheeks flared and her nose had turned red and shiny. Her brows were upturned, her eyes swimming with tears. Her lips, wet and irritated from the salt, wobbled, parted as she took small, shuddering breaths.

When he closed the distance between them and wrapped his arms around her stomach from behind, her wet eyes met his in the mirror. She began to pull away, but he held firm, pressing her to his chest. She didn't try to fight. She couldn't, not in that state.

Orion couldn't help it. He got hard at the sight and feel of her like this, all of her defenses stripped, leaving her naked for him.

Her lashes flicked down as she felt him against the small of her back. He braced for her to pull away again. Instead, she turned in place in his arms, fingers releasing the dress she was clutching to curl into his shirt. She looked up at him.

“Ignore it,” he rasped, his voice rawer than he intended. He didn't want to scare her. Not now. Not yet.

Instead of heeding his instruction, Kaia did something that bewildered him. She slowly lowered herself, hands tracing careful lines down his torso as she got onto her knees. The plunging neckline of the dress blended with the blush creeping up her chest. Orion frowned as she fumbled with his belt, then tugged his pants down over his hips—shy, but determined.

He remained silent, clenching his jaw as she pulled his briefs down to his thighs. He couldn't see her eyes or her expression, only the tops of her lashes as she stared at the erection in her face. Her hot breath washed over the head, and he could already feel the spikes prickling up around the base and underside of his dick.

When she pitched forward and awkwardly bumped her lips against the head, a hiss caught in his throat. Her hands slid to his hips, grasping him for balance as she planted another

small, hesitant kiss on his flesh. This time, she looked at him. A tear spilled along her temple as she craned her neck. He flicked it away with a thumb. When, still watching, she enveloped the full head of his shaft in her mouth, he had to squeeze his eyes shut, lift his head to the ceiling, and think about his forest.

Fuck. He was supposed to make her beg.

He couldn't watch as his dick disappeared halfway in her mouth. He only felt her lips leaving a wet trail along his flesh, then his head pressing against the roof of her mouth. She drew back then, and it took all his visualization abilities to picture trees swaying in the wind instead of holding her still and forcing himself down her throat.

Orion didn't know what this was, and he found it impossible to give a fuck. She wanted to do this. Despite his genius plan of breaking her delusion, he couldn't bring himself to refuse the offering.

He chanced a cautious glance down, pulling her hair from around her face for a better view. Her cheeks hollowed as she sucked him, bobbing her head onto his cock, then back out. It wasn't a good blow job. She'd clearly not done this often... Maybe ever. But the sight of her on her knees before him was enough. Her inexperience only added to the thrill of it, so even when her teeth scraped the spikes that now protruded into her tongue, it sent a pleasing shudder down his spine.

She was still crying, stray tears sliding onto his cock even as she sucked him off. He should probably ask about that. But the look in her eye was pleading and desperate. What did she want? Did she want him to come? Did she want him to ask? To stop her, show her that he cared about her feelings? If this was a test, she should've known he was always going to fail.

"Fuck, don't do that," he croaked when she dug her fingernails into his thighs and ripped them down, making his vision blotch black and red.

She made a nondescript sound through the mouthful of dick and repositioned herself on her knees, her hips rocking

forward a little as she worked. Then she did it again, clawing at his skin and making him picture punishing her for it.

“Goddamn it, Kaia, you’re asking for it,” he warned through a growl.

When her eyes locked on his again, he realized that was exactly what she was doing.

“That’s what you want, you little whore, isn’t it?” he mused.

He shoved her off him with a careless knee to the chest. Kaia scrambled backward, and he leaned in to push her to her back. There was the faint rip of a seam somewhere. He crouched over her mouth and she reached for his ankles on either side of her head.

“Open,” Orion demanded. He looked down, meeting her eyes. His cock jerked in her face, a droplet of exorin-tinged precum bulging on the tip. Kaia stared at it with wide eyes that had begun to dry. That wouldn’t do.

“I said fucking open.” He pressed his dick against her mouth and pushed it past her lips, and kept pushing. Her hands scrambled at his legs, fearful eyes widening.

Good.

He forced himself in until he felt the back of her mouth, and then deeper. He pressed through the resistance and into her throat. It squeezed around him as her instinct to swallow kicked in, and Orion held himself there, taking the opportunity to admire his little whore while she was occupied.

Her breasts, which he just realized were exposed over the dislodged neckline of her dress, twitched as she fought for air fruitlessly.

The spikes protruding around the base of his cock dripped exorin onto her face, covering her eyes, cheeks, and chin with silver globs. There were fresh tears welling in her eyes, mixing with it as they spilled.

He tilted his head to watch her neck expand with the volume of him for a few delicious seconds before finally

dragging himself back out.

She made a wet spluttering sound as she sucked in air, then coughed out silver droplets.

“What a good slut.” He reached down to pat her silver-stained cheek. Reward was important. Then he plunged his cock back into its hole. His exorin mingled with saliva from her throat, lubricating it for his passage.

It didn't take long. Only a few mindless thrusts into her face, and then his dick began to jerk. His balls pressed against her chin as he made her take it all, enjoying the feel of her throat milking him as he shot his load deep into her belly.

When he was done, Orion withdrew and his softening cock fell from her lips with a slurp. Once again, she heaved for air. Silver-tinged spittle dripped in a thin line from her mouth to the floor as she rolled onto her stomach and pushed herself up.

Deep-rooted satisfaction welled within him, along with something else he couldn't put a finger on just then. It spread through him, coating the back of his ribs in expansive warmth. A far cry from past instances of post-nut clarity.

Orion crouched next to her. He cupped her face and tilted her head up. He kissed her lowered eyes, then bent to trail his lips down her cheeks, to her swollen lips.

“I don't know what this was,” he whispered. “But you are a force of fucking nature. Let's go home.”

CHAPTER 54

KAIA

She wasn't hearing the platitudes he was muttering in her ear as he gently pulled her to her feet. Her heart had stopped its rabid racing, and finally all those stupid fucking *feelings* that caused all this were subdued. Now she only felt two things: the rawness of her abused throat and the thrumming heat between her legs.

The dress was ruined, which was a thing Kaia realized only when she saw the horrified looks on the planner's and designer's faces as she and Orion left the fitting room. She stared at the ground, adjusting one delicate strap on her shoulder with useless care.

"She'll take it," Orion told them as he ushered her from the planner's office and into a blood passage. He tried to help steady her at first, but soon accepted that Kaia was walking just fine on her own.

In fact, for all the soreness in her throat and the bump she had begun to feel on the back of her elbow, Kaia felt much better than when she first got up on that stupid pedestal in that fucking dress. Numb in her chest and hot between her legs... Probably just how Orion liked it too.

Before she knew it, they were back in Orion's suite and he was nudging her toward the bathroom, peeling the torn dress off of her and putting her into the shower cubicle. For a moment he hesitated, looking like he might join her.

"Orion, I'm fine." Her voice cracked, but she smiled with what she hoped was reassurance.

He didn't look convinced, but nodded and left her alone. Kaia turned her face up to the hot cascade of water.

"I used up all the water again," she said when she emerged wrapped in a fluffy towel.

“Good.” Orion rose from the couch, cradling a steaming cup in his hands. He handed it to her. “For your throat.”

“Thanks.” Kaia accepted the offering. The cup warmed her palms, and the smell of its contents reminded her of that hint of mint he always carried.

It was peppermint, so that made sense, she realized when she took a tentative sip.

They ended up in bed like nothing had happened. Kaia sat with her back against the wall, the heavy blanket pulled up to her chest. Orion was next to her, crinkling papers strewn around the surface of the bedspread as he continued to study Peter’s father’s records.

It was comfortable, Kaia decided, sitting together like that, doing their own thing. Not talking was easy. What would in the past have been an awkward silence belied by an undercurrent of tension was now a warm stillness which neither felt the need to break. Kaia could live with that, as long as she didn’t get too complacent about it.

It hurt to swallow, but she was glad it happened. She needed to be reminded of how scary it could be, but more than that, she needed to be punished for what she was about to do. Because even more than the feeling of giving up a life she might actually want, what overwhelmed her at the fitting was the guilt of the betrayal she was about to commit. And the realization that she was about to atone for the guilt of her brother’s death only to adopt another... Well, that she couldn’t live with. Not here, and sure as hell not in Heaven. She needed Orion to be the monster she envisioned going into this, and she’d turned him into one.

Better still, now she had leverage.

“Hey, so...” She cleared her aching throat and turned to her fiancé. “Who will be invited to the wedding?”

Orion took a moment to finish scanning a crinkled physical report before turning his attention to her. “Colony leadership usually. Why?”

“Can I invite a friend?”

Orion smiled. “Of course. I’m sure Alina will be happy to attend.”

“I didn’t mean her,” Kaia muttered.

“Well, whoever. Send the names over to that planner. She can find their contact in the ship’s database. Anyone you want.”

Yeah...

Kaia had a feeling the planner would have trouble finding this one. But she’d leave it there for now—she wouldn’t want Orion thinking she’d done what she did back there in exchange for the huge favor of bringing an outsider to *Colossal*. Plus she was suddenly feeling a little nauseous. Kaia took another sip of her tea and curled up in the bed.

CHAPTER 55

ORION

“Tell me about your brother,” Orion said one evening as they sat together in the library.

He was poring over Peter’s father’s documents, and Kaia was curled in an armchair next to him, staring at her tablet. Orion had already thoroughly examined its contents, of course—a long time ago. He knew what she was watching, among other things. But she’d also grown less secretive about her activities, letting him catch glimpses of the videos on her screen. He wasn’t sure if it were because she’d grown to trust him more with it, or if she just got sloppy.

It took a while for her to acknowledge him, but he knew she heard him. Finally she turned to him. “What do you want to know?”

“How did he die?”

“He had cancer. You know that.”

“How did he get cancer?” Orion pressed. She never talked about her brother with him, but she kept watching this footage of them as kids. He hadn’t bothered asking before because it didn’t matter. The kid was dead, and Kaia would have to move forward no matter how many old vids she watched. But as time went on, he realized this was an important part of her life to which he wasn’t privy. And he wanted to be.

He let her sit in her hesitation. Pushing too hard for answers would just make her shut him out. And unlike her body, he couldn’t quite force her mind to his will that easily. Well, he *could have*, if the exorin had taken hold. But there was still no sign of it. No sign of dependence. No sign of craving. He’d gotten glimpses of that primal twilight in her eye, the one they’d shared. But that was all her. Orion had been too busy detangling the expedition to add this other thing to his plate, but if it was true... if she *was* immune... well, it was unheard of. He couldn’t even begin processing the

possible consequences. To them. To *Colossal*. To humanity. How many others were there?

“The suns are dangerous on Artega Seven,” she began slowly. “It’s a desert planet, and you can’t be out in daylight when the primary sun is out. The atmosphere doesn’t filter out the radiation... It’s too dark at night to forage, and too cold. So we’d go out and do it at the end of the night, when the secondary sun was just about to set, before the primary rose.”

She took a beat, then continued: “He was seven, and I was twelve when one morning we came across a patch of succulents. They’re rare. The fruits are so sweet. We usually just got roots, you know? Dry things. Succulents had water. I was excited and impatient. Hungry. We ate a few there and then picked what we could. But there were so many... only a matter of time before someone else found them.”

Kaia’s eyes shone. “Ahton knew it was getting too early. He said we should leave, but I pushed to keep picking. I said... I told him not to be such a wimp. By the time I realized how late we were, we had to run home for cover. I made it. He tripped twenty feet from shelter. He... got hit with a blast. I... I wanted to run out and grab him, but my parents held me back. Said I’d kill myself. He had to run on his own. Local medicine man diagnosed him a week later, with the first tumor on his neck.”

“Shit, Kaia.” This was so far from what he was expecting. Orion had no idea how to deal with something like that. “You think it’s your fault?”

“It *is* my fault. I delayed us. I left him there. I don’t even know where my parents scraped up the chips to get him Uploaded.”

“He’s Uploaded?” Orion’s brows shot up.

“He was so scared...”

Orion didn’t know what he was supposed to do. Touch her, hug her, something? He rubbed the back of his neck. “And your parents? They’re with him now?”

“We were poor, Orion. It’s a miracle they managed with him. I was... They didn’t tell me what they had to do for it. They died after. Right after the promise.”

She fell quiet, looking away. “What promise?”

But she was done. She shook her head, letting her curls bounce in front of her face to hide the wetness in her eyes. Orion let it go. He wished she’d told him this before, but he didn’t blame her... he didn’t exactly express interest.

Turning his focus back to the more immediate matter of X1s and the upcoming expedition, Orion sensed that he had all the pieces right in front of him and just needed to put them together.

“This guy. Paul Creaton...”

“The archaeologist?”

“Yeah,” Orion slid his palm down his face, stretching out his back after hours of sitting in one place. “I’ve separated the docs into diaries and notes, unreviewed ‘articles’, and peer-reviewed papers. Most of his reviewed work is on uhyre artifacts. But some of these other things—” he motioned to the stack of binders “—are compelling. He goes all the way back to Old Earth and has some theories about colony ship development over the years, with a through-line into *Colossal* specifically.”

Kaia picked up a report from the article pile and flicked through the pages. “But what about X1s itself?”

Orion groaned. “That’s all just notes and scraps. Journals and rambling letters to Mother that don’t make any sense. It must tie in somehow though, if he kept all this shit together.”

Kaia nodded. “Maybe he’s just obsessed with your family. A stalker.”

“Maybe, but... Shit, I’m going cross-eyed trying to figure this out,” he admitted. “I’ve been blowing off handover training for this. What if it’s all useless?”

Kaia looked at him with resolve. “If your gut tells you there’s something there, you should trust it, Orion. I’ve read

about uhyre intuition.”

“You have?” He cocked an eyebrow.

“Of course. Did you think I’d jump into this marriage totally blind?”

“And what did you find?” Orion smiled.

“That you drool a whole lot.” She rolled her eyes. “But also that uhyre had impeccable instincts... some considered it a sixth sense. If you smell something here, it’s probably ‘cause there’s something smelly.”

Orion nodded, oddly reassured by her confidence.

In bed that night, Orion tried again.

“Can I see a vid of your brother?”

“Why?” Kaia looked uncomfortable.

Orion shrugged. “I didn’t realize how big this was until you told me. I want to know more.”

She swallowed, blinking fast. Fuck, was she going to cry again? Orion cut that shit off, cupping her cheek.

“Hey,” he said. “I just want to learn more about you. Your family. Everything.”

She pulled the tablet from under the mattress, glancing at him from the corner of her eye as she scrolled through a list of footage.

“I’ll pick a happy one,” she said, scooting closer to Orion in bed. “He was the happiest person I knew.”

He leaned into her as she propped the tablet between them. The vid was of a young boy sitting on a sandy carpet, and an older girl with disheveled orange curls next to him. Orion felt himself smiling before it even registered.

“You were adorable.”

“Shut up and watch,” she mumbled through a small smile. “I think my mom’s taking this.”

The boy played with a chunk of wood that was thicker than his arm. It must’ve been hollow though, because he swooped it easily through the air with his little hand.

“Prepare for landing,” he was rattling excitedly, “Colony ship *Ahton* has detected a habitable planet. Pshhh pshh.”

He made hissing sounds as he steadied the stick in his hand and lowered it to the floor for a landing approach.

But before colony ship *Ahton* could touch down to the habitable carpet, Kaia swooped in with a stick of her own, smaller and faster, with a pointed end that knocked her brother’s hand out of the way.

“Caw! Caw!” she screeched. “Turns out the world has pterodactyls on it! Colony ship *Ahton*, abort, abort!”

Ahton squealed with delight as their hands sailed around in a flurry, his ship maneuvering to avoid the attacking dinosaurs until the siblings were crawling all around the floor in fits of laughter. A woman’s laugh came from the camera as it was lowered and the footage ended.

“That was disgustingly cute.” Orion snaked an arm around Kaia’s shoulder and pulled her into his side.

“It was not!” She punched him playfully. “It was a serious mission.”

A little quieter, she added, “Ahton loved dreaming about New Earth.”

“He thought it would happen?”

“Said when a colony ship found New Earth one day, they’d come back and save everyone and bring them there, and there’d be no poor people on Artega Seven anymore,” Kaia said with a wry chuckle.

“Kaia, that’s perfect. Now you get to make it happen.”

“What do you mean?”

He stared at her. She could be slow on the uptake sometimes, but damn, had she not considered everything that came with *marrying* him?

“You’re here. It may not be X1s—hell, maybe it will be—but even if not, the sole purpose of this colony is to find New Earth.”

“And coming back for the others? That part of the plan?”

“We can *make* it the plan.”

“Don’t fuck with me, Orion. We both know even if we find something, there’s no way *Colossal* is returning to help the poor little residents of Artega Seven, or any other place. Every colony’s out for themselves.”

Orion touched her chin, guiding her to look at him. “We’re about to run this whole place, Kaia. Not saying it’ll be easy. Shit, we need to find the fucking thing first. But once we do, we can do whatever the hell we want.”

Her brows knotted together as she sat up fast, squaring her shoulders at him. “You have to promise.”

“That we’ll come back for others?”

“That *you’ll* come back. No matter what happens to me, you come back. You have to swear it.”

“What do you think could possibly happen to you?”

“*Promise*,” she demanded.

She stared at him, poised with an intensity he’d rarely seen.

“All right. I promise.”

He gave her what she needed, and just like that, the tension was gone. She smiled and settled on her side with her back to him. Orion closed his eyes, dimming the lights.

A new weight settled over him. The kind he’d been familiar with and should want to dump immediately—the load of yet another commitment. This one he could easily discard. Empty words for a silly request. But something about it felt different this time. It settled inside him with an ease he’d

never felt with any commitment before. Flowed into his lungs as he breathed in her scent beside him. As he drifted off underneath it, Orion decided that this weight would be one he'd gladly carry for her.

CHAPTER 56

KAIA

It had been a week since Orion planted the idea in her head, and it was all she could think about. She'd barely slept thinking about the prospect of fulfilling Ahton's childhood dream, trying not to toss and turn too much in bed so as not to wake Orion and raise his suspicions.

Kaia's memory of her brother's preoccupation with New Earth was one of playtime and pipe dreams. Not something she, or anyone else on Artega Seven, took seriously. Of course not. Why would they? Not only was New Earth unlikely to exist, but who'd come pick up the refuse of the universe and take them to this pristine dream of a planet even if they'd found it?

In her preoccupation to atone for what she'd done and get to Ahton, Kaia had ignored the new doors that opened with her position on *Colossal*. Not just doors to manipulate Orion and get to Heaven, but ones that might make Ahton's dream come true while she was still alive. What would Ahton think of her once he learned that she could've helped find a better world for everyone, and passed up on it for the sake of being rid of this guilt she'd lived with her whole life?

"Stop fidgeting," the hairdresser chastised, shooting her a look in the mirror.

Kaia had been swinging back and forth in the swivel chair, the ball of her foot twitching on the metal footrest. The wedding planner had arranged a cut and "hair test" before the wedding. Kaia looked forward to finally chopping some of it off.

"When will you start cutting?" she asked, watching the hairdresser fuss over her curls in the mirror before her.

"Cutting?" The man's reflection looked confused, the tip of a curl pinched between thumb and forefinger over her head.

"Yeah. To the chin will be fine."

The man looked like she just asked him to launch himself out of an airlock.

“Oh no... no, no, no, we are *not* cutting anything. A trim at most, for the split ends. Any more would be a *crime*.”

“Then why the fuck am I here?” Kaia sighed.

“Have you never had a blowout before?”

“A what?”

The hairdresser had enough. He gave her an exasperated sigh and a pat on the shoulder. “Relax. You’ll understand.”

An hour later, she did understand. She had no idea what weird nice-smelling crap the man worked through her hair. When he came at it with hot air, she got a little worried, but the results spoke for themselves. Her curls were still wild and voluminous, but the way the strands framed her face now looked like it was on *purpose*, and the majority of the mass was held in an elegant bun atop her head with golden pins.

“Art.” The hairdresser complimented his own handiwork.

But though he really did do something magical to what had previously been an unruly mop, Kaia could bring herself to appreciate none of it.

She’d been telling herself that it was all a fantasy, repeating it like a mantra. This whole dream rescue plan was contingent on them even finding New Earth. Kaia could spend decades looking in vain while Ahton languished on his own out there. Maybe it was all just a tempting seduction rooted in her own selfishness, the same selfishness that got Ahton killed in the first place. Was this last-minute desire to stay rooted in some fear of dying, or out of the feelings she’d developed for Orion?

Kaia walked back to the cabin in a turbulent haze, looking forward to downing a shot of caffeine and ditching her next lecture to distract herself in the sim rig. She and Orion had been meant to spar that day, but he’d cancelled. He’d been cancelling a lot, getting increasingly preoccupied with solving the puzzle of X1s. Kaia didn’t mind. She didn’t like what that kind of proximity did to her. Or rather, she didn’t like how

much she liked it. He barely looked up at her when she entered their cabins, poring as usual over papers strewn across the floor.

He'd been looking tired. Two-day-old stubble peppered his jaw, making him look even rougher than usual. Eyes encircled by sleepless shadows scanned up and down the same page, rereading over the same words, over and over.

"Orion..." Kaia filled a shot of water from the dispenser. She pressed the glass into his hand, and for a second he looked like he wasn't going to take it. But then he registered her for the first time and his expression softened.

"Did you do something to your hair?"

"Yeah," Kaia sighed, putting a carton of charred flesh she'd brought for him in the coolbox for later, then kneeled on the floor beside him. She couldn't help it—she still felt that flash of annoyance when she saw him down water in a single careless gulp.

It wasn't just about that though. As he succumbed to the stresses of his research obsession, Kaia had found herself being the one to bring boxes of fries and charred flesh to him in the evenings, or reminding him to come to bed for sleep. The urge to make sure he was okay wasn't one she'd felt with anyone, not even her brother, whose care had fallen on the shoulders of her parents while Kaia wallowed in debilitating guilt.

"How's it look?" She scooted closer to him, gauging his reaction. She relaxed a little when he placed a warm hand on her head, stroking absently. That was a good sign. Kaia relaxed into the casual caress and rested her chin on his knee, trying to steal surreptitious glances at whatever piece of text he was reading.

After a few quiet minutes, Orion unfurled his hunched spine and threw himself against the back of the couch, raking a hand through his hair. He tilted his head up against the backrest.

"Paul Creaton had it all along. The place," he said.

“The place?”

“He didn’t know what he had. Wasn’t a navigator, but worked with them. Had access to all prospective expedition data, since his job was to inspect it for signs of existing high-level life—”

“High-level?” Kaia frowned.

“Intelligent. Humans. Uhyre. Who knows what else is out there?”

Kaia hadn’t thought about that before. The only offworld species humanity had interacted with was the uhyre, and that was a disaster. What if there was something worse?

“These records,” Orion continued, “contain so much more data than the virtual lib. Nav specs, planet details, scans, other expeditions and ship disappearances. Everything. Kaia.” He leaned forward, staring. “I don’t think Paul Creaton knew what he’d gathered. I think I know where to look for New Earth.”

He looked so utterly sure. The conviction in his eyes was doubtless.

And she believed him.

Fuck. She believed *in* him.

“Orion, we have to talk.” Kaia sat back on her haunches. “I need to tell—”

“We will talk.” He stood abruptly, practically throwing her off his knee, and made for the door. “But I have to go tell Mother. Have her recalc for a new destination. We aren’t going to X1s. Not with this.”

Kaia remained sitting there for a long time after he left the cabin, staring at the papers strewn on the floor. She didn’t need to read them. She knew with the entirety of her being that Orion was right. Call it faith in the reported uhyre intuition. Call it trust in all the work he’d put into this. Call it what it was, hanging on her breath as she tried the label on silent lips.

CHAPTER 57

ORION

“Look.” Orion projected the NS scan of the document onto the wall of his mother’s cabin. “Two dozen craft have not come back from this sector over the last two hundred years.”

Mare Halena looked bored. Per Halen, standing behind her as usual, looked amused. Orion scrolled through the data he’d scanned. Paul Creaton didn’t gather his information in neat tables. It was nav and peripheral research thrown together over the years, the threads of it lost to his deteriorating mind.

“Paul Creaton studied Kann Galaxy, in that direction, and detected an anomalous signal.”

“We detect anomalous signals all the time.” Mare Halena rubbed her eyes. “Orion, you’re reaching.”

“That is *not* fucking it, Mother,” Orion growled. How could she be so nonchalant about this? She was sending them on a fool’s errand when the answer was right fucking there. “Missing vessels. A signal. And an artifact.”

“What *artifact*?” Mare Halena sighed.

Orion brought up the numbers.

“What is this?” Per Halen leaned forward, squinting at the table of figures. Orion couldn’t blame his cluelessness for this one—the data didn’t mean anything to most people. He’d barely been able to decipher it himself.

“Subspace resonance detection. Paul Creaton found a way to scan far reaches of space in narrowly defined ranges for subspace signatures. He found one. Organic.” Orion turned to his mother. “Suspected plant matter.”

“Plant matter? In space?” Per Halen laughed. “Orion, this is...”

“You’ve been chasing your tail long enough, Orion. *Subspace resonance detection*? Everyone knows that tech was a dead end. The ships that disappeared weren’t even colonies! They were small station craft—and they followed each other into a black hole because they were desperate.” Mare Halena leaned back, flicking the projection off with a blink. “Focus on your duties, Orion. Having your wedding and putting an heir into that girl. I’m just glad your father will be here to help guide you once I’m gone because you’re clearly not prepared for any of this yourself.”

Orion stood there for a moment, the realization dawning on him as his mother bristled in her seat, uninterested and unsurprised.

She already knew this. Everything he brought her, she’d seen before.

So why was she ignoring it and sending them to X1s anyway?

CHAPTER 58

KAIA

It was the morning of the wedding, and Kaia was fucked.

She'd tried to confess three times over the past week, but it was like Orion didn't want to give her the time of day. It was way too easy to let it be, tell herself she'd do it soon. Soon. Once she could prepare herself for the worst possible outcome: losing this forever.

But even if Orion rejected her, threw her in the brig, or out the airlock, she wasn't prepared to help Loran ruin this anymore. Not when New Earth was finally within reach. Even if it didn't turn out to be hers.

Because he'd promised, and she believed him.

He was avoiding her. At first she thought he was just too preoccupied with his conflict with Mare Halena. She was apparently not receptive to his findings, and Orion was now convinced that she had already known all of this and was covering it up.

And Kaia was pretty sure he was right, but she tried to put the matter into perspective now that she'd gotten some herself. His mother would be Uploaded eventually, and then Orion would do whatever he wanted. He could reroute them to his target sector. Who would stop them?

Orion seemed to hear her, yet still each time she worked up the guts to come clean, he brushed her off as if his goal were to make this difficult.

Luckily, she hadn't heard from Loran after that last flurry of messages. She could tell him after the wedding, or maybe... Kaia looked at herself in the mirror, her hair back in that nice-smelling shiny updo. Maybe she could just forget it and not say anything at all.

No, that wouldn't fucking work. It was still months until the expedition, and she wouldn't put it past Loran to try

something before then. In theory, on *Colossal* she should be unreachable. But she'd sent Loran so much data... He could use it to find another way of ruining this.

Her dress, hair, and makeup took four hours—a stupidly long time, after which Kaia wanted to just call it quits and get the damn wedding over with. There she stood in her repaired crimson gown. She flushed at the memory of her last time wearing it. She wondered how long this version would last.

There were to be fifty people in attendance, though the ceremony itself was to be broadcast across the colony feeds. Kaia's stomach had been oscillating between cramps and flutters all day until she could no longer discern them. She thought she might be sick as the planner prepared to usher her onto the main floor.

Kaia steeled herself at the doors to the main hall. She was ready. Ready as she could be, anyway.

When the doors finally hissed open, her heart plummeted and her blood turned to ice.

Her nightmare stood in the doorway.

“Hello, little sister,” Loran stepped forward to wrap her in a tight hug. Kaia looked over his shoulder at Orion, beaming behind him.

This couldn't be happening. How could this be happening?

“Loran... how did you get here?” Kaia's voice shook as Loran held her at arm's length, looking her up and down. From behind him, Orion didn't see the venom in the warlord's glare.

“I invited him,” Orion said. “I saw the chimes between you on your tablet. Realized you were afraid to ask... You should have some family here.”

“We're not family.”

“I know. But it's the closest to it, right?”

“Right...” That's how they made it sound in their messages.

A small frown creased Orion's features. “Are you happy?”

“What? Yeah, of course. I just... I’m surprised,” Kaia laughed nervously.

Fuck.

What now? Loran snaked his way onto the ship after all. Got his hooks in exactly as she’d feared. And now that he was here, he would have some plan in motion. He was like a pincher on a mech rig. Once he got his hold, he was digging in for the long haul.

“I’ll give you a few minutes to catch up. And Kaia, you look amazing.” The blue fire in his eyes drank her in before he left her with her nightmare. Loran’s greedy smile didn’t fade when they were alone.

“I shouldn’t have doubted you, Scav. Playing the long game, making him think it was his idea,” he said, crossing his arms on his chest.

He thinks I planned this...

“Don’t worry about it.” Kaia played along.

“Well, you pulled it off. For a while there, I thought you were blowing me off, but ya came through, kid.” She flinched when he reached up to stroke her arm affectionately.

“What are you gonna do now?”

Because there was always a plan with Loran. He wouldn’t have just showed up without a scheme. He stepped closer and dipped his head to mutter low in her ear. “Now I’m going to destroy this place and pick it apart for scraps.”

Kaia’s heart lurched to her throat.

“After you’re out of here, of course,” he added as he stepped back, throwing her a cocky wink. “I’m not a *monster*.”

“You know... Now that I’m marrying him, maybe you don’t have to do this. We could milk this. I can get you chips. Plenty for—”

But Loran cut her off with a cluck of his tongue. “Don’t get soft on me now, Scav. We’ve come this far. You wanna see your brother, don’t you? What happens to this place is none of

your concern. Unless..." He lifted a brow. "Have you gotten *attached*?"

"What? No, fuck that." Kaia rolled her eyes, wrestling her voice under control so she could sound like the ruthless little Scav he knew. "Do what you want. I've got a wedding to survive before I die."

Heart pounding, Kaia stalked out on teetering heels, panic constricting under her ribs.

She had to warn Orion.

She'd wanted to tell him. Hoped to catch him out there before the ceremony, but it was too late. As she walked into the hall, rows of people rose to their feet. They waited in awkward silence as she walked down the empty aisle in the middle.

Orion was already there. She was too shocked to appreciate his preparation earlier, but now she had plenty of time, even though her brain was melting with all the ways she fucked up and how she was going to unfuck it. He wore black, towering over them all. And over her too when she came to stand before him. He was nervous too. At least a little. It was in the way he ran a palm over his slicked-back hair haphazardly, a disturbed strand falling in his face. The cyan of his eyes, flooding his dilated pupils, caught her own in that way she could never look away from. But under that entrapment, there was an underlying warmth that she deserved none of.

Kaia didn't hear any of the words the man in front of the altar had recited. All she heard was pounding in her ears as the world closed around her. She wished he'd let her look anywhere but in his eyes, where that warm admiration was making her hate herself. It was a look she didn't think he was capable of when they first met. Back then, he was just a spoiled rich kid being dragged home by his mother.

Except he wasn't. He was protective and determined, and it was obvious he cared about *Colossal* and the people on it.

He was hopeful and believed in the dream of finding the perfect planet to inhabit. He was disciplined, and despite his alien genes, he had more self-control than she'd ever expected.

“Relax, princess,” Orion muttered as he slipped the black meteorite ring on her finger, squeezing her clammy palm.

“I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Was that it? It was over?

It must have been over because people were clapping, and Orion was grabbing her face and planting a kiss on her mouth that she didn't even feel.

“I need to talk to you,” she muttered, but it was too loud all around them. They were already being swarmed—mostly Orion. Was that normal, to converge like this on the husband right after the marriage part, not even giving them a chance to talk?

Kaia glanced around at the smiling faces and her eyes locked with Loran's, who sat in the front row. He smiled too.

She tried to speak with Orion for the next hour, with no luck. When it wasn't a guest demanding his attention, it was, to her dismay, Loran himself. She suspected it soon enough. Loran knew she'd flaked. Kaia was a bad actress, and Loran had known her for longer than Orion did. He'd seen right through her. Now he was keeping Orion away from her.

“You are just so gorgeous. I think this is the best dress I've ever commissioned.” The planner was gushing, picking at the fabric.

Kaia had had enough. This was the fifth time the woman had piped up about her impeccable dress-choosing powers.

“I have to go talk to my husband now.” Kaia brushed past her, pushing through the throng.

She stood on her toes to look for Orion, and it wasn't hard to spot him—he stood heads above everyone else, like a giant alien beacon. Except when she made her way toward him and saw the look on his face as he huddled against the wall with

Loran, her blood ran cold. And when both men looked at her, she was pretty sure it may have frozen over completely.

She forced her feet forward. One over the other. Slowly. Someone had cut in front of her, making a beeline for Orion, but swerved and changed course at the glare on his face.

“Is it true?” Orion’s voice was ice, and his expression a shuttered wall.

“Is what true?”

“Don’t bullshit me, Kaia.”

Loran slouched sheepishly. “Fuck, I’m sorry, I thought... I fucked up. I said something I shouldn’t have.”

He was a much better actor than Kaia, clearly. She gasped when Orion grabbed her arm and yanked her closer, growling in her ear. “Is it true you did all this to goddamn kill yourself?”

“I...”

“Don’t lie to me, princess. Not again.” The flash of something breaking on his face was soon tucked away as he withdrew into himself.

“It’s true, but I realized I didn’t want to hurt you, that I lo...” she cut herself off. It was too late for that now. “Orion, I tried—”

“So when were you gonna do it?”

“Wait, what? No, Loran was—”

She didn’t get the rest out. Orion tightened his grip on her and pushed past Loran, who held both hands up and stepped back as Orion dragged her behind him. Kaia glanced around, wondering if there might be anyone she could signal for help.

Oh, who was she kidding? Of course nobody would help her. To them, this was normal. Their heir was an uhyre. For all they knew, he was just going off to fuck her somewhere, get started on the whole “producing an heir” thing. They watched him drag her away, saw her stumble after him, trying to keep up, but the drunken smiles remained undisturbed on their faces.

Orion hauled her into a passageway and then through an open door, which immediately snapped shut behind them.

It was a large bathroom with several stalls. The huge mirror over a faux-marble countertop reflected sparkling white walls. Orion shoved her against the sink, the edge of it burrowing into her hipbones. A hand landed hard on her back, pressing until her torso was flat against the cold surface.

“Orion, please—” She met his eyes in their reflection, but there was nothing there. Nothing at all.

“I know my own reasons for going into this weren’t exactly *pure*, Kaia, but you’re really a piece of work. I didn’t realize how good of a liar you were.”

She moved to push herself up, but was slammed back down with a decisive shove.

“Stay down, bitch.”

Fabric ripped. This dress was really going through a lot since it met her... The ridiculous thought made her bark out a manic laugh before she clamped her mouth shut. But it was too late.

“This is funny to you, huh? Toying with me? Making me love you just so you can fuck off?”

Kaia knew that word. She’d tried it on the day he found the way to New Earth in their cabin, but never out loud—not even just to herself. Until that day, Kaia had been afraid to so much as think it. But after it, when she’d made her decision, it followed her thoughts like a shadow.

She had no words to make it better because Orion was right. She had fucked with him, buying time, using him every step of the way until the very end. And he didn’t even know the worst of what she’d wrought... Kaia thought back to Loran in the other room, putting his plans into action.

Cool air brushed her flesh when Orion hiked her dress up over her hips. She winced at the sharp burn across her inner thigh as he ripped off the silk black panties underneath.

“Tell me, princess.” He leaned close, the spite in his voice dripping right into her soul. “What were you waiting for? Were you gonna go down to the medbay right after the vows? Or was it after the dinner? What was your plan to make it look like an accident and not an unsanctioned suicide?”

“Orion, I’m sorry, but I wasn’t...” She sobbed, but a twist of bullshit Loran worked into the story didn’t change anything. The core of it was true, and that was all that mattered.

“I hope you don’t think those tears are gonna work in your favor. You know they only turn me on,” He muttered next to her face. Kaia shook her head as best she could. She wasn’t crying for sympathy.

She accepted what she deserved as Orion came back up and unbuckled his belt behind her. Their eyes remained locked in the mirror. She refused to look away. He deserved that much. So they looked at each other as he pressed his cock against her slit. She gripped the sides of the sinks on either side of her for balance and shifted her feet apart for him.

Despite having accepted what was happening, the sterile way he shoved himself inside her was not something she could’ve prepared herself for.

“Look at me,” he commanded, but she couldn’t. She couldn’t do anything but close her eyes and breathe through the pain of his movements.

“I said fucking look at me.” Her eyes flew open, and she obeyed with the smack that landed on her ass.

She didn’t dare close her eyes again as he began fucking her in cold earnest. It was different from the last time she was in this dress. At that time, she asked for it. There was pain, lots of it, but the reward was the way he hungered while delivering it. The pure admiration and need in his eyes back then were a reward she hadn’t expected, but one she found herself enjoying.

None of that existed now. He didn’t take it slow, didn’t ease into it, didn’t control himself. But the ruthlessness was

empty and uncaring. He split her open like she wasn't even there. Like he didn't even want her.

This was better. This she wouldn't miss after.

When her body moistened, it was purely from the mechanics of it, friction inducing secretions that neither of them cared for. But even that was too much pleasure for Orion.

"*You* don't enjoy this," he barked, reaching up to yank her head back and slam her head against the counter, forcing her eyes down. "This is for me."

Her skull ached, but she didn't complain. She could take this. She could even take the friction burns in her breasts and belly as Orion ground himself against her in robotic furor, shoving her up on the counter, then dragging her body backward with him.

"Stay fucking still." He clamped a hand around the back of her neck and kept her in place; that was when Kaia realized she'd been writhing, trying to shift her hips out of the way of the deepening onslaught. The spikes on the underside of his cock dragged against her just the same as before, but she couldn't enjoy their texture.

She didn't think she could take it much longer, especially when Orion grabbed both her hands in one of his own and yanked them behind her, the stretch in her shoulders threatening dislocation. If that happened, would he get her to the medbay after he finished, or just leave her there? And why the fuck wasn't she fighting?

Because I deserve it.

Besides, he could always do whatever he wanted with her. She was his, officially. Unofficially, she was his ever since she stepped foot on *Colossal*.

Orion must have read her mind.

"You were always here to be used like this. You know that, right? Just something for me to fuck." He accentuated each word with a thrust. "Just a reservoir for me to cum in. Plant an heir in you. Fuck you up a little. Right?"

She nodded against the counter. “Yes, Orion.”

“Yes, Orion,” he mocked. “I should’ve done it like this a long time ago. Makes you all submissive and boring so easily. Could’ve saved myself all that trouble.”

It didn’t last much longer, thank God. With a few final thrusts, Orion buried himself in her, locking his hips against her as he ejaculated. Kaia was hard pressed to think of it as an orgasm.

When he was done, Orion pulled out of her mechanically, releasing her screaming arms.

“You know the sad thing, Kaia?” He chuckled as he buckled up.

“Tell me.” She stared at the patterns on the counter underneath her.

“The Heaven network used by colonists is a higher tier than what planetary Uploads get sent to. You wouldn’t have gotten to him anyway. Go try for all I care. Good luck.”

He walked out, leaving her to pick up her pieces.

CHAPTER 59

ORION

He couldn't believe he fell for it.

Orion gathered himself in the hallway and considered if he should return to the ceremonial hall.

Fuck that.

He went the other way, ignoring the barrage of NS comms in his head.

He could live with knowing she only came along for this ride to build a better life for herself. Shit, that was the incentive he used to get her here. But it was supposed to be his idea. When Loran divulged that she had planned to seduce him before they even met for free Upload... He was tempted to go back in there and fuck his anger out on her again.

Orion ripped loose the collar of his shirt. He needed air.

He'd find someone else, of course. Maybe play with the bitch for a while longer and then cast her off like the broken toy she was.

No.

No more Kaia. He wasn't an idiot. He couldn't afford to remain attached, and that was what would happen because she fit. Everything about her fit. The way she wasn't afraid to stand up to anyone, not even him. Her taking his concerns about the expedition seriously, not brushing him off as some kind of clueless heir who waltzed in, trying to feel important. The way she got off on the shit he did to her.

And he had to admit she still showed no signs of exorin addiction, and it was well past due. Maybe she was right—and didn't that make her even more perfect? The only woman in the known universe who could take him and not get fucked in the head.

Orion scoffed. She was already fucked enough all on her own.

But if it was true and she was immune, that made her important. Not for him personally, of course. For research.

But he was still seeing red. Heat cinching at his ribs and clawed up his throat like a spider's legs forcing free. He needed to hurt something else. Orion took the blood passage down to the prison deck.

CHAPTER 60

KAIA

She stayed there for too long, face down on the synthmarble countertop. Her breath left a layer of condensation on its surface. She'd relaxed there, her knees buckling until the counter was the only thing holding her upright.

Everything was numb at first. Eventually, she registered some sensations—first, the aching in her hipbones and shoulders. Then, the searing pain in her shoulders, radiating down the arms. This was followed by the cold of the stone against her skin and the thin fabric of the gown she still wore. The air around her ass and legs, with the dress still hiked around her waist. Then she felt Orion's fluids leaking down her inner thighs. They'd cooled and were now getting sticky and uncomfortable as they dried.

He didn't hurt her as badly as she had expected, but she wasn't done disappointing him yet. Kaia groaned as she pushed herself up, locked limbs protesting. She did the bare minimum to adjust herself in the mirror. There wasn't time for anything more than pulling her ripped dress down, pushing up the straps, and swiping the remaining tears from under her eyes. She looked a mess—everyone would know something happened. Everyone had seen him drag her out of the hall before, and surely rumors had already started.

Right now, it didn't matter.

“Shit,” Kaia wheezed as she stumbled, ankle twisting inward on the ridiculous heels she was still wearing. She pulled them off, collecting them in one hand. She had to find Orion and tell him the rest of the story before Loran destroyed everything. Would he even believe her, or would he think she was just trying to get back at Loran giving away her Upload plans?

She had to try.

When Kaia emerged from the bathroom into the hallway, Alina was already there, waiting for her.

“Are you okay?” she began fussing, touching Kaia right where a welt was blooming on her arm.

“I don’t have time for this,” Kaia brushed past her. “I have to find him.”

A stern, rattling voice down the hall had her look over Alina’s shoulder: “Probably down on the prison deck.”

Mare Halena stood in her floor-length emerald gown, her black hair pinned up with a brushed silver clasp. “Why would you tell me that?” Kaia was suspicious. Mare Halena had hoped Orion would ditch her this whole time, and now she was suddenly giving her tips? The commander rolled her eyes. “It’s much too late for petty drama, scavenger. You both have a job to do now.”

Kaia regarded her. Something was off, but she didn’t have the time or wherewithal to think about it. She bunched her dress up in her free hand and forced her pained limbs into as quick a jog as she could manage toward the elevator.

“Mrs. Halena.” The guard at the front desk gave her a curt nod, his expression betraying only a hint of surprise. Kaia reminded herself that as far as everyone else was concerned, she was the future commander’s spouse now. She had authority, at least until Orion announced her betrayal and cast her out.

“Is he here?”

The guard nodded. “In the reformation room.” A little more gently, he added, “You sure you wanna go in there?”

She wasn’t sure about much, she had no other choice. “Where?”

The guard pointed her off to a door on the left and closed his eyes momentarily. “Just unlocked it for you.”

The “reformation room” was covered in splatters of blood. She smelled it before she even registered it. It reminded her vaguely of the scent of exorin, only this was so, so much worse.

Orion was beating something on the floor, and even though the blood should’ve given it away, it took Kaia too long to realize it was a someone. The prisoner, presumably, was a huge man clutching his stomach, eyes shut as he took a blow to the head. The hit sent another splatter flying from his mouth across the floor, landing at Kaia’s feet. She only saw Orion’s back tensing as he worked. He bent down and grabbed the man’s red-soaked shirt, dragging him up with one hand. The other wound back, elbow cocking for a punch.

“Orion, stop.” Kaia slipped in all that red as she lurched forward. The man’s head made a pained cracking sound against the floor as Orion dropped him. When she wedged herself between them, Orion’s fist was still cocked. “Hit me. I’m the one you’re mad at.”

Teeth bared, he did as she suggested, that fist flying right at her face. It was only when he grabbed her jaw instead that she squinted one eye open. He lifted her off her feet and held her close, spittle flying at her face as he spoke: “You just want me to kill you, princess. Anything for Upload. You know it doesn’t work that way, right?”

“It’s not like that, Orion. What you said before... you were right,” Kaia rushed the words, knowing she had very limited time in which he’d listen—if he was listening at all. “My brother would want me to find it. Find New Earth. I know I lied. It was fucking stupid. I’ll leave. I’ll do whatever you want. But Loran—”

“Loran,” Orion spat. “I guess I know why you didn’t ask me to invite him yourself, huh? Afraid he was gonna spill your dirty little secret?”

He tossed her aside and rounded on her, forgetting the half-dead man on the ground for now. “No.” She struggled to pick herself up off the ground, her shoulders feeling like they were split open. “It’s worse.”

Orion cocked his head, a flicker of something human crossing his expression. “What could be fucking *worse*, Kaia?”

“The plan was his. He’s here to destroy *Colossal*. Destroy it and strip everything. He.... he hates the colonies. He planned for me to seduce you so he could have an in to the ship. It was that or an airlock.”

Orion’s hand slammed against the wall near her head. “What?”

“That’s why I didn’t ask you. I... I was a moron. I didn’t care at first. I was gonna get back to my brother, and he was gonna get whatever he wanted. But your mission isn’t completely batshit crazy, and I...”

“You *what*?” Orion was shaking his head.

Kaia swallowed the lump in her throat, staring at his chest. It was too late for any of that. “Nothing. I get it. You can kill me. Do what you want. But just... Please believe me, you can’t trust Loran. You need to get him off this ship.”

The silence dragged on for an eternity, but eventually Orion moved into action. He threw her over his shoulder with careless ease, pressing on all the fresh pain points. The corridors were a blur until he dumped her unceremoniously on the floor of what used to be their shared cabin. He didn’t say a word as he left her there, locking her in, and Kaia could only hope he would find Loran before any more damage could be done.

CHAPTER 61

ORION

Find the man who arrived from Riker 109 this morning. Bring him to the hold. Contact me when you do, Orion subvocalized instructions to the guard crew. They'd relay it to his mother, of course, but he'd deal with that soon. He was already on his way.

Even as he hastened to the commander's quarters, the black wisps of loathing still tight in his insides. He briefly considered going down to the prison deck to finish what he'd started, but he sensed it would only wind him up further, and he couldn't afford that. Maybe those self-control lessons his mother had him take from the age of three did some good after all.

I realized I didn't want to hurt you.

What did that even mean? The lying bitch suddenly grew a conscience after plotting to have the entire colony destroyed? What changed? Did he convince her he wasn't as much of a monster as he thought?

Except he fucking was. He just managed to rein it in for her sake somehow. Because he realized at some point that he fucking cared. What a waste that was—should've fucked the shit out of her soon as she stepped foot on his ship.

Questions were coming in through his NS, mixed with congratulations from those who hadn't realized anything was wrong yet. Probably thought he and Kaia were fucking somewhere.

Well, that did happen, though this wasn't how he imagined it going. He was going to try to make it good for her. He was gonna try to make it *special*, be all sensitive and loving and shit before lovingly destroying every hole in her body.

Orion adjusted himself through his pants, willing his brain to focus. He *needed* to focus.

The commander's quarters were lit brighter than usual when he walked in to see his mother.

"Where is she?" Orion asked his father, who was sitting on a foam cushion with a glass of something brown. It threw him for a second—Per Halen didn't usually consume alcohol.

"She is resting, Orion."

"In there?" Orion made for the door which led to the master suite.

"Let her be."

When Orion moved to the door, it remained shut. He turned back to his father. "It's important."

"Maybe I can help." Per Halen took a slow sip.

"You can't. It's about the expedition." Orion's father was a convenient pet. He didn't get involved in actual ship business.

"Ah. Did you figure it out yet?"

Orion frowned, trying to puzzle out if his father was talking about X1s or something else. "Figure what out?"

"Why we're going where we're going?"

"I don't have time for this, so either tell me what's going on or fuck off, Father."

Orion was getting sick of this shit. He had an outsider out there trying to destroy his ship, a traitorous whore of a wife locked in his cabins, and about a million questions.

"Do you know the percentage of uhyre genes inside you, Orion?"

"Ten percent."

"Nine point nine to be precise. Do you know how that's possible, keeping in mind it's been over a thousand years since a full-blooded human first reproduced with a full-blooded uhyre to create your line on Old Earth?"

“Is this a math lesson, Father?”

“It’s a survival lesson, son.” Orion had never heard that mocking tone in his father’s voice before. It took him aback. “Most of the uhyre died out with Old Earth, along with the humans there. *Colossal*... well, *Colossal* was built contingent on uhyre DNA. It’s your blood that matters, yes, but the alien part *specifically*. Nothing human about you was incorporated into *Colossal*’s control system. That’s why your familial ancestors had the foresight to freeze uhyre sperm from the original mate and use it to refresh the gene pool for as long as they could. As long as it lasted.”

“Nobody knows what was incorporated into any of the ships’ control systems except for *Ecliptic*,” Orion rolled his eyes. This was also the first time he was hearing of frozen uhyre DNA being incorporated into the bloodline, but he supposed that wasn’t too surprising... he was just a teenager when he was sent to Mars, maybe too young to be taught such things.

“What do you think I’ve been working on this whole time? Do you know how high a percentage of uhyre blood one needs to control this ship?”

Orion balked, shocked into silence. *He’s been working on this?*

“Five percent. Under five percent, there is a high probability that the ship will be uncontrollable. We aren’t yet sure if this is going to be an instant refusal of any direction, or just a slow sputtering into instability and obsolescence. Do you know what that means for your child, Orion, should you manage to even have one?”

If any of this were true, it would mean Orion may be the last heir to retain control of the ship.

“How haven’t the other colonies been worried about this?” Orion asked, numb.

“They have been, of course.” Per raised his brows. “The other colonies run on wholly *human* genes. They can freeze eggs and sperm. They can experiment with relevant human

mutations. They can inbreed. The other colonies have long exercised ways to keep the dilution of their controlling genes to a minimum. *Colossal* hasn't had such luxury."

"And X1s..."

"X1s just might, if we're right, be our saving grace. We have reason to believe it contains a surviving population of your relatives. Full-blooded uhyre relatives who can top up the controlling gene pool."

"Full-blooded... Is Mother completely batshit insane?"

She had to be. The uhyre were monsters. Destroyers. The reason behind the colonies, their mission, their desperate search to replace the planet they'd lost. They were the ones who got humans addicted to them as a strategy. If it was true and they were out there, his mother was about to send them all to their deaths.

"Your mother simply listened to reason, Orion. I take full credit for the strategy. The last piece of the puzzle—" a smile tweaked Per's lips "—was how we were going to work said genes in without at least some of the unfortunate side effects. Addiction really was the kick in the balls back on Old Earth, huh? But I think you may have just provided us with the perfect solution."

"What?"

"We tested Kaia's blood sample in the medbay using your mother's exorin. Seems she's right, and we've found our first ever exorin-immune subject."

"What the fuck are you suggesting?"

Per Halen shook his head. "You can't be so dense, my son. I'm saying we may soon have all the components we need to isolate a sustainable solution for our continued existence. Synthesize a cure for addiction as well as a way to work required genes into the *Colossal* gene pool. But I'm sure we can work through the details later. You should go say goodbye to your mother before it's too late."

The bedroom doors slid open then and Orion rushed in. His mother lay on her deathbed. Orion knew that was what it

was, because it was a full Upload rig. She already had the electrodes attached to her temples. How they got that thing in there from the medbay, he had no idea. But there she was, with Ptolin Geeson by her side.

“Oh, good, Orion.” Her words slurred a little, and Orion noticed the IV in her arm, pushing in the calming chemicals that were already shutting down her body. She placed her hand on the small blood reader cradled in her lap. “It’s time now. Listen to your father. He’s thought everything through.”

The air was sucked from the room, and Orion’s stomach lurched as the ship jerked. He floated into the air with the movement as the lights of the ship flickered around him.

Orion never realized how much sound *Colossal* made until it was gone. As he remained suspended in the air, looking at the ceiling, he heard perfect nothingness. Not even his breath. He knew what this was—the jump. His mother had done it early, taking them out of known space and through a porthole the scouts would’ve been working on for months. Problem with those was, they were one-way trips.

In the next moment, it stopped. The deep humming bass of *Colossal’s* heartbeat returned, reverberating through his bones.

“Shit,” he swore as the gravity turned back on and he crashed to the floor. He scrambled to his feet, glancing at the rig. She was dead, but he didn’t even need to see her to know it. The chime echoing through the ship was one of the first things any kid on *Colossal* learned to recognize. The gentle, eerie pulsation in his ears accompanied recurring notifications in his visual overlay.

The commander was gone. There was a new commander now.

“You’re needed at the command center,” his father called to him as Orion bolted past him.

“Fuck off.”

Orion ignored the confused people he ran into on the way back to his suite. The ship was trying to stabilize with intermittent whole-body quakes, making him stumble and

crash against the walls as he bolted down the main hall. He should be running the other way, to the command center. He should be assuming control of the ship. But his feet only seemed to point in one direction—back to his cabins, where Kaia was trapped and probably terrified.

When he opened the door he saw that she was definitely trapped, and she was definitely terrified.

She crouched in the corner, clutching her wedding dress to her chest. Wild eyes focused on the man advancing on her with a knife glinting in his hand. Loran. His head jerked to the side, glancing at Orion behind him. The next moments were a blur of haphazard movement. Both Loran and Orion lunged forward at the same time, and Orion missed grabbing the fucker's arm by barely an inch. Kaia was already screaming, and Loran was already twisting the knife in her ribs.

His chest constricted with those black claws that he had only just managed to banish. His vision blurred on the edges. Orion didn't even feel himself doing it, but the next thing he knew, he was pummeling Loran's face into the ground. He wasn't sure if the red he was seeing was the fury in his vision, or Loran's blood, or the blood of Kaia, who he saw slump to her knees, gripping the hilt of the knife in her chest.

It didn't take long. Loran probably tried to fight back, but if so Orion didn't feel it. He didn't waste any time here, like he had with the prisoner. He grabbed Loran's head in both hands, hoisting it up. When he slammed it back down, it collided against the floor with a satisfying crunch. To be sure, Orion twisted the bloodied head into an unnatural angle until he felt a snap deep in Loran's neck.

When Orion turned to Kaia, she had collapsed to the ground in a heap of limbs and blood. He lifted her as carefully as his body would let him, being sure not to jostle the knife still protruding from her ribs. He ducked into a blood passage, leaving a trail of blood behind him as he rushed her up to the medbay.

Orion, the ship needs to be stabilized. We need you in the command center immediately. A subvoc came through from

his mother's... well, now his lead navigator.

Handle it without me.

We physically cannot. We need your auth.

Orion spat a string of expletives even as he barged into the medbay, yelling for staff. He was directed to lower Kaia onto a stretcher, following the throng of white-coated physicians who crowded around her and wheeled her into what the door claimed to be an operating room.

The ship jerked again with a series of violent shudders, sending equipment flying into walls. One of the doctors bent over Kaia's body, shielding her from the debris.

“Can you stop it?” the doctor yelled at Orion.

And fuck it, he was the only one who could.

“If she's not alive by the time I get back, I am going to murder every one of you.”

“Yes, but if... in the worst case...” a woman asked quietly.

“There is no goddamn worst case.”

“In the worst case, should we Upload, sir?” she pressed, a hint of agitation in her voice.

Orion's blood ran cold. It was an idiotic question because she wouldn't fucking die.

“Yes,” he barked, then raced to the command center.

CHAPTER 62

KAIA

Orion was shaking her to death. Ahton was there, too, but he wasn't grasping for her like he was in prior dreams over the years. He was just watching Orion shaking her so hard that her teeth rattled.

Kaia peeled her eyes open and saw nothing but lights and shadows moving in front of her, so she closed them again. At least the shaking had stopped, sort of. Someone screamed in the distance. Then there was another series of rough, full-body jerks. A shadow bent over her. Voices she couldn't decipher drifted in and out before everything faded out.

When she next woke, Kaia looked around. She followed a thin tube from her arm to the plastic bag hanging at the side of the bed. Hushed voices reached her ears.

"We're fucked," a male voice was saying. "He's there, but he's not *there*."

"How many times has it been?"

"Twelve. In the last two hours. I don't know how he's meant to stabilize anything like this."

Kaia groaned as the ship keeled, throwing her into a barrier locked at the bedside. Her shoulder collided with it, ripping a scream from her throat.

Footsteps approached.

Apparently Kaia had only been passed out for a few hours. The doctors filled her in on the gist of the situation as they prodded the IVs in her arms and skinsilks on her wounds. Mare Halena was dead. She jumped them before she died. Orion was the commander now, tasked with stabilizing *Colossal* after the jump. Except instead of doing that, he was

spiraling, distracted with angrily checking if Kaia was dead yet.

“May have been easier if you’d died. At least then he’d know you were in Heaven,” the female doctor blurted out as the ship rattled again. She covered her mouth, wide eyes fixing on Kaia. “I... I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Kaia said. “He wouldn’t have let me get to Heaven.”

The doctor shook her head. “He told us to Upload you if you died.”

Kaia’s mouth hung open. After what she’d done, she had fully considered her chances of being Uploaded on *Colossal* to be nil. Did he just want her Uploaded so he could torment her some more in their future?

“Well, tell him I’m fine.”

“We just did. Let’s just say he didn’t seem comforted. This man is going to kill us all.”

Kaia began to push herself off the bed, pain shooting through her plastered rib. That wasn’t what made her freeze and look down at herself though.

“I can’t move my arm.”

“Dislocation and nerve damage.”

“From the knife?”

“From the rest of the assault.” She pressed Kaia back into the bed. “You’re in no condition to go anywhere, Mrs. Halena. Once power’s fully restored, we can get you into the regenerator, but for now you need to stay put.”

The rest of the assault.

They thought Orion did this to her, stabbing and all. Kaia’s mouth went dry as she looked down at herself, spotting blue and red welts peeking from under her hospital gown.

“This... The knife wasn’t him,” she said.

“Okay.”

“It *wasn't*,” Kaia insisted at the skeptical look on the woman’s face.

She glanced at her wrist. Her comms bracelet was gone. She had to talk to him.

“Get me...” she began to ask for a comms line but stopped short.

Orion was fixated to the point of severe distraction. Not only that, but he also told them to Upload her if Loran had killed her. He obviously wasn't in his right mind. And now he was all alone up there, figuring out how to pilot a fucking colony ship months earlier than expected because his mother decided to screw them all over. Hearing that Kaia was fine wouldn't be enough, not even in her own *voice*. Not for what she needed to say.

Kaia felt sick even thinking about it.

“Implant a Neurosync.”

“Now?” the male doctor asked, giving his companion an exasperated scowl as another violent tremor rocked the ship. They didn't understand. The lights flickered and hissed overhead. Only half of them came back on.

“Just fucking do it.”

CHAPTER 63

ORION

Power outage on the prison deck, the subvoc came through as high prio among incessant chatter of compromised systems. All the humans through which the artificial alerts were filtered sat within the command center, but the space itself was silent save for the occasional curse. The tension was distinct, and it was making Orion see red.

He was plugged in for the first time. He had to be—the frequency of his commands was such that slamming his palm on a gene reader each time he needed authorization would be untenable. Instead, he had a sampler plugged into a newly installed socket at his inner wrist in, collecting a thin flow of blood on a continuous basis.

Reroute CRD power to prison deck.

Better to leave the residents in the dark for a while than have prisoners on the loose.

Power outage in grain store.

God fucking damn it.

“Stats on grain store hull damage,” Orion demanded out loud.

“We’ve got techs working on it, but generator won’t last long. They need to get plugged in.”

Extra units to prison deck, reroute power from command deck residential sector to grain store.

Orion was reminded *why* he wanted nothing to do with *Colossal*. The ship was dying. If his mother were here, she’d know what to do. She’d been through enough jumps to know all the systems like the back of her hand. He was fresh blood in a ship that was used to being run in a very specific way.

“Power in medbay,” he queried.

“Eighty percent. Life support functional, but regen and Upload compromised.”

Shit.

Orion fought to focus, but it was useless. He ripped the sampler from his hand, droplets of blood spraying the air as the cable fell to the side. All eyes turned to him as he pinched the bridge of his nose, massaging at the inner corners of his eyes.

Prio Five transmission from medbay. Emote requested.

There was only one thing this could be about. They wouldn't push through a Prio Five now with emote if the situation hadn't gotten much worse. Kaia was dead. They were all fucking dead. He killed them.

Orion closed his eyes, slumping back in his seat. And the last thing he'd done was fuck her and call her a whore. That would be her last memory besides getting viciously stabbed by the man *he* invited onto the ship. Another round of tremors jostled the ship.

“Did Upload succeed?” He didn't bother subvocalizing it, hearing his own voice as though detached. Cool and collected, just the way he should be.

There was a beat of silence on the other end, followed by a rush of emotion that slammed him back in his seat. It was everything rolled into one: fear, ache, want. What the fuck was this?

Orion. C-can you hear me?

His eyes snapped open.

“Kaia?”

Yeah, it's me. Still here.

He tasted her uncertainty, transmitted straight from her prefrontal cortex into his own. It was followed by another burst of everything all at once, sending him reeling.

You got an NS. His stomach lurched in that way that had only ever happened with her—a sensation he thought he'd

never experience again after.

Yeah. Look, Orion... The uncertain voice grew more familiarly snippy.

“That’s my princess,” he thought.

You’ve got more important shit to do than harass medbay about me. We can deal with our shit later. Focus on keeping everyone on this ship as alive as I am right now. Forget about me, and I swear I’ll still be here for you to throw me out or space me or whatever after. Understand?

Space her? She thought he wanted to space her?

But the scattered cogs in his brain started to click back into place at her instruction. Now that he knew Kaia was not only fine but communicating, he could push her to the back of his mind. She’d still hate him after what he did. And he still fucking felt her betrayal like a knife in his back. But she was speaking to him. *Feeling* with him.

Orion grabbed the sampler and shoved it back into the freshly installed socket in his hand, wincing before the device began excreting its anesthetic.

Power maps up and get me a scan of immediate topology.

CHAPTER 64

KAIA

Kaia had fallen back asleep soon after getting through to Orion, worn out from the blaring sirens, each shake of the ship feeling like another stab in the ribs. On top of that, the panic of having a wormy little Neurosync shoved up her nose to twist its way into her brain drained what was left of her energy.

It wasn't just the initial fear of it that exhausted her, but the way it messed with her mind once it was in. Most of the functions would take time to propagate, but already she felt the strange ways the NS affected her perception. It sharpened her vision—or rather, her brain's interpretation of the images reaching her brain. And the emote connection with Orion was exhausting in its fidelity. She spoke out loud, assured by the doctors that his own NS would replicate her voice in his primary auditory cortex. The connection between their implants created a sort of magnetic link inside her skull that, by the end of it, utterly exhausted her. They said he'd feel her emotions, but she didn't feel anything back. Apparently that function hadn't finished calibrating yet.

A few times, the edges of sleep blurred enough for her to feel a hand brush across her cheek or touch her own. Her fingers curled around that warmth.

When she woke, she kept her eyes closed. There was something warm molded to her limbs, but when she gave her foot an experimental shift, there wasn't much resistance. It felt as though she were submerged up to her temples in the stuff, the edges of it clinging to the delicate skin there. Kaia took a beat before trying the thing she was most afraid of—a tentative twitch of her right index finger. Unsure if it worked in the thick substance around her, she braced herself and flexed her hand, scrunching the material between her fingers like some sort of goo.

Kaia exhaled, relieved that her arm seemed to be functioning. With that settled, she took stock of the rest of her body. Contracting and relaxing her muscles one by one, experimenting with drawing air deep in her chest to get a sense of the stab wound between her ribs or the bruising in her shoulder blades from when Orion had...

She didn't want to think about specifics.

There was no pain that Kaia could discern. Unsure if she was just still numb from sleep, Kaia didn't get too comfortable yet. Not until she opened her eyes in the darkness and sat up in a tub of viscous goo. It was cold out there, and part of her wanted to dip back under. But before she could, she noticed jagged outlines of shapes around her.

Was she still dreaming? She scanned the space, watching the faint orange edges of the walls and door hover in her vision. This was followed by more details, like the shape of a cart with a series of roughly outlined tools on top.

Kaia realized it was her new Neurosync kicking into gear, aiding her night vision. The effect faded as the bath-like chamber she was sitting in began to emanate a warm orange glow, illuminating the room.

Kaia looked down at herself. The blue substance of the regeneration chamber—she'd already deduced that's what it was—clung to her nude body, leaving a slick sheen and a few sticky pieces as it slid back into the larger mass of the pool. She twisted to look for the wound on her right side, running her palm over her ribs. There was nothing there. She flexed the wrist of her right hand, then the arm that she couldn't feel nor move when she first woke up in the medbay.

Good as new.

She would at least be in decent shape to work down in the bowels of *Colossal*. She was pretty sure now that Orion wouldn't want to space her. After all, he'd instructed the medical staff to Upload her if she died. But now that they'd jumped, she was also stranded here for the duration of the expedition, so he couldn't just send her off the ship either.

She could still stay out of his way though. Orion rarely went down to the CRD. She could disappear there. With time, maybe people would even forget who she was supposed to be. It was fortunate that Orion deemed it worthwhile to regenerate her. She could find a job and make her way down there until they were back in habitable space with more options. If they ever made it back.

She could do this. One step at a time. The dreadful pressure in her chest was becoming difficult to ignore as her plans solidified. She was losing the closest thing to love she'd felt since blowing up her family, and it was all her own damn fault.

Get your shit together.

All Kaia had to do now was get out of Orion's hair and let him focus on his job. She'd figure out the rest later.

With the semblance of a plan, she stood and stepped out of the regen bath, goosebumps tingling as her bare feet hit the tiled floor. She flapped her arms a few times, throwing some of the remaining globs of goo off her limbs as best she could.

Maybe she would find a set of clothes and just leave quietly. She was scanning her surroundings for options when the door hissed open behind her. Kaia didn't need to turn around to know who it was, because something in her brain recognized Orion's presence immediately.

It took her a long time to turn around without falling on her ass with the slick blue goo she'd spread along the floor in her shuffling, but she was finally facing him.

He looked like shit.

That was her first impression, anyway. She didn't get a chance to figure out what she should say to him because he was already closing the distance between them and pulling her into a bone-crushing embrace.

"You're not going anywhere," he said into her neck.

"What?"

“I heard you.” His arms tightened, and Kaia had to force herself to focus on what he just said instead of the hard warmth of his body pressed against the full length of her.

“You heard me *thinking*?” She frowned, trying to pull away, but he jerked her back in place against his chest.

“You’re not used to the NS yet. Newbies are prone to accidental broadcasting,” he explained.

Shit. He heard all that?

“Pretty much.”

“Get out of my head.” This time, he did let her step back. How much had he gotten from what were meant to be internal thoughts?

“I love you too, Kaia,” he said. “I want you to stay.”

“Orion, I just schemed to use you for—”

“The whole time you were under, I was so fucking scared you wouldn’t make it. That you’d hate me when you died.”

The crack in his voice broke her, and Kaia was shaking her head before he even finished speaking. “Is that why you told them to Upload me? You felt guilty?”

“Mostly I just felt selfish.” He shrugged. “I wanted to be able to find you again.”

Kaia swallowed the lump in her throat. “I was lying to you the entire time, Orion. How can we ever do this again? How could you ever trust me? And how... how could I ever trust you not to kill me if I screw up again?”

Orion cocked an eyebrow. “Planning any more long-term suicide attempts?”

“No, but—”

“What about your brother?” Orion’s eyes searched hers, pinging between them.

“When he died, I swore I’d find a way to Upload and be with him someday. I just imagine him all alone out there, because of me. I wanted to do it as soon as I could. It was so

fucking selfish.” Kaia wavered. “Finding New Earth and escaping the hellhole of Artega Seven was Ahton’s dream. He’d *want* me to do it. Find a way to help the others left there too. Hell, he’d want me to help *everyone* living like we were. I think part of me always knew that. I’ve just been ignoring it since it seemed so unobtainable. So much harder than just dying. But *you* can find it, Orion, I know it. I just don’t know that it can be with me.”

“Look.” Orion pressed both hands firmly on her shoulders, halting the protest rising on her lips. “I get what you did now, and why. Doesn’t mean it doesn’t fucking destroy me every time I think about it. But you tried to tell me. I kept brushing you off because I was preoccupied. We have a lot of shit to work through here. We both know how to twist a good knife in each other, but I was the one who hurt you the most. That regen chamber... That wasn’t all for what Loran did. Can *you* ever forgive that?”

Kaia returned the look he’d given her earlier. “Planning any more violent outbursts?”

He clenched his jaw, not indulging the joke that really wasn’t one. “I... You know what I am, Kaia. Being with me is never going to be without certain pain points. But I guarantee it won’t be like *that* again. I won’t let myself be like that again.”

There was sincerity in his eyes, and nothing inside her could find a hint of doubt to latch on to.

“On top of all that,” he continued, “we’re in the middle of goddamn nowhere, having just forcefully embarked on what may be a suicide mission. I don’t want to do it without you, Kaia. I don’t think I can. Can you?”

Kaia brought a hand to his chest, nervous fingers picking at a thread in his synthleather suit. She realized the most painful thing that had happened since their wedding was the thought of destroying this twisted thing they’d built. Like no one else, Orion understood her, and she thought she understood him, too. He put himself on full display for her; unapologetic, raw, sometimes brutal. She didn’t yet know how

much of Orion stemmed from his fucked-up upbringing and how much was his uhyre blood, but suspected it was more of the former than he would admit... Maybe more than he even knew.

“I don’t want to do it without you either,” she said.

They stared at each other, seeing each other for the first time in this new light. His fingers whispered from her collarbone along the line of her goo-slick throat, trailing goosebumps in their wake. His eyes followed their path, pausing at the pulse point stuttering at the side of her neck. That was the spot he kissed first, pulling her wet hair aside to make space for his lips. By the time the heat of his breath was at her mouth, each nerve was hypersensitized, waiting for that contact.

Kaia shifted up on her toes, closing the minuscule buffer of space between them.

As soon as their lips connected, sparks bloomed behind her eyes, the rush of it making her dizzy. It was the Neurosync, she realized, heightening positive sensations as it scanned her brain millions of times per second and calculated her ideal operating state.

“Can you feel it?” Orion rasped, nipping gently at her lower lip before returning to luxurious exploration of her mouth with his tongue.

“Yeah,” Kaia gasped, blinking through the kiss as it thrummed through her with a heady undercurrent. She recognized that she should find it disturbing, having an artificial implant manipulating her senses like that. It just seemed so unimportant in the moment compared to the way her skin tightened under his touch. The implant’s work felt so natural. It wasn’t creating sensations that weren’t already there, but heightening existing senses in the most delicious way.

Orion lowered them both to their knees on the floor, his hold on her firm lest she slip in the regen fluid that still coated her skin. He shucked off his suit and undershirt until his torso

was bare. Kaia reached up to trace a familiar line from the underside of his chin down the side of his neck.

“It’s still there,” she mumbled, looking at the faint pink slash that marked the path of her knife weeks ago. “I didn’t think it’d scar.”

“I’m glad it did. I want your mark on me.”

Orion leaned forward, fingers splayed on Kaia’s slippery back as he pulled her towards him. His head dipped to her breast, and she sighed as his mouth grazed her nipple, then latched on to suck the delicate flesh. She tensed when she heard his hands on his belt. Kaia got a taste of what sex with Orion would be like, and she knew to expect the most delicious pain. She was healed and ready for him. But just then, she wished they’d keep this tenderness between them for a little while longer.

The delicate way with which he lapped at one nipple, then the other, and the softness in his hands as he slid them up her thighs surprised her. She had forgotten he could read her mind.

Even when Orion was restraining himself before, there was always a thread threatening to snap. Now his hands weren’t shaking. His eyes, when he looked up at her from his ministrations of her breasts, looked soft. Instead, it was her hand that trembled as she cupped the back of his neck, caressing the sloped spikes there. Kaia tested running a palm down the ladder of his abs, then along the length of his exposed shaft. The spikes at the base and underside were already hard, beading exorin onto her fingers.

He groaned against her breast, the sound of his satisfaction making her core clench. Kaia didn’t want to wait anymore. She gripped his shoulders and scooted closer. They slipped a little against each other as the regen gel rubbed off on him, but he held her firm as she straddled his kneeling lap. She wanted to take him now, before the aggression in his blood took over. She wanted to feel him inside her while he held her just like this, like she was porcelain.

Kaia tipped her forehead against his as she lowered herself on his shaft. She watched his eyes. Any second now, they’d

harden. Any second, he'd force her to her back and fuck her just like he wanted. Hell, she'd want it too, when it came to that. He might hurt her again, but at least they were right next to the regen pod.

She was frozen atop him, craving his friction, but afraid to move.

"I'm scared," she confessed, searching his eyes.

Orion cupped the back of her head.

"I'm scared too. But I don't feel that part of me taking over." His hold on her remained soft. The muscles of his thighs flexed beneath her, creating a bit of movement that made her squeeze around him. He closed his eyes, bending his head to her shoulder. "Right now, I just want to savor this."

Kaia rolled her hips slowly. He emitted a strained sound and his fingers tightened on her back, his other hand gliding up her side. She unfolded her legs for a better brace on his lap. Sensing the adjustment, Orion shifted his hands to her hips, stabilizing her atop him.

"Stay with me," she pleaded as she rolled her hips again, building a slow, deep rhythm. "For as long as you can."

Orion nodded. "I can feel what you need now. It... helps to alleviate the impulse."

He stayed still, aside from providing the support she needed to move against him. Her back arched as she took him deeper, her own restraint threatening to slip. She saw no tension in his face, and it gave her the courage to lean in and kiss him, feel his tongue against hers. He moved his hands up her back, pulling her closer.

Kaia broke the kiss to take in the sight of him inside her. Their hips came together as she moved, the ledges of his abs taut as he maintained their balance on his knees. His shaft was coated in exorin mixed with her own milky fluids.

She'd never had sex like this before. With love bubbling like a physical thing between their bodies. She couldn't tell where the effects of the Neurosync ended and her heart began. It made her expand past the boundaries of her body. Sex had

always been rough, always. She liked that most of the time. This time, all Kaia wanted was this.

Still looking down, Kaia frowned at the trace of pink she noticed glistening on Orion's shaft as she pulled her hips back for another thrust. Was that...

"Blood," Orion finished the thought for her. Kaia glanced at him, confused. He hadn't hurt her. She didn't even feel anything.

It finally dawned on her. After all these years, she had to get her period *now*?

Kaia was mortified, hitching her hips to a sudden stop.

She didn't realize she'd subvocalized it until it was too late.

Hey. He cupped her face, thumbs stroking along her cheeks. She couldn't meet his eyes at first, but he gave her a little nudge, speaking out loud this time. "Hey, look at me."

A small smile played on his lips as he leaned forward to press a kiss to her forehead.

"Don't you know what this means?" Orion allowed himself a little push of the hips, urging her back into careful motion. "We can make a fucking baby."

Kaia froze at the prospect. She hadn't thought she'd be *alive* to go through with a pregnancy. But now she was, and it was terrifying. She tried to hide her trepidation, but her NS skills were still shit.

"Don't worry," Orion insisted. "It's too early to worry about that. We have hundreds of years to figure this out. There's nothing to rush here."

"But it's my job," Kaia stumbled. "It's like... my only job."

"Your job right now," he wiped a silver smudge from her chin, "is to find New Earth with me. And to make it a great fucking adventure."

She wasn't scared anymore when he took over, lowering her to her back on the floor. Whatever happened, Orion wouldn't hurt her—at least not in any way that mattered. Sparks ignited her skin and the air between them as they moved. When the orgasm finally exploded from her belly, her pleasure was like a mirror reflecting into him along the thread of their link, triggering his own release.

CHAPTER 65

ORION

It had been another all-nighter. By the time Orion showered and came to bed after having scrubbed the crusted blood from his port, he could barely stay awake.

He should have been used to it by now.

“Morning.” Kaia stood in the doorway of the master suite, failing to suppress a bleary yawn. She pulled the heavy blanket tighter around herself, hiding the curve of a bare breast from the chill underneath.

“Go back to sleep,” he said, eyeing the steaming box sitting open on the table. Orion thought she’d get sick of waiting up for him every night, but it had been almost two years and she still had dinner—or breakfast—awaiting him every time.

Kaia shuffled to the table and perched on a wooden stool that had to be older than any human alive today. Such were the antiques that came with the commander’s suite. A bare knee poked out of her cocoon as she propped a foot on the rung.

She looked at him. Waiting.

Orion sighed and took his place across from her, pulling the warm box closer. The sight and smell of sizzling steak, nestled next to a generous mound of fries, made his mouth water.

“Thanks, princess,” he said as he dug into the meal.

“Don’t call me that,” Kaia’s mouth quirked up, compromising the impact of her frown. “Any luck?”

“Not yet,” Orion mumbled through a succulent mouthful of meat.

He’d been in the lab with his head biomechanic all night, running tests on the latest trial batch of gene variants. Their experiments making *Colossal’s* control system more sensitive

to lower compositions of Orion's uhyre genes had yielded no results so far.

"I'm not worried," Kaia shrugged.

He knew she wasn't. Kaia had complete faith in Orion's theory of New Earth's location, and so as far as she was concerned, it didn't matter that Orion may be the last to control *Colossal*. If it were up to him, they'd have been well on their way to the Kann Galaxy by now, searching for what had to be there. Instead, they were two days from entering the territory of X1s.

If he could have, Orion would've aborted this entire mission two years ago. He'd tried, attempting to divert the ship to a safe location within the confines of the known universe until they could prep to set off for Kann.

Unfortunately, Orion's mother had found a way to prime the ship with instructions Orion couldn't override even after her death. In theory, that shouldn't have been possible. But Ptolin Geeson found a way. Ptolin Geeson now resided in the brig for his interference in a colony's chain of command. Orion had intended to space him, but Kaia had made a convincing enough point that they may still need him someday.

Colossal would do anything he said, except for change its present course.

But once they entered the boundary of X1s, Mare Halena's instructions would be obsolete and it would all be over. That was the plan. Turn around and never look back. The waste of it all was maddening. All the stockpiles they'd chewed through for nothing. Worse than nothing: the possibility of stepping into an uhyre nest. Orion wasn't convinced it was even there, but no way was he taking the risk.

Once they got out of there, regrouped, and made their journey to Kann to find their real home, the gene dilution problem would be a nonissue. They wouldn't need *Colossal* anymore after his lifetime, which it would spend the remainder of as a transport vessel for planetside refugees. Kaia had

worked on a plan for that while he was busy running the ship, and she'd had two years to make it a fucking good one.

“Hey.” Kaia reaching for his hand atop the table brought him back. “We’re almost home free.”

Orion nodded, wishing he could be as confident in himself as she was. So much had changed since they first met. The crude little scavenger who didn't trust Orion far as she could throw him had turned into an unflappable force of nature. She seemed to have redirected all her energy and fight to making shit happen, planning their mission to Kann, and managing him in the process. Orion finished the last bite of his steak appreciatively and proceeded to down the fries soon after in easy silence.

When he was done, Kaia rose and held out her hand, expectant. He took it. She led him to the master suite. Orion discarded the towel around his waist and got in bed, sinking into the pleasant foam. His eyes were already closing, head already drifting as the weight of her leg sprawled across his stomach. Kaia pressed her length against his side, molding herself tightly against him. Finally her cheek nestled in the crook of his shoulder, and warm breath puffed against his neck.

Two more days. Two days and they'd be beginning their two-year journey back into known space. It would be a year after that before they could make another jump, but what was another three years when New Earth was on the other side? Humanity had waited for millennia already. And he had Kaia to wait with. Waiting with her would be fun. Despite his exhaustion, Orion stirred at the thought.

Tomorrow. Kaia chuckled through the subvoc, transmitting a brief image of a blood passage they'd recently discovered. It had become a favorite for its labyrinth twists interspersed with long, narrow stretches. Twisty enough to hide, long enough to run and to chase.

Orion grunted his approval and turned to his side, wrapping his arms around her to pull her into a sleepy embrace. He slept better with the bundle of her body against

him, their limbs intertwined and their brains pinging warm goodnights and whispered affections.

Good night. Kaia pressed a kiss to the faint white line at the side of his neck, nuzzling closer beneath the lazy stroking of his hand.

Orion sat in the command center, watching the nav scans projected onto the hull. Kaia was in her co-pilot's seat next to him, absently stroking along the veins in his forearm. He was plugged in, staring at the output of the debris scans that were just beginning to come in.

They were about to enter X1s, and Orion was ready to finally turn this ship around. Per Halen was already locked in his quarters to ensure minimal interference.

Two minutes from X1s entry, the lead navigator's subvoc alerted him.

Orion looked over at Kaia. She returned his nod.

Focus, she nudged him.

Orion focused.

One minute from X1s entry.

Orion worked out the tension in his shoulders, rolling them against the padded backrest.

Strap in, he instructed. Kaia's harness clipped across her ribs as she complied, followed by the clicks of others throughout the command center.

Three... two... one...

"Max turn to starboard," Orion instructed. The ship registered his words, and he was already plugged in, so when navigation made the relevant adjustment *Colossal* should have listened. Orion held his breath, braced for the possibility of another rejection of instruction due to Mother's fuckery.

The jerk of his belt against his left side told him it worked before the navigators did.

“Thank fuck,” Orion exhaled, running a hand down his face. They were turning. Due to *Colossal’s* size, it would take close to five minutes—four minutes, fifty-seven seconds to be exact—to finish its arc and be back in intergalactic space. They were home free, finally free of his parents’ schemes.

They waited.

Three minutes till we’re out, Nav updated.

Kaia grinned from ear to ear, making Orion lean over to kiss her cheek because it was impossible not to when she looked that goddamn happy. The last two years with her had been something else, despite all the shit going on around them. She was the only thing that kept him sane and prevented him from killing everyone and anyone involved in this stupid X1s plan.

Two minutes until we’re... wait. Radar check.

Hushed voices rose as the departments congregated.

“Unknown-class vessel approaching, distance two hundred miles and closing,” the navigator announced.

“Weapons ready,” Orion instructed.

“Roger.”

“Comms coming through.” The officer on comms swiveled toward him, waiting.

Orion’s mind raced with who—or what—might be on the other end of that line.

“Wait... sir, it’s the *Elysian*. The ship is *Elysian!*”

Dread became elation that was reflected in the excited murmurs all around him. *Elysian* was intact? Could they have found what they were looking for, here of all places? Had they been settling a New Earth all these years? Why else hadn’t they returned?

“Put them through.” Orion edged forward in his seat.

“Yes, sir,” Comms acknowledged with a beaming smile.

It was the comms officer that screamed first when the transmission beamed onto the hull. Kaia recoiled in her seat, terror flooding his feed. It was justified.

It was a man, but only barely. The body was suspended from the ceiling in what looked to be *Elysian's* command center. A sampler stretched from the socket in its wrist, a glob of dried blood crusted thickly at the entry point. Cylinders attached to moving pumps expanded and contracted the body's skeletal chest cavity, and countless thin IV tubes extended like spiderwebs from every inch of what used to be the colony's commander.

Then a monster came into view.

“*Colossal*,” the uhyre rattled a guttural sound in deep, broken Universal. “We have been waiting.”

Thank you for reading *Colossal*. I invite you to join my newsletter to receive an **exclusive steamy bonus scene** featuring Kaia and Orion.

<https://alexandranorton.com/colossal-bonus/>

For a sneak peek of the next book, turn to the next page.

THREXIN

[SNEAK PEEK]

The reclamation of the ship did not take long. Once they destroyed the enemy's combat fighters with their own planetary missiles and satellite nukes, it was only a matter of maneuvering around the ship's mounted projectiles and searing a speedy but careful opening in its hull to accommodate a pressurized passage tube.

It took much longer to do so with this ship than it had with *Elssian*, Threxin acknowledged with some pride. In fact, this ship as a whole looked much more impressive. It was a massive and practical black behemoth, with no effort spent on appearances and all of it spent on defenses, however useless against his efforts.

Just at that time, his *Clossal* objected to being underestimated by landing a hit on their transport vessel.

"Shoq," his brother swore next to him, adjusting to keep the transport steady as the mechanic in the back did his work.

Threxin rose and made for the tail of the craft just in time to watch his two suited females of his cohort, latched to the ship's exterior, push the seared hull inward. As expected, the humans had blasted oxygen from the part of the ship Threxin had been targeting.

The others were already attaching the boarding tube to the opening, applying a transparent seal to the open gash. Threxin secured his helmet. Renza came out of the cockpit, already prepared. They exchanged raised chins over the heads of the others. Finally Threxin entered the boarding tube and, once on the other side, pushed through the seal to enter the ship.

The space appeared to be a large storage area, filled with containers which were filled with more containers, these full of shiny packs. Threxin ripped one of them open with bulky gloves while two of his cohort put a temporary seal back on the hull and two others worked at the door on the other side. Gray goo beaded out and around him from the packet. Threxin appreciated the magnetic force holding his own boots firmly to the floor.

Judging by their entry point, he estimated they were ten spans away from the command center.

He hoisted his weapon from the harness on his shoulder and approached the inner door when it looked like work was nearly finished. His brother came to stand beside him, followed by the seventeen other males and three females.

“Kill them all?” Renza checked.

“May as well.”

The door opened to laser fire, and they killed them all.

Threxin was wiping human blood spatter from his visor when red alarms blared overhead and oxygen was once again vented with a deafening roar. He ducked out of the way of bodies and equipment that careened at and past him, pulling Renza down with him.

“Shoq,” he muttered, nodding at his men to take the next door. This was inconvenient.

Threxin wasted no more time while the others were dispatching the next group of humans. He scanned the space for any semblance of his target, cleared the bodies along its path, and unsealed his suit. Shrugging his arm free to expose his hand, Threxin struck his palm to the indentation in the wall. For several moments he waited, hoping the thing was indeed what he thought it must be.

It was. He smiled at the faint pricks delivered to his palm.

A high-pitched sound chimed overhead, and a soothing voice surrounded him with a recurring Human utterance. It took Threxin time to wrestle his mind into processing the language, so the repetition was appreciated:

“New Commander authenticated.”