

SUNDERED POLARITY

FREE EXTENSION FOR THE INTERSTELLAR HEREAFTER
SERIES

RHEA V. MAY

This is a free work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2020 Rhea V. May

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form on by an electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review.

If not over 18 years old, please do not read. Mature audiences only.

Contents

| | |
|------------------|-----|
| Episode 1 | 1 |
| Episode 2 | 12 |
| Episode 3 | 21 |
| Episode 4 | 31 |
| Episode 5 | 40 |
| Episode 6 | 48 |
| Episode 7 | 57 |
| Episode 8 | 65 |
| Episode 9 | 75 |
| Episode 10 | 86 |
| Episode 11 | 94 |
| Episode 12 | 102 |
| Episode 13 | 113 |
| Episode 14 | 121 |
| Episode 15 | 129 |
| Episode 16 | 138 |
| Episode 17 | 147 |
| Episode 18 | 156 |
| Episode 19 | 165 |
| Episode 20 | 174 |

SYNOPSIS

The year is 2398. Several centuries passed since the Syks invaded. The war with the Arru'Thal is history. Terrans are a sure part of the Union, settling on the new worlds of Novalis and Cordus Prata.

Everybody seems to have forgotten about the Watch., about the pledge to protect and restore little old Earth... everybody but a small group of people who still call Terran Prime Station home. The home where they live and love, where they wait and hope.

Where they plan.

Where they scheme.

Where the drama unfolds.

This divided group comes together when a new threat arises. The misfits of Terran Prime must prove their strength when they find themselves serving in the first line of defense.

Sundered Polarity features four separate love relationships, each with its own arc, themes, and characters. The story is told from multiple POVs.

Episode 1

Terran Prime station, year 2398 TST (Terran Standard Time)

Zale

The beeping started again.

Zale sighed, then cracked his neck and swiveled the chair around, getting up to approach the console on the other side of the room. Activating the holocontrols, he selected the right feed.

“VALID, run a scan on sector 4-25, please.”

“Running, Commander Corvald,” VALID’s voice echoed in the small office. “Scan completed. No parameters detected.”

Zale grunted, visually confirming VALID’s assessment. There was nothing in that little piece of space. Still. “Detailed report, please.”

“I have detected no motions, no RSD trails, no flux disruptions. I received no hails, and the shield in that section is intact.”

“Thank you, VALID. Add the scan to today’s log, under miscellaneous errors. After, send a copy to Chief Miura,” Zale instructed the neuronet, then returned to his desk to finish typing the report. His eyes fell on the massive poster covering the opposite wall, printed on old-fashioned plasticine, and he paused.

Terran Prime station, or the Eye as the residents called it, resembled an eye no more. As the end of the Watch was approaching, the station’s modules started to disengage, being repurposed. The upper arch was already half gone, as the Ark detached over a month before and moved to hover in the exosphere. The other half was scheduled to go in a few weeks as well, down to the planet, to be used in the construction of the first habitats.

And soon, the lower arch would part from the Eye, with Corporate moving in.

All that would be left was the central hub, resembling a giant ball, as white as space was black.

Just one more year, and Zale could move forward with his life. The Watch would end, and the Keepers would disband.

Time decreased but the pressure on his shoulders didn’t. Zale became more determined to succeed in his task, to end his term as Commander-in-Warrant in a dignified manner, befitting Evangeline Carter’s efforts.

After all, only the beginnings and the ends made history. So, he would earn his place among the legendary. And nothing could prevent that.

He would be the last Commander of the Prime and the first leader of the colony down on the newly healed Earth. Zale viewed his six years spent on the station as training for what was to come. He planned to direct his entire focus on leadership. Reconstructing society on old Earth was no easy task, after all. Zale figured he’d have to delve into

micromanagement even deeper.

His wrist tingled, the embedded Correslink alerting him it was time to prepare for the welcome. At the same time, VALID announced, “The shuttle from Keepers Inc. just dropped out of RSD and entered the system.”

“ETA?” Zale asked, pressing his palms to the surface of his desk as he got up.

“Fifteen minutes, Commander Corvald. Directing them to service bay four.” Service bay four had been the only one used for docking over the past decades, so Zale wasn’t surprised the neuronet had assigned it by default.

“No. Bring them to the central bay instead,” Zale ordered. Dismissing VALID, Zale stepped into the small lavatory off to one side of the office.

When he got out, straightening his impeccable uniform, the Chief Security Officer was waiting for him, ambling around his desk. “Brade,” he greeted in a gruff voice. “Put that back.”

Brayden Connaway barked a laugh and placed the holoframe back onto the desk. “Yo. I’m not going to break any of your precious stuff, man. Even if they’re ancient.”

With a grunt, Zale flipped Brayden off. “That’s not mine. I found it on the desk when I moved in.” It was true. In the entire office, Zale didn’t think he had one personal item, even after all the years spent on the station. Shaking his head, he dismissed the thought. “Why are you here?”

“Well, they’re here, aren’t they?” Brayden drawled, eyebrows wagging.

Zale grimaced. “Yes. But I could’ve greeted them alone,” he replied, surveying Brayden’s uniform. “I see you dressed for the occasion. You even donned your jacket. The regulations state, however, for it to be closed all the way up.”

“Not everyone’s boots can be as shiny as yours, your highness, the King of Misfits,” Brayden’s upper half dipped to

an exaggerated bow. After a second, he strengthened and his roguish grin slipped, his eyes turning serious. “Couldn’t let you alone, brother. Not today. Not... not now.”

Zale’s forehead crinkled. “You’re starting to worry me. What’s up, Brade? What’s today?” The glare he leveled on his best friend, the one that had intimidated countless others in the past, didn’t work. Brayden merely returned his stare.

“I take it you know something I don’t,” Zale tried again, crossing his arms over his chest. “How is that even possible?”

Brayden snorted and stepped forward to slap him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, brother. I got your back. I may have learned of something a few weeks ago. And I may have been keeping it from you.”

“What?” Zale barked. “What the hell, Brade?”

“You’ll get it when you see it, man... Come on, we’re going to be late.”

But Zale froze on the spot. Only Brayden could surprise him like that. And then treat the entire thing as inconsequential, when Zale’s heart burned at the betrayal. Logically, he knew Brayden rarely kept secrets from him. Zale had felt him pulling away for some time now, his best friend’s eyes taking on an uncharacteristically guarded look.

He worried he’d succeeded in alienating the only person left in his life. The only one Zale could call family. In fact, after all they’ve been through, the two of them were practically glued together.

What has gotten into Brayden? Why was there a sudden gap between the two of them, when even being forced to fight each other hadn’t broken them apart?

“Fuck, man. Don’t look like at me like that. I was trying to protect you.”

“By lying to me?” Zale scoffed.

“I didn’t lie. More like... I made sure certain information

never reached you,” Brayden replied, throwing his palms up in front of him.

“Same thing,” Zale declared, storming past Brayden out of the office and into Central Control. Rick, the comms officer, startled at his abrupt entrance but threw him a hasty salute once he recovered. Zale nodded in return, then hurried down the corridor.

If Brayden was here, making an unscheduled appearance just as the shuttle from Corporate was coming... and he was keeping something from him... “Who’s coming, Brade?”

Silence. Zale looked back, scowling at his best friend. Shrugging, Brayden used a thumb to point behind him. “Shouldn’t we take the main elevator?” he asked, switching the subject.

Zale growled in annoyance but accepted the evasion, knowing he’d be fighting a useless battle against Brayden’s stubbornness. “No. We’ll take the western one instead. The main has been acting up lately.”

A lot of things started to act up on the station in the past year or so. Lights flickered, machinery broke down, doors opened for no reason. Proximity sensors went off when there was nothing around...

“Dude,” Brayden shivered dramatically. “I swear the station’s haunted.”

Despite himself, Zale chuckled. “It’s old, Brade. That’s all.” But Zale wondered if Brayden’s ridiculous, yet simple reason wasn’t true. He felt constantly watched nowadays, and it wasn’t because of the neuronet’s uninterrupted surveillance.

They advanced, their two sets of steps being the only ones echoing down the corridor. Sure, it was the middle of the night cycle. But even during the day, the station seemed abandoned. Built to house the thousands that were once on it, the Prime had to manage with a couple hundred now.

Nobody volunteered to be a Keeper these days. Only the outsiders, the crazy, or the ones running from something. Brayden's nickname for him fit. He was a king over misfits.

After a brief ride down, the two of them exited the elevator just outside the central bay. Mason Miura, the Chief Technical Officer, was already inside.

"Yo, Maze," Brayden greeted.

Mason turned around, a smile on his face. "Hi, Brayden. Commander," he returned the greeting.

"We're not late, are we?" Zale asked, checking his Correslink for the time. He was never late.

"No, no. I'm early," Maze hurried to reassure him. "Couldn't sleep so I went one level down to work on an egression pod. Being an older model, I was trying to retrofit it for modern use and... Anyway, just as I finished, VALID announced the Keepers were here."

"VALID?" Zale addressed the neuronet. "Have you announced any of other Chief Officers?"

"None were up, besides the three of you," VALID answered. "Should I wake them all?"

"That's not necessary. Thank you, VALID," Zale replied, eyes narrowing as he saw Brayden and Mason whispering to each other a little farther away. What were those two up to? He dismissed the issue when the shuttle came into view and the alarm started blaring as VALID lowered the shield and took control of the craft to park it in the bay.

The ramp lowered, and Brayden moved to stand at Zale's side. Two men dressed in dark clothes exited but when the third person stepped down the ramp, Zale flinched.

Clenching his jaw, he straightened to his full height, cursing himself for the little slip. Abhorring any show of vulnerability, Zale felt as if his muscles turned to real steel.

"Easy, brother. It's okay," Brayden coached, whispering in

his ear.

Zale glared. He was fine. He didn't need Brayden's protection. He wasn't made of porcelain.

"I thought they were from Keepers," Mason said from Zale's other side. "But I see no Keepers insignia..."

Zale zeroed in on the woman standing at the center of the Corporate line. She met his eyes and raised her chin. Lima Harris-Pratt looked older, but it wasn't as if time hadn't carved a few lines in his own skin. After all, more than a decade had passed since they last saw each other.

Scoffing, he looked at Brayden. This was what his friend and brother had been hiding from him? The little kitten couldn't harm him anymore; out of necessity, Zale built a sure shield around his heart years ago, one she couldn't breach anymore.

When the bay's pressure matched the one on the station, the red light turned green and the door opened. Lima was the first one out, leading the procession.

"Commander Corvald," she greeted, right hand outstretched, which Zale ignored. "I..." she faltered and cleared her throat. "We are from Leeweather Holdings. I don't know if you've been informed, but a deal has been struck between Keepers Inc. and Leeweather Holdings, regarding one section on the lower arch of Terran Prime."

"Yes," Zale grunted, then fell silent. Oh, how he enjoyed seeing her squirm!

Clearing her throat once more, Lima gestured to her companions. "This is the team assigned to my project. Um... this is Alvin Gray—"

Lima continued in her introductions, but Zale tuned her out. His eyes raked over her body, clad in a form-fitting dark blue dress. A pair of low-heeled shoes, matching the shade of her dress, completed the ensemble. Corporate attire. So

different from the debonair dresses he remembered her wearing. She also filled out more, losing the youthful figure. She was still petite, but her hips and chest arched in delicious curves. The only thing that remained the same was her hair, a light-blonde with strands so fine, they gleamed in the light like spider silk.

“... so, Mr. Leeweather appointed me as hospitality manager,” she finished. “I hope we can assure this project’s success, together.”

Abandoning his perfect impersonation of a marble statue, Zale nodded. “Welcome to Terran Prime. I am Commander-in-Warrant Zale Corvald. This is Brayden Connaway, the Chief Security Officer, and Mason Miura, the Chief Technical Officer,” he listed briskly, scowling at the men gaping at Mason’s cybernetic implants. “You will meet the rest of the Chief Officers later, as it’s the middle of the night cycle for us. But frankly, I don’t expect for our paths to cross too much. You’ll do your job, and we’ll continue in doing ours. VALID will show you to your rooms. Good night.”

Zale knew his manner was more brusque than usual, and he was treating the newcomers with more disdain than normal, but the shock of seeing Lima again angered him. With Brayden, he would have words later.

The only thing that he wished for at the moment was to retreat into his office. As he turned to leave, however, a ruckus from the bay stopped him dead in the tracks.

Brayden

Watching Zale slip into a hot mess was painful to watch. On the outside, he might project his ‘assholeness’, given the curt greeting he gave to the Corporate bastards, but on the inside,

Brayden knew a storm was brewing.

He knew he was to blame for not telling him about Lima coming to the station sooner. He'd tried. He really did. But how could he tell Zale the woman who had hurt him so deeply in the past was coming for a reunion? How could he not hide the shuttle's manifest from his brother?

Brayden had been there for Zale after she did what she did, picking up the pieces she left behind. Putting his brother back together again.

And now, the shrew was here. Back in his brother's life. Haunting him. What the fuck was she doing on Terran Prime?

Through narrowed eyes, he watched their interaction. From the corner of his eye, he saw Mason stiffen too, no doubt picking up on the vibe in the room.

"Wait, stupid bot! Wow, Evangeline Carter... " a distinctly feminine voice came from the bay. "OMG, hi! You look so lifelike!"

Brayden felt his eyebrows inching up on his forehead, and he leaned to one side to peer around the sea of people blocking his view. He chuckled as the woman continued to talk to the hologram of Evangeline Carter, the founder of the Keepers and the builder of this station, placed there to greet every person who stepped on the Prime.

"No! Wait! Um... stop. Halt! Stupid bot. What's the right voice command—"

Brayden heard a thud, and the group parted, turning to look at the poor woman whose body had just met the floor. Shouldering past the chuckling gawkers, Brayden hurried to the prone woman's side.

"Hold," he instructed the bot, finally ending his advance. "Are you alright?"

Red-faced, the woman mumbled an affirmative and accepted his help in getting up. Brayden bit back a smile as

she busied herself with arranging her clothing, refusing to meet his eyes. She looked so cute and innocent, especially with her dark curls in disarray, stressing her youthful face.

Pale blue eyes met his once she recovered. “Thanks. I’m Tessa... um, Theresa June Starr and... Oh, no,” she gasped, hurrying to the bot.

Brayden followed her, noticing one of the bags on the bot’s platform was opened, its contents spilling out all over the place. He proceeded to assist Theresa in gathering up her things, handing her a piece of lacy underwear with a wink.

The poor girl was so embarrassed, she actually whimpered. At least, Brayden hoped she whimpered because she was embarrassed, and not because she was frightened of him. To that end, he hunched a little, trying to make himself smaller.

“I’m Brayden Connaway,” he extended a hand out to her as they finished. “Nice to meet you, Tessa-Theresa.”

“N-nice to meet you, as well. I’m sorry,” she huffed. “For making a fool of myself and all.”

“No need for apologies. It happens,” he tried to console her, a bit awkwardly. “Come. Commander Corvald was just telling the Leeweather people off.”

When she blanched, Brayden chuckled. “Don’t worry. He doesn’t bite.”

“I heard he’s... difficult.”

“That’s one way to describe our fearless leader. But you’re a big girl. I’m sure you’ll be fine,” he joked.

Mumbling to herself, Tessa-Theresa followed him back to the group. Ignoring the others grinning at her, she went straight to Zale and introduced herself. Brayden felt a hot rush of arousal at her displayed confidence. That, coupled with the innocent air from before, made it highly dangerous. For her. He was addicted to the chase, and prim and proper Tessa-Theresa would make wonderful prey.

“Commander Corvald, I’m Theresa June Starr, Public Affairs Specialist, sent by Keepers Inc. to fill out the Corporate Chair,” she said, gesturing to her insignia. “I’m also the one they chose to work with our new Leeweather partners, to build the planned luxury resort in the lower section of H-1. I’d like to request a meeting as soon as possible, to go over the specifications—“

“Tomorrow morning, after breakfast. VALID will take it from here. Good night, Miss Starr,” Zale interrupted her, then disappeared inside the elevator.

Hurrying to catch his brother, Brayden left the discombobulated group behind. As he passed by them, several tried to get his attention but he ignored all, hurrying down the corridor to the other elevator.

Earning his brother’s forgiveness surpassed calming the corporate ignorants.

Episode 2

Terran Prime (the Ark), 2398 TST

Luna

“Coltram, are you sure about this?” Luna asked, gripping her boss’s arm a bit too tightly. “Maybe now’s not a good time...”

The closer they got to the Head of the Biology Department’s office, the louder the sounds of crashing became. Luna didn’t know much about the man, other than he was known as Kalthera Kalon among the scientists, because of his obsessive research on the miraculous plant, and that, surprisingly, he was a Rakh’Sha.

Surprisingly, because she never met a Rakh’Sha pursuing an academic career before. They tended to keep at what they knew best—military operations.

On the trip to the station four years ago, she’d glimpsed a Rakh’Sha male, but she figured he’d be a new addition to the Security Department. A year passed before Luna learned the newly pointed Head of the Biology Department was Rakh’Sha, and even more before she realized he was the same prickly male from the shuttle.

Other than that, their path never intersected. But now, she needed his help, according to her boss, the Head of the Physics Department.

“Don’t worry, Luna. I’m sure there’s a logical explanation for all this ruckus,” Coltram Tinsley offered.

Luna gulped, but offered a nod to her boss. She’d feel a lot better if she could see. As it was, she felt too vulnerable relying on her other senses, especially in a situation that could become dangerous.

“We’re here,” Coltram announced, raising his voice so she could hear him over the crashing.

Luna felt her boss’s muscles shifting under her palm as he leaned to press his palm to the door’s controls. Mumbling to himself when he found the door closed, he rang the bell.

A toe-curling roar shook the walls and the floor, echoing in the corridor outside, where the two of them were standing. Ears ringing, Luna shook her head. Her flight-or-fight instinct kicked in, and she felt her legs tensing in preparation.

She pushed it down, because her logic dictated there was nothing to fear. On the other side of that door was a civilized scientist, and not a beast.

“I t-think you might be right, Luna. Maybe we should return at—“ her boss started to say, but he was interrupted by the sound of the door opening.

“What?” barked a gruff voice.

She swallowed, turning her head in the approximate direction of that voice. Based on the threatening underline of the tone, Luna knew now was definitely not the right time to ask for a favor.

“Kalon,” her boss chuckled nervously. “We are sorry to disturb you at what sounds like a terrible time. Um... here’s a member of my department, Luna. She needs your help.” With that, the bastard shook off her grip and fled down the corridor,

leaving her alone and standing awkwardly.

Turning in the direction she heard his footsteps making a hasty retreat, Luna shook her head. Swallowing again, she turned back to the Rakh'Sha. She wondered if he'd closed the door in her face by now, but she could hear his heavy breathing in front of her.

"Hi," she said, swallowing a gulp. "Um... It's okay. I'll just go too. VALID, could you direct me back to my office, please?"

"Nonsense," Kalthera Kalon protested in a curt tone. "You're here now. Come."

Luna startled when strong warm hands gripped her shoulders and dragged her inside, walking her forcefully to a chair. "Hey!" she admonished, batting away his hands when he pushed her down on the seat. "Knock it off!"

She felt him putting a space between them again and heard his steps retreating. An awkward silence followed.

Clearing her throat, Luna started to say, "Look, I obviously came at the wrong time—" at the same time Kalon said, "Apologies, I was just trying to direct you inside. What can I help you with?"

Fiddling with her prosthetics, Luna chuckled nervously. "Um... with these, actually. Coltram said you were a bioengineer and..."

"What happened to them?" his voice sounded closer, and she tilted her head in the direction it came from.

"A stupid accident yesterday. The guys were trying to create this new polymer that acted as a conductor for a prank. You see, there's an old feud between our department and Chemistry, and... Anyway, their foolish prank cause a minor explosion in the lab, and it knocked me over, and... " she gestured to her prosthetics. "I was fine otherwise, but the fall must have damaged them, as I lost all vision after that."

"Fascinating," he murmured, and she startled anew when

she felt his breath on her face. He must have bent closer to study her prosthetics. “They are a true marvel of engineering. How come you have them?”

Luna shrugged, unsurprised by the questioning. Her prosthetics were illegal in the Union, as the use of cybernetic alterations was prohibited. In her case, a special dispensation had been made. She offered him the same explanation as to everyone else, so used to it by now, the words just tumbled off her tongue. “The Replicator couldn’t handle the trauma, fixing only the scar tissue. So, I got permission for special alterations.”

She used all the right words, the ones that usually made the others back off. Trauma. Scar tissue. Alterations. Despite the advanced technology they used every day, the people in the Union were biased to the extreme regarding cybernetic supplementation.

Kalon grunted, then showed her strategy failed. “It must have been extensive trauma if the Replicator couldn’t fix it. What happened?”

Frowning, Luna clenched her fists. “It is a subject I don’t wish to discuss,” she replied, her tone prim.

The warmth of his body disappeared as he moved away from her. Kalon sighed, and she heard a scratching sound. “Apologies. I’ve been told I can become insensitive in my quest for knowledge.”

Her jaw relaxed, and she nodded, accepting his apology. “It’s okay. So? Will you help me?”

He snorted. “Are you sure you don’t need Medical instead?”

“I’ve already been. Chief Quinn couldn’t do much for me and referred me to a bio-robotics specialist. Coltram said you’re a bioengineer...” she trailed off, her tone expectant.

“So the next best thing around here. Very well. Let’s see what we can do, then,” Kalon agreed, and Luna felt bolstered

by his confident tone.

After scanning, he carefully detached the prosthetics from her temples, and placed them in a sterile environ before starting to work on them. Luna knew all this because he explained each step to her, a very thoughtful gesture for a self-proclaimed insensitive.

As he worked, he made all sorts of sounds, quiet growls and snarls, and Luna's lips twitched every time he argued with himself. After some time, he finished and approached her to reposition the prosthetics.

"Let's give them a test. Should be alright now," he mumbled, pressing them gently into the ports. "Whoever did them was very skilled. They're wonderful."

"Thanks," Luna said, then blinked to activate them. Blurry at first, the view cleared after a few more blinks. Kalon stood so close, they were almost touching noses, a fact she expected as she'd felt his breath fanning over her face.

He cleared his throat and drew back, his forehead creasing as he arched his eyebrows. "How is it?"

"Perfect," Luna gushed. "Thank you so much!"

"It was nothing. A minor repair," he dismissed her gratitude with a wave of his hand.

Kalon was exceedingly tall and muscular, like all the Rakh'Sha. She'd seen him before, but only briefly. Now, she eyed the breadth of his shoulders and wondered why he chose to pursue a scientific career. He wore a white lab coat over dark short pants that only reached his mid-thighs, the design no doubt more comfortable for his kind, as their knees bent backwards.

As under the lab coat he was bare-chested, Luna noticed a faint stripe pattern through the short gray fuzz covering his body. The stripes were more pronounced on his tail, which she noticed flicking behind him.

The scraping sound came again, and she looked at Kalon to see he was scratching one pointy ear. He lowered his hand and fidgeted awkwardly, for such a big male.

Luna realized she was making him uncomfortable with her ogling and she smiled, vying for reassurance. “I realized we never officially met. I’m Luna Jaffai, astrophysicist.”

Frowning, Kalon replied slowly, “Kalon, matronymic. Bioengineer and Head of the Biology Department.”

Ah. She remembered the Rakh’Sha never bothered with last names. She knew they often used their designations instead, but Kalon hasn’t offered his, so maybe it wasn’t something they shared outside of their society? “Nice to meet you,” she nodded. Then, her eyes fell on the destruction wrecking one corner of the cavernous lab.

Kalon noticed her looking and winced. “I got some bad news,” he defended his actions.

Since she had nothing to say to that, she just nodded. How did normal people react in this situation? ‘Sorry to hear that’ seemed superfluous, while ‘hope everything’s alright’ was downright ridiculous, since he had clearly stated the news were bad.

“Well, once again, thank you. If there is any way in which I can repay you... What’s that?” As if in a trance, Luna abandoned her stool and moved to walk between the rows of flowers. Case after case, the Kalthera stretched in every direction.

A few years back, a miner discovered the flower on a deserted moon in the Far Reaches. What was astounding wasn’t that the species seemed to have sprung basically overnight, but that the flower was growing out of actual rocks. This was enough to prick the scientists’ interest. No matter how different the worlds in the known universe were, they all functioned under a similar set of laws. Yet this plant seemed

to follow its own rules.

Named Kalthera, which meant ‘miracle’ in old Testran, the plant kept mesmerizing the scientists, the longer they studied it. It exhibited incredibly potent therapeutic properties, ranging from instant healing to rapid cell renewal. And its capabilities seemed to be never-ending, as the scientists continued to discover new ones with each study.

“You’ve never seen a Kalthera?” Kalon asked, following her around as she flitted from row to row.

“Only in holos. But I never realized they were so... colorful.”

“Colorful?” Kalon frowned, scratching his ear again. “What are you talking about? They’re white.”

“What are you talking about?” Luna volleyed. Then, pointing, she listed, “That one’s pink. Red. Dark blue. Green. Bright yellow.”

Seeing the Rakh’Sha was staring at her, wide lips parted and cat-like eyes wide, Luna shrugged. “And some are glowing more than others.”

He stormed in her direction so suddenly, Luna took a few steps back. Stopping her retreat by gripping her shoulders tightly, he shook her a little. “It’s your prosthetics. You can see things differently, can’t you?”

“I don’t know. I mean, usually, I don’t. I see just as I used to see before... except now I can see perfectly in the dark. And I’m picking up the ultraviolet wavelengths. So... maybe it is the prosthetics?”

Kalon laughed and picked her up, twirling her in the air. She laughed too, because his excitement was infectious, and gripped his shoulders when he started jumping up and down. After a minute, he put her down.

“Tell me. Which one’s glowing the brightest?” he asked, his expression now impatient.

Looking around, Luna finally settled on the right plant.

“That one.”

“That one?” Kalon drawled, clearly astonished. “Are you sure? It’s barely a fledgling, hasn’t even blossomed yet. Even though it’s been planted at the same time as the others in the row, its growth is sixty percent slower.”

“Well, it’s the brightest here. Also, it may sound crazy, but I sense it’s the healthiest.”

Kalon hummed and started pacing, his tail curling and uncurling as he thought. “I wonder if I can replicate these results. Each one has its own environment, as you can see.”

Luna nodded, her attention directed to the Kalthera again as she ambled between the rows. Each case held a micro-environ, and one plant. “What are you trying to achieve, anyway?” she asked, looking over at Kalon again.

He stiffened a little, like bracing for something. “It may sound crazy...” he started and she giggled at him echoing her words from earlier, “but I’m trying to prove the Kalthera are sentient.”

Luna gasped. “Whoa. That’s so freaking cool! And are they?”

Kalon’s lips twitched. “I don’t know yet. Based on my previous studies, I developed this theory that the Kalthera can be groomed to develop only certain capabilities if the right environ is provided. As you can see now, I’m trying to prove my theory.”

Mouth slightly agape, Luna nodded. It sounded terribly fascinating. “Can I help?” the question just slipped. She knew Kalon was an incredibly private person. She’d never seen him partaking in any of the other social functions, so she worried she might have made him uncomfortable now. “Sorry. It’s just, you fixed my prosthetics and—”

“If you want to help, then you’re welcome to do so. Frankly, I need you. You can see what I can’t,” he replied. “But I don’t

want to keep you from doing your job.”

Luna snorted. “Hardly. There’s not much for an astrophysicist to do around here. Except getting extremely bored and devising catastrophic pranks.”

Kalon looked suddenly unsure, so she hurried to convince him. “Please. I swear I’ll treat your plants with the utmost care. Despite what you may think, I’m a responsible person. The prank that landed me in here notwithstanding.”

Reluctantly, he nodded and extended his arm for a handshake. “Very well. Shall we agree on one week?”

“Yes!” Luna agreed and shook his hand, trying to contain her excitement, since he looked as cool as a cucumber. “One week. And then we’ll see.”

Episode 3

Terran Prime station, 2398 TST

Lima

Halfway to the Prime, she had learned the name of the Commander-in-Warrant. Zale Corvald.

Too late to turn back around.

And even if it wasn't, she didn't think she'd have returned. She had already accepted the job from Austin Leeweather, and the days when she could choose her clients were long gone.

Lima had lost everything. Her fame, her reputation, her family...

This title of hospitality manager and her connection to Leeweather Holdings were the only things she had left.

So, even if the thought of seeing Zale again was making her wish crawl into some hole and wither away, Lima had to confront the situation head-on and talk to him.

After all, this was a new Lima. And new Lima had to learn how to stand on her own two feet and not let the others decide for her like she used to.

She had to mend the bridges as much as she could with Zale

if she wanted for this to work. She had to grow up. She had to apologize.

But not right now. Now, she was on her way to visit her twin brother's best friend. The one that got her this job.

Orion Peyton Quinn was the Chief Medical Officer here on the Prime. Relying on VALID to direct her to the medical bay, Lima studied the station as she passed through the corridors. She'd traversed four levels from her assigned cabin and never met another soul. A heavy air of desolation and neglect enveloped the Prime.

"The medical bay is on your right," VALID announced, and she paused before turning the corner, thanking the neuronet.

The doors to the bay opened automatically and after the brightly lit corridors outside, Lima blinked in the darkness of her surroundings. "Ri," she called, looking around. Her vision adjusted just as the room lost its golden glow and the lights came on.

"Lima," Orion replied to her calling, exiting an adjacent office, and approaching her with his arms outstretched.

After a brief hug, Lima leaned back to study him. "You're looking well," she said, smiling when he flashed her his trademark grin.

"Thanks," he answered, fiddling with the pierced lobe of his left ear. "Tell no one, but I think I put on some weight."

Lima laughed at his joke. Orion had always been on the slim side, even if he ate a lot. "Are you the only doctor here?" she asked, noticing they were alone in the bay.

Orion snorted. "Yes. Supposedly, there's another one, an ancient Testran Rendition. But in all my years here, I've seen him come in only two times."

"Sorry, Ri," she said but Orion waved her support away.

"It's fine. There's not much to do around here, anyway. Patching scrapes and bruises, and the medbots take care of

most of that,” he replied, and she could detect the sour note in his tone.

“And I’m sure you’re rocking those tasks,” Lima said, then winced internally at her pathetic words. Clearing her throat, she changed the subject. “Well, I wanted to thank you for what you did for me, for your help in landing me this job—”

“Nope. Not necessary. You’re family to me, both you and your brother Cairo, and it’s what you do for family. Trust me on that, I’m gypsy,” he grinned again, and it prompted her to chuckle in return. “Aaand... I didn’t do much, to be honest. I made a passing comment to Cairo about how Keepers Inc. was looking for partners in repurposing several modules, now that the Watch is almost over. Cairo did the rest.”

“You vouched for me,” Lima reminded him.

Orion snorted again and shrugged. “Come,” he said, turning away, and leading her into his office. “Have you had breakfast yet?”

“Yes, thank you. Whoa, it looks like you’re all ready to go,” she gestured to the heap of packed boxes. “Excited?” Lima waggled her eyebrows, giving him a lopsided grin.

Orion’s grin slipped and he collapsed into the chair he’d pulled up for Lima, sighing and rubbing his palms over his face. Frowning, Lima kneeled in front of him and placed her hand on his arm. “What happened?” she asked.

“Cairo didn’t tell you?” he mumbled, looking away.

“No,” Lima answered, bracing for the bad news. “It’s been a week since I last spoke with him.”

Resting his head on the chair’s back, Orion looked to the ceiling and gestured around him. “All my life, I’ve been in closed quarters. First, my parents’ freighter. Now, this fucking station...”

Nodding, Lima searched his face as she waited for him to continue. She already knew about Orion’s tragic diagnosis of

severe social anxiety bordering on agoraphobia. It was how him and her twin had met, actually. In the first year of university, back on Novalis, Orion suffered a serious panic attack right in the dorm's mess hall. Cairo had been the only one to help the poor guy up from his fetal position on the floor, the rest gawking or laughing as people did.

Having spent all his life on a freighter in the Far Reaches, Orion had never been diagnosed, because he'd rarely interacted with large groups of people. But coming directly to the crowded campus of Novalis University, Orion soon became overwhelmed and snapped.

Using the Harris-Pratt name, Cairo pulled some strings and arranged for Orion to continue his studies from the safety of the college dorm room.

"I was supposed to leave the Eye in less than a week," Orion continued, his shoulders slumped. "Did you know I wasn't even supposed to be here, on the Eye? A colleague of mine from the Institute signed up for volunteering and then accepted a prestigious position in a medical study. Connor fucking O'Bradley..." he sneered the name. "The study looked promising. Modifying fluid data to treat a series of psychological and psychiatric conditions... When they reached him on the waiting list, the Keepers, he was already engrossed in the research. So, he approached me, promising me a sure spot in the upcoming medical trials, in exchange for me going in his stead."

"Then what?" Lima asked quietly.

"Then, he betrayed me," Orion stated on a sigh. "I was supposed to receive state-of-the-art treatment for this awful condition of mine that brought me nothing but desolation. Maybe even a cure... As my time here was almost up, I contacted Connor. But I couldn't reach him, he never answered any of my comms. After about a week, I contacted

the Institute directly. Imagine my surprise to find out that not only Connor never put me on the list, but he had been fired two years ago for inappropriate behavior.”

“Oh, Ri...” Lima said, blinking back tears. “I’m so sorry.”

As the first tear fell, Lima dove into his arms and hugged him tightly. Her heart broke for him. Orion was such a nice person, so full of life. So undeserving of this illness that tortured him to no end. She knew that his greatest wish was to be normal so he could do more, help more people. He was one of those, those people who became doctors out of the real desire to heal and help and aid.

“Thank you, Lima,” he said, breaking apart from her and getting up from the chair to hide his own red-rimmed eyes. Pacing a little farther away, Orion shrugged. “It’s fine. Life, eh? I’ll figure it out, don’t worry.”

“Yes,” she nodded, straightening herself too. “You always bounce back in no time. I admire you for that.”

Orion snorted, then swept the air in front of him with one hand. “Enough about me. Tell me, have you seen Zale yet?”

A scowl twisted her features. “Yes. He was there to greet us last night.”

“And?”

“And?” she drawled. “What do you want me to say, Orion? You know what I did. I know I have to apologize but, how can I?”

Shrugging, Orion looked straight into her eyes. “You just do.”

You just do. Hours later, Orion’s words were still echoing inside her mind. She’d procrastinated for as long as she could. But now, the time was up.

Swiping her sweaty palms down her thighs, Lima stared at the bold gold script adorning the closed door. Station Commander, it said. Swallowing for the umpteenth time, she

tried to dislodge the heavy pebble in her throat.

She remembered a time when just seeing Zale managed to calm and center her. He was her refuge from the constant onslaught of her anxiety. Now...

Taking a fortifying breath, Lima slapped her palm over the door's sensor. Nothing happened.

"There's a short list of people sanctioned by the Commander who can enter his office without permission. You are not on it, Miss Harris-Pratt," VALID announced.

Sighing, Lima looked up into the tiny camera above the door. That put a damper on her plans. "Thank you, VALID." What was she supposed to do now? Knock?

"Shall I announce you?" VALID asked.

"Please," Lima nodded. "And thank you!" she added as an afterthought.

"You may come in," the neuronet announced after a second, opening the door.

Lima supposed she could be happy Zale invited her inside. Entering, her eyes fell on the imposing man immediately. He was seated behind his desk, placed in the center of the room. As she advanced, Lima hoped he couldn't see the way her knees threatened to buckle.

Despite her nerves, Lima couldn't look away. Like every other time she'd seen him in the past, he was consuming. Piercing. Imperious and impervious to anything. The only difference now was that his eyes didn't soften in her presence.

The door closed behind her with a snick, and Lima gulped. She was locked inside, with him. Alone. Her heart started beating faster and faster, and she felt herself teetering on the spot, as the room started spinning. Wouldn't it be just great if she fainted right now, in front of him? Would he feel satisfied by that?

"Zale," she greeted, wetting her lips immediately after.

More mature now, his face seemed nothing but angles. His constant tendency to scowl carved two deep lines between his eyebrows. Other than that, his caramel skin looked smooth and unmarred.

He said nothing for long moments, studying her with his golden eyes. “Commander Corvald,” he corrected in a harsh tone.

“Commander Corvald,” Lima acquiesced. “Thank you for making me the time to see me. I... may I sit?” she asked, gripping the back of the chair in front of her as she felt her legs turning to jelly.

“No.”

Lima blinked. Oh, how he must hate her. “Right. I wanted to... I know it’s well past time, but... I’m sorry, Zale. For how... we ended things. And for... what happened after.”

“Why?”

“Why?” she parroted back, completely bewildered. “Why what?”

“Why now?” he grated. “Because you need me to finish this project of yours? Because you need me to succeed and show everyone what a good girl you are? All these years have passed, and you never bothered to contact me.”

Lima hugged herself and nodded. “I k-know. I’m sorry. I didn’t think you’d want to hear from me ever again... But no, I’m not apologizing to you because I need your help...”

Arching an eyebrow, he regarded her in silence for another long moment. Flushing, she stammered out the truth, “Fine. Yes. I need us to get along for this project to work. And it’s not mine, I’m just an employee.”

“At least you’re honest,” Zale mused. “If I wasn’t here and in charge, would you have bothered apologizing? Would you have ever looked me up to say sorry?”

“Probably not.” She flushed again at his mirthless chuckle.

“Because I knew you probably hated me and... ugh! Let me start again.”

“You’re the same poor little rich girl you’ve always been,” Zale stated, rather bluntly. “And to think I told your father to shove it when he commed to threaten my future if I didn’t end things with you...”

“Wait, you did? He contacted you too?”

“What do you mean, me too?”

Rolling her eyes, Lima finally straightened her spine. “Come on, Zale. You knew how I was when it came to you. You couldn’t have thought I’d go from completely smitten to cold as ice the next day without some interference. My bastard of a father commed one day, after he learned we were seeing each other, worried I’ll ruin the family reputation if people saw me with you. Of course, he found out, even if we tried keeping things secret. He threatened to disown me if I didn’t end our relationship and when that didn’t work... he threatened he’d make Cairo’s life an even bigger hell. So...”

“That worked, huh?” he drawled, lips twisting in a cruel smile.

“You know it did. The reason behind my behavior was all him, but... how I actually handled things wasn’t. That was all me. And I apologize for that.”

“You could have come to me. Talked to me.”

“I know. But he’d already leaked the juicy info to my snotty friends. And...” Lima paused and sighed. “And, I did nothing to stop them from disparaging and degrading you when you came to talk with me. For that, I am sorry.”

Zale stood and rounded his desk. Her skin prickled in anticipation of his nearness, but he passed by her and approached one of the consoles near the door.

“You think I cared about some foul comments? Think I cared about some rich girls calling me what I am, a prison

planet runt?” he asked, his back turned to her as he fiddled with some controls. “Know what? It doesn’t even matter. It’s been a long time ago.”

“I agree. We were young and stupid. So, you’ll accept my apology? And we can be friends?”

“We can never be friends, Lima,” he replied, leaving her other question unanswered. “The best we can manage is a strictly professional relationship. Now, go. I’m busy.”

Shoulders slumping, Lima turned away and left his office. She’d told her piece. She apologized. It was all she could do.

Right?

Episode 4

Terran Prime station, 2398 TST

Maze

Was he seeing ghosts?

Groaning, Mason rubbed his palms over his face and leaned back, the chair creaking in protest. The Correslink chimed the morning alarm, and he waved impatiently over its surface, turning it off. He hadn't slept a wink the other night.

How could he, when they might be already on their way to finish him off?

At the thought, he rubbed his good hand over the band circling his neck, the black Dream Skin band that showed to the entire universe he used to be owned by the Havoc Syndicate.

With a sigh, he started from the beginning of the list, for the millionth time. No matter how many times his eyes traced over the document, the name wasn't there.

He thought he saw someone the other day, among the group that came from Keepers Inc. and Leeweather Holdings. A man from Septimus station, Havoc's Septimus station and Mason's birthplace.

By the time Mason recovered from the shock, the man was

already gone. In a daze, Mason ran through the empty corridors, looking for him, the former lieutenant in the criminal organization of Havoc Syndicate. To no avail.

Then, last night, he thought to check the shuttle's manifest, but the man's name wasn't in there. What else could he do?

"VALID," he said suddenly as an idea popped into his mind. "Could you please go over the footage from yesterday, when the group from Leeweather Holdings arrived?"

"Certainly, Chief Miura. Please, hold," the neuronet answered promptly. "Correct footage identified. What should I be looking for?"

Closing his eyes, Mason focused on remembering the man's exact position. "The last person on Miss Lima's right. The fourth down the line."

"Do you mean the third?"

"What? No, the fourth," Mason stressed.

"Chief Miura, placing Miss Harris-Pratt in the center, there are three people to her left and three to her right," VALID detailed.

VALID's words matched Mason's memory, except he remembered the man closing the line on the right. Frowning, he ordered VALID, "Show me your footage. Central screen."

Swiveling around to the entertainment screen on the opposite wall of his cabin, Mason watched the events from yesterday unfold on the screen. VALID had been right. The man was missing from the footage. How was this possible?

"VALID, can you scan the footage? See if you detect any cloaking signs?"

"Negative."

So, the man hadn't used a cloaking device to hide himself from the cameras. Those distorted the space around a person, sometimes causing a blurring shimmer in the air, sometimes causing an unnatural glint appear on the screens. An advanced

neuronet, such as VALID, would be able to tell if a cloaking device had been used.

“Any evidence of tampering?” Mason pushed.

“Negative, the feed hadn’t been tampered with.”

“Have you?”

A longer pause. Then, “Negative, Chief Miura.”

Mason clenched his fists, fighting the urge to bury one of them into the nearest surface. Was he hallucinating? Or was the man hiding? Where could he have disappeared to in such a short time? To the Ark? But how? The Ark wasn’t connected to the Eye anymore. To reach it, one had to take a shuttle and make the trek to Earth’s exosphere.

Much more likely he was simply hiding. But why?

And the most important question of all: had the man already announced Mason’s whereabouts to his former employers?

“Thank you, VALID,” Mason dismissed the neuronet. It wouldn’t be able to help him in tracking the man down anyway, if it could not see him. However... “Wait! Did you register any outgoing comms to Septimus station or the Last Frontier?”

“Negative, Chief Miura.”

The neuronet’s words made Mason exhale in relief. “Great. Thank you, VALID.”

“Chief Miura?” VALID said, almost at the same time. “A couple of faulty shuttles have been transferred to Engineering Bay 5. Commander Corvald asks you to take Casey Jenkins, the Vehicle Engineer, and repair them.”

“Very well, VALID. Thanks.”

“Task added to the record,” VALID added in a monotonous voice, different from the inflexion it usually used when conversing. No doubt, a remnant in its code from when it used to be a much simpler entity.

Sighing, Mason got up. After he showered and dressed, he exited his cabin and proceeded in the mess hall’s direction for

breakfast. The thought of approaching Casey Jenkins caused him to gulp. He'd noticed her before, of course he did. The Engineering Department wasn't that big, and she was a beautiful woman.

Far too beautiful for a man like him. Half of one, at that.

His eyes spotted her as soon as he entered the canteen. She was waiting in line to get a tray of food with her friends, the other five ladies on the Engineering team. The dark coveralls fit her snugly, her rear being especially emphasized, as the end of her pants were tucked into work boots. Over her blonde hair, weaved with several colorful streaks, she wore a white billowy scarf.

Mason rubbed the band over his neck and closed the distance between them, clearing his throat to get her attention. "Hi, good morning. Have you received the day's workload from VALID yet? Apparently, there are some shuttles that need to be repaired..."

Casey's eyes widened when she saw him, and he saw her gulp. Mason hid a wince. After wetting her lips, she spoke, "M-morning, Chief. No, I haven't checked my Correslink yet. But, sure. I'll do that now and—"

"No, no. Please, have breakfast and we'll meet later. Um... right. I'll just go," Mason rambled. He wanted to facepalm himself, with his bionic arm so it would really hurt. This was... awkward. He was awkward. He turned on his heel and moved to the end of the line, greeting everyone.

As he waited, he couldn't stop himself from following her with his eyes, like some creep. This was the first time he'd spoke to her more than two words, despite Casey being a part of the engineering crew for almost two years. He'd seen her around but tried to ignore her like he ignored most of the other women, after a perfunctory greeting.

Mason didn't like seeing the fear in their eyes. He knew he

was ugly, his bionic parts standing out sharply. He couldn't hide his left eye, or face, or arm.

After he ate, he exited the mess hall and moved to one wall in the corridor to wait for Casey. It was still early in the morning, and most of the engineers weren't up yet. Seeing Grant, an older mechanic, he waved him over. "Hey, Grant. What's your schedule today?"

"Morning, Maze. Wide open. Why?"

Rubbing his band again, Mason nodded, then explained to the man that he wanted him to join them on the shuttles job. Mason figured Casey would feel more at ease with another person there, than alone with him.

When Casey joined them a few minutes later, she found the two men going over the repair plans. On the way down to the bay, Mason noticed Casey studying him from time to time. He ducked his head and again, suppressed a wince.

"Chief—" she started.

"Call me Mason, please. Or Maze, like everyone else," he hurried to say.

"Right. Maze. Um..." She blushed and looked away. "I don't want to sound..." She sighed and then looked straight up at him. "Are you sure about Grant joining us on the job?"

"What do you mean?" Mason frowned, returning her look.

"What I mean is, I don't think the man sobered up completely from last night's party."

"There was a party last night?" he asked in utter bewilderment.

"Shay's birthday party, yes."

Mason had completely forgotten. Shit. He'd never missed a birthday party of one of his crew. And all for nothing; he'd found no trace of the ghost he was hunting.

"Man," he groaned. "I'm so sorry. I completely forgot."

"You don't have to apologize to me," Casey retorted with an

amused smile.

“You’re right. I’ll talk with Shay as soon as possible. Shit.” Mason rubbed the band around his neck again, but stopped when he saw Casey studying it. “Hey, Grant,” he called then, stopping the man who was a few paces ahead of them. “You don’t look so good, man. Why don’t you take the day off and rest? We got this.”

“Are you sure, Maze?” Grant asked but looked relieved. “I feel a little tired, now that you mention it.”

“Positive. Sleep well.”

Casey moved out of the way so Grant could pass by her and waved goodbye to the man.

“Thanks. For telling me. I was distracted and... he shouldn’t operate any machinery in this state.”

“Don’t mention it,” Casey nodded, resuming her pace.

Maze nodded too, then lengthened his stride until they were once again walking side by side. He peeped down at her. She was one of the few women on the station who reached his shoulder. As his cybernetic implementations required his entire anatomy be reinforced to support the added weight, he’d gained a few inches to his six feet.

“You don’t have to be afraid, you know. I won’t hurt you,” he said, causing Casey to look up at him in surprise.

“Well...” she replied, blushing. “I wouldn’t say afraid. I’m more intimidated. Especially since you’re the Chief Technical Officer.”

“Ha!” Mason barked in amusement. “Allow me to put that concern of yours to rest. I am CTO because of seniority. I’m the oldest member of the Engineering Department. But other than that, I don’t even have a fancy degree.”

“No way!” Casey protested. “But you know so much! Remember that time when the g-spinner got stuck and no one could figure out why and you realized the particles filter wasn’t

scrubbing right and that was the problem? Or when the anti-grav engine on one of the hogs was on the verge of exploding? Everyone knows you can't stop an anti-grav engine from exploding but you somehow managed... Or when the repair bot last week suddenly glitched and, instead of repairing the breach, it started drilling into the hull? You were the one to spot the faulty line of code in the software and—“

“Whoa, alright, alright,” Mason stopped her, pressing his palms into the air. He hadn't realized she'd been there during those moments. Or that she'd noticed him. “You make me sound heroic or something. Which I'm not. I just meant that I never got to go to university because...” he trailed off, gesturing to the Dream Skin band. “Everything I know, I picked it up on the go. Plus, someone had to repair these,” he finished, pointing to his bionic parts.

“Right.” Casey nodded. Then, after studying him for a moment longer, she declared, “You're alright, Maze. A nice person.”

Mason flushed and ducked his head but didn't reply. They reached the bay in silence, and then continued to work side by side in the same manner, speaking only when necessary.

“Casey! Look out!” he called, just as the pin from one of the rear thrusters whizzed forward and embedded itself into the wall, missing Casey by an inch.

The huge sprocket came loose next and hurtled into the air and suddenly Mason was there, right in front of Casey. With a grunt, he knocked it away, changing its trajectory.

“Shit, that would have decapitated me,” Casey said, gasping for breath. “Thank you... Ohmigod, you're bleeding!”

Sure enough, the serrated edge had caught his shoulder, slicing a deep cut into the flesh. Blood was pouring out, covering his arm at a rapid pace. “I'm fine,” Mason announced after inspecting the wound.

“Fine?” Casey asked, her eyes as wide as saucers. “You need medical. Shit!” She fumbled with her Correslink, then looked up and yelled, “VALID! We need help in EB 5!”

“Dispatching emergency medbots,” VALID recited. “ETA 2 minutes.”

“Come, sit.” Casey rounded on him, pushing him down to the floor. She took off the scarf covering her colorful hair and pressed it to his injury, trying to stem the bleeding.

“Casey, calm down, I’m fi—“

“But you’re not. Just... Shit, maybe I should apply a tourniquet instead,” she stammered, holding back a sob. “I’m so sorry, Maze. I should have been more careful. It’s my fault.”

“No, it’s not. It’s... Look, I don’t even know how this happened. The thruster’s pistons were disengaged. I checked them myself.”

Casey shook her head and finally let the tears roll over her cheeks. Mason placed his bionic hand over her own that kept the scarf in place over the wound. “I’m fine,” he reiterated.

The medbots arrived before she could reply, and she reluctantly stepped back, allowing the machines help him.

“Aren’t you taking him to medical?” she asked when she saw the bots intended to patch him up right then and there.

The cut was bleeding a lot and hurt like hell, but it wasn’t any worse than the countless others he’d received while fighting on Septimus. Mason worried more about Casey, and about the scare she suffered.

“Negative. Situation assessed. Field operation decided,” one of the two boxy medbots answered. “Commencing.”

With a keening sound, she looked away from the mess, gagging a little. “Sorry,” she said, pressing a palm over her lips. “I hate seeing blood.”

“It’s fine,” Mason stated, hiding a wince as the bot pulled a little on the wound. “Are you okay?”

Still looking away, Casey nodded. “Don’t worry about me. Um... I should call this in, right? Get more guys in here, see if we can finish the job.”

“Right. As soon as the bots are done, I’m gonna—”

“As soon as the bots are done, you’ll rest. Take the rest of the day off,” Casey cut him off, finally turning her head to pin him with a stare.

Tickled that she fussed over him so, Mason grinned. “Yes, ma’am.”

Narrowing her eyes, Casey hummed. “Good. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll comm CC,” she replied, stepping away and activating her Correslink.

Mason nodded, but she had already turned her back on him to comm Central Control. With a sigh, he redirected his attention to the bots, watching as they Remwanded the cut.

How did the thruster collapse if the pistons were disengaged? Adding the incident to the ghost from last night, Mason had experienced more excitement in the past twenty-four hours combined than he did in the whole year on the station.

Strange things were happening on their Eye.

Episode 5

Terran Prime station, 2398 TST

Zale

He'd screamed again in his sleep. That's what woke him. Confused, and still in the nightmare's clutches, Zale looked around the bedroom without recognizing his surroundings at first.

Sighing, he rubbed a palm over his face, trying to push his father's snarling expression out of his mind. Fuck. He hadn't dreamed about his father in years. That he did now frustrated Zale to no end.

He knew why. She was the reason. She came and disrupted his hard-earned discipline, born out of carefully constructed routine. For so long, Zale wore that routine like a cloak against the trauma he'd suffered. Trauma only Brayden knew about and shared, as they grew up together on Orcus, the infamous prison planet.

Despite it all, despite needing the routine like he needed air, and always avoiding any unknown like the plague, Zale didn't fear change. Inhaling, he uncurled his fists and relaxed his

shoulders, desperately reminding himself that fear of change is moot, for life is change. And like any other challenge, it should be met fists first.

Yes, Lima being here threw him for a loop. Because he hadn't known she was coming, he hadn't prepared for the encounter. Yes, he felt threatened by her being on the station. No, he would not allow himself be vulnerable to her again.

It was bad enough his nightmares had restarted.

And that she'd come see him yesterday, after he'd convinced himself he could ignore her altogether. Lima coming to apologize served one purpose only, as far as he was concerned—it stirred his interest anew.

Now, his strong will was the only thing stopping him from stalking her movements on his station.

Growling, Zale untangled the sheets and left his bed. Showering in record time, he then meticulously donned his uniform. Glancing one last time in the mirror before he left his quarters, Zale nodded when he found everything in place.

"Fuck!" he swore when he checked the time. With another growl, he exited his apartment and strode down the corridor. The few members he met while descending to CC flew out of his path without bothering to greet him, no doubt fearing to engage the commander when he was wearing such a thunderous expression.

Today proved awful already, as Zale registered another first: he was never late. Bursting through the doors of CC, Zale offered a brisk "good morning" to the day shift and hurried to his office.

He found Theresa Starr waiting for him, which he expected, and Brayden, which he did not expect. Judging by the woman's scowling expression and Brayden's roguish grin, Zale had interrupted something. Shooting Brade a warning look, Zale approached his chair on the other side of the desk and took a

seat.

“Apologies for being late, Miss Starr,” he murmured, scanning his Correslink to power up the central console. Soft pings sounded as VALID updated his work files and comms stream.

“That’s all right, Commander. And please, call me Tessa,” the corporate liaison replied.

“Aw... you never offered me the same,” Brayden interrupted, sprawling in the other chair.

Blinking, Zale tipped his chin in Brayden’s direction. “Why are you here, Brade?”

“Urgent security matter,” he drawled, his tone bored despite his words. “Takes precedence over this lovely suit’s scheduled time with you,” he continued, jabbing a thumb in Tessa’s direction.

Offended, Tessa Starr sputtered for a minute. “I beg to differ. As Corporate Chair, I have not only a right, but a responsibility to be present for all matters that involve the security of this sta—”

“You’re cute when you’re irritated,” Brayden said, his grin widening when Tessa glared at him.

“Chief Connaway, you will take me seriously,” she ordered in an icy tone. “I may be young, but I am the one Keepers Inc. chose to represent them on this station. At least, for now.”

“Respect is earned,” Brayden volleyed, his tone conversational. “You think any one of us here haven’t worked for the positions we’re currently in? Nobody gifted us a damn thing, you can be sure of that.”

“There it is,” she snapped. “That’s what bothers you. You think I want to be here, dealing with the likes of you?”

Brayden’s blue eyes turned glacial, but before he could reply, Zale intervened. “That’s enough. You are both behaving unprofessionally. So, fine. Your security report takes

precedence, Brade. What happened?”

“Chief Miura had an incident in Engineering Bay yesterday, involving one of the shuttles scheduled for repairs,” Brayden said, his eyes focused on a point somewhere behind Zale.

“Since when is an engineering accident a security threat?” Zale asked, leaning back in his comfortable chair.

“Since Maze classified it as possible sabotage,” Brayden replied, finally meeting Zale’s eyes. “He was working with Casey Jenkins on the first shuttle when the pin from the left thruster exploded and the thruster itself collapsed, despite the pistons being disengaged. He says that shouldn’t have been possible.”

“Yes, I’m reading his report now,” Zale said, his eyes roving over the comm’s attachment. “Is he out of medbay?”

“Never went. His injuries have been field-treated by medbots,” Brade answered.

“I’m ordering him to go and get checked up by Doctor Quinn, nonetheless,” Zale replied, his fingers flying over the holokeys.

“Is he suspecting anyone?” Tessa asked, breaking the silence for the first time in minutes.

“No, he isn’t. But...” Brayden trailed off, rubbing his palm over his chin as he pondered his next words.

“But?” Tessa prodded, arching an eyebrow at him.

“But I know the man, we’re friends,” he informed her. Then, looking at Zale, he continued, “So I know he’s hiding something.”

Cracking his neck side to side, Zale nodded. “You have my approval to launch an official investigation. Keep me posted on every step.”

“Great. Thanks, kino.”

“What about me?” Tessa intervened, addressing Zale.

Stifling a sigh, Zale amended his order to Brayden. “And send a copy of our comms to Corporate Chair Starr. Now, about our scheduled meeting, Tessa. There’s bad news. Astrophysicist

Jaffai updated her warning on the solar flares happening two days from now. Apparently, they're going to be much more severe than she initially predicted."

"Okay..." Tessa Starr replied, frowning in clear confusion. "And does that affect our plans for dismantling the section promised to Leeweather?"

"Indeed. All space operations will be canceled during the flares," Zale nodded.

Tessa sighed, her shoulders slumping. "That's going to be so much fun to impart to Lima. She's already stressed about falling behind schedule."

"It's out of our control. For the next week, everyone stays put, inside the Prime and the Ark."

"Don't worry, baby girl. You'll get used to it. I can keep you company, if you want," Brayden offered, smirking at Tessa.

Scowling, she pushed to her feet. "No thanks. I guess I'll go talk to Lima. Until later, Commander." She hurried out of his office, purposely not acknowledging Brayden.

"What the fuck, Brade? Why are you so devoted to driving every Corporate Chair away?" Zale rounded on Brayden as soon as the door closed behind Tessa.

"I'm not," his brother replied, eyes wide.

"Really? Remember the last one?"

His expression now darker, Brayden scoffed. "That guy was an asshole. I merely gave him a chin check. Her though... her I dig. She's cute."

Schooling his own features to a stern expression, Zale pointed a finger at Brayden. "No."

"No?"

"No. Leave her alone."

Chuckling, Brayden shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't accommodate you, my brother. She's too much fun."

"Just be careful," Zale warned. Brayden was the only one to

whom he would ever give in. Their history was simply too intertwined not to-- Brade was family.

“Don’t worry, man. I won’t screw this up for you.”

“I know.”

Later, after Brayden left, Zale sighed and gave in to temptation, even though he should have been working. More so now, when his station was being threatened. “VALID, find Lima Harris-Pratt for me, please.”

A mere second later, the footage appeared on the holoscreen in front of him. “Thanks,” he murmured, smiling when he saw her looking quite aggravated, the more Tessa explained to her.

Even after all these years, even after what she did to him, Lima was still the only woman who could make his heart beat this fast. She was also the only one who could make him this hard, Zale thought as he adjusted himself. Especially when she was as furious as she appeared to be now.

Pulling himself away from the footage was hard, but Zale had work to attend to. Updates to revise, projects to oversee, permissions to grant. A plan to follow. Reports to send to Corporate. A possible sabotage to deal with.

All of that fell into the background when VALID announced Lima Harris-Pratt was demanding to see him. Granting her access inside his office, Zale leaned back in his chair and couldn’t help himself from giving her a smug look as she stormed to his desk.

“This was your doing, wasn’t it? You’re hell bent on causing me to fail, aren’t you?”

“What are you talking about?” he goaded, smiling internally.

“It’s all a lie. There are no solar flares.”

Shaking his head, Zale informed her, “I can assure you that threat is very real. And very dangerous.”

“But... a whole week?”

Shrugging, Zale nodded. “Possibly longer. That remains to be

seen.”

“Fuck!” she exploded. “No. You cannot do this. I have two days, right? You can authorize the de-moduling now and my team and I have more than enough time to settle in by the time the first flare hits.”

“The detachment of each section is a complex process which cannot be rushed, for every little error could trigger a proper catastrophe—“

“You’re an asshole! But if you think I’m going to let you ruin my chances because of our past, you’re mistaken,” she threatened Zale in a low voice, putting her palms on his desk so she could lean closer. “I’m not going to allow that.”

“Allow?” Zale echoed, finally allowing his amusement show in the smirk he gave her. In the face of her ire, a hot ball of pure lust exploded inside his body. A thousand fantasies ran through his mind, fantasies in which Zale tempered her anger with his touch and mouth and turned it into intense passion instead.

“You did it on purpose,” she accused.

“How could I do it on purpose, Lima? Think I can order some solar flares like I order pizza? Here, I’ll forward you the comm from Astrophysicist Jaffai.”

“Don’t bother. Tessa already did,” Lima grumbled. “Don’t get in my way,” she warned, before turning on her heel to exit his office.

Unable to contain it any longer, Zale released a deep belly laugh, which earned him a scowl from a retreating Lima. After he calmed, Zale abandoned all pretenses and ordered VALID to follow Lima around the station, keeping the transmitted footage in a small square to the foreground of his holoscreen as he returned to work.

Did it feel good that these pesky solar flares encumbered her work? Hell, yeah. Zale quite enjoyed her anger. And, as a bonus, it would keep her on the Eye for longer.

Not that he enjoyed her nearness.

Fuck. So far, she hadn't given any indication she'd like to give the two of them another chance.

But if she did? Would he sweep the hurt she'd caused him under the rug and welcome her with open arms?

Scowling at the answer his mind offered, Zale knew he was well and truly fucked. Approaching the viewingpane stretching on the entire wall opposite his desk, Zale let his forehead drop forward as he remembered the two of them together. They'd been so young back then.

After his childhood on Orcus, Zale was no innocent. But Lima... she was a sheltered rich girl just making the first steps into adulthood. That's what drew him to her. The air of innocence and complete belief that everything would be alright.

That's also what caused Zale to hide his true self from her. What would Lima say if she discovered how different Zale was from the man he allowed her to see? Would she accept the real him, or run in the opposite direction?

Episode 6

Terran Prime—the Ark, 2398 TST

Kalon

The funds destined for his research were dwindling to nothing. The cyclic stipend has stopped, all because his mother had died and his older sister, the new Matron of the House, refused to pay Kalon a credit more. The nosy jerk of a sibling tried to find out what the money was for, as it was quite unusual for Rakh'Sha males to continue using the house's funds once they reached adulthood.

But Kalon couldn't tell her their mother was paying for his silence. For not telling the whole universe she was dishonorable, a thief and an embezzler.

His sigh echoed in the empty lab. Kalon abandoned the desk and stretched his spine, looking around. His Kalthera plants occupied a great deal of the space, and Kalon was glad no one else shared his lab. Biologists stopped coming to the Ark long before Kalon arrived five years ago. So, Kalon was in fact the sole member of the Biology Department. Which suited him just fine. He preferred to work alone. Enjoyed the silence.

Speaking of which, she was late. The little human who could see his plants in a way he'd never be able to.

The Kalthera was discovered almost a decade ago on a rocky moon in the Far Reaches. At first, it had been ignored, as the little white flowers looked innocuous enough. But a curious scientist started to study why the flowers were growing out of sheer rock, and in truly inhospitable conditions.

What he discovered shook the entire scientific community of the Union. The plant could not only survive in high atmospheric radiation, but it was using said radiation to grow and flourish. In an environment as far from life-conducive as possible, the Kalthera thrived.

From there, the scientists scrambled to study the Kalthera, and they discovered it exhibited a long assortment of properties, primarily healing capabilities. Even today, few could understand the Kalthera and Kalon himself could sometimes barely comprehend his results.

He knew the plant was sentient. He just couldn't prove it.

Which is why Luna was playing such an instrumental part in his study. Because of her prosthetics, she could communicate with the plants.

After extensive deliberations, Kalon was ready to pay the ultimate price for the experiment's success: putting Luna's name right next to his on the thesis.

Moving to the first row, Kalon started his second examination of the Kalthera that morning. Sometimes, he missed stuff on the first try. Contained in micro environs, the plants stretched in five neat rows. Every case simulated one ecosystem available in the Union, with the ones Kalon modified by introducing several "training" agents at the back.

The most promising Kalthera, the one that had produced nanocell regenerative sap, sat proudly in the middle of the first row. And it was the one with the weakest aura, according to

Luna.

Even though he planted this specimen in Bokhreen soil—the richest known soil of the Union. Kalon bent and repositioned the magnifying goggles over his eyes as he studied the plant’s stalk, adjusting the digital zoom with a series of quick blinks. Growling, he jumped back.

Holy Mother, it was dying! The Kalthera was dying. And now he couldn’t afford to replace the plant.

What went wrong? What was missing? Just several days ago, the plant was thriving, and Kalon had been ready to conclude the experiment and declare it a success once he obtained the small quantity of regenerative nanocell.

But a responsible scientist always double-checked his work, so Kalon pushed forward, waiting to see if he could replicate the results. It seemed he missed a link in the process. But how? He did everything just the same—

“Sorry, sorry. I’m late, I know. Had to attend a meeting with CC, explaining why I’ve raised the alert status on the solar flares. Regarding that, I have some bad news. But first, here. Coltram gave this to me to give to you as you missed the last interdepartmental session,” Luna said, thrusting a data vial at him, her eyes on its label with ‘Kalon Null’ printed in bold letters. “I’ve never seen a Null designation before,” she commented, finally looking up at him.

“It’s rare,” he replied, taking the data vial, and throwing it on his desk. He offered nothing more but felt Luna’s curious stare. Ignoring it, he pointed to the dying Kalthera. “Will you, please, check this one?”

“Sure. This is the weak one, yes?” she asked, finally shaking herself out of her thoughts and moving to the case to flick through the holocharts depicting its progress. “The charts tell me it’s dying, but... I see the aura is stronger than yesterday.”

Shoving his fingers into his mane, Kalon pulled until his

scalp prickled. “How is that even possible?”

“I don’t know... Perhaps it’s all backwards. Maybe a strong aura means the plant is not that healthy, and vice versa.”

“It is possible,” Kalon drawled, sounding doubtful. The longer he stared at the dying specimen, the more dismayed he became.

“Hey...” Luna approached, placing a palm on his forearm. “We’ll figure it out, together. It’s just a minor setback.”

Kalon gazed at her pale fingers gripping his dark fuzz. He wanted to touch her back. To see if her skin felt as soft as it looked. But a Rakh’Sha male was forbidden from touching a female, unless the female was the one to place his hands on her body. And even then, he couldn’t let his hands roam. The female was the one directing every touch.

But Kalon wished to be in charge. Which is why he was also an Errant, and not just a Null.

Concerning Luna, Kalon felt none of his normal anger when he looked at her. Was it because she was human, or because she was so small, compared to himself and the rest of the Rakh’Sha?

Every time he looked at her, Kalon felt like somebody punched his core. She was so dainty and feminine. He especially liked her shiny black hair, so long it brushed against her waistline every time she moved. Her big brown eyes, he could barely meet, for they did wicked things to his insides. He even liked the prosthetics he admired so, in a purely professional capacity, of course—two thin metal bands stretching from the corner of her eyes to her hairline on both temples.

Blinking, he shook off her hand and turned back to the desk, powering up his console to register her new theory. “The money’s gone,” he blurted.

Frowning, Luna shook her head slowly. “What money?”

“For my experiment. I’ve got no more funds. So, I can’t replace the specimen if it truly dies.”

“You were using your own money for all this?”

“Of course.” Kalon reared back in surprise. “I presumed you knew. The experiment is mine, not the Ark’s.”

“Oh. And can’t you use the Ark’s funds for the rest?”

“Keepers Inc. will never approve the funding for a Kalthera experiment, as it’s of no use to Earth,” he replied, gesturing to the planet stretching somewhere underneath.

Luna pursed her lips in thought before a determined expression settled over her features. “Then, we’ll just take more care of the plants. Triple-check every step. There’s no room for errors.”

Her response pleased Kalon. It showed exactly what type of scientist Luna was, one he didn’t mind working with. “You said you have some bad news?” he asked, propping himself against the desk and crossing his arms over his chest.

“Yes. First, the solar flare coming tomorrow will be even stronger than I initially predicted. Even here, on the Ark, we must take some safety measures. Second, I’m leaving this evening. They have ordered me to the Prime to assist in the preparations there. So, for the next few days, I won’t be able to assist you in the Kalthera experiment.”

Chuffing, Kalon nodded. “I see. I’ll probably redirect all power in the lab to the micro environ cases and won’t work on anything until the flare’s over. I’ll review the findings so far and brainstorm a little... Do you know how long the flare will last?”

“By my estimate, three days. But that could change anytime.”

“I know the drill,” Kalon drawled. “Very well. You have time to help me today, then?”

“Yes. I’ll check their aura and note any changes,” Luna said, activating the correct app on her Correslink.

“And I’ll further study the dying one,” Kalon concluded, giving her a nod as she went to the last row of plants. She always started from there, as she considered the row closest to the door

to be the first, despite Kalon's clear numbering system.

For a long while, they worked in silence. Kalon appreciated Luna seemed to enjoy the quiet as much as he did. The only sounds were her low murmurs whenever she marked something down on her app, or his growls and snarls when he mentally debated any findings.

At lunch, his Correslink chimed quietly, and Kalon straightened from his bent position over the microscope. Shaking his head as he refocused on reality, he saw Luna had already finished with her work and perched on a corner of his desk, her attention riveted on the holoscreen of her Correslink.

On the balls of his feet, he approached, intending to surprise her. He did so yesterday and she had giggled for five whole minutes. But as soon as he saw the article she was reading, Kalon froze.

He must have made a noise, for Luna looked suddenly behind her, and her startled expression morphed into a guilty one when she saw him looking at her holoscreen. "Sorry," she gasped, turning the device off. "Kalon, I..."

"Did you find answers to all of your questions?" he sneered, gesturing to the empty air where the article hovered just before. He knew he was being unfair, for her curiosity was normal. Kalon didn't know why the fact that she was trying to find out more about his designation was bothering him so much, when he never cared about what others thought before.

"I didn't, actually. There's little to no information on the SysNet regarding Rakh'Sha designations. All I could find about Nulls is that they are, in fact, rare, and cannot contribute to the gene pool. Duh. They're Nulls."

"We're remnants of the previous civilization. Before the Re-education," he grudgingly admitted.

Luna's eyes widened. "That's so cool! But... gene pool? That's why a Rakh'Sha female has up to six mates?"

Kalon nodded. “A Matron. After she’s mated, a Rakh’Sha female becomes a Matron. And if she wants to conceive, all six mates must contribute to the... reproduction process.”

“That’s... “ Luna shook her head. “So, you can’t conceive? That’s why you’re a Null?”

“I have no desirable genes to transfer to my descendants. That’s why I’m a Null,” he corrected. There. It happened. She knew. Would she look at him differently now?

The humans were so diverse, Kalon knew. Seemed so tolerant of each other’s differences. And free. Ironically, because of his undesirable designation, Kalon reveled in a lot more freedom than the rest of his brethren.

“Ah, I see. So, your society of now doesn’t accept the genes of your ancestors, when the Rakh’Sha males let their natural aggressiveness lead,” she surmised, surprising him.

“Correct,” he nodded, giving her a look of unabashed pride.

“You have those genes. And yet, you’re a scientist,” Luna teased.

Kalon burst out laughing. Wiping tears of mirth away from his eyes, he wheezed a little before stopping. “That was a good one. Let me return the favor. Why don’t crabs donate?” he asked the latter in Standard Terran.

“What?” Luna was looking at him like he grew another head.

“Because they’re shellfish,” he finished the joke, chuckling.

“Oh,” she said, and then chuckled too. “A biology flat joke.”

“Correct,” he replied, switching back to his native tongue and grinning. “You’re not a bad lab partner, Luna Jaffai.”

“Right back at you, Kalon Null. You know, you scared me a little that first time we met.”

“Me? How?”

“You roared.”

“I did?” Kalon scratched his head, trying to recall the incident. “I thought... because of my size.”

“I expected that. I knew you were Rakh’Sha. But when I was with Coltram on the corridor, and he knocked. You roared.”

“I see. Apologies. Bad day,” he tried to explain. Hunching his shoulders to make himself smaller, he looked right into her eyes, willing her to believe him. “I’d just found out my funding stopped because Mother died. I’m usually well-mannered.”

“Your mother died? I’m so sorry, Kalon.”

His entire body froze as Luna flung herself at him, hugging his middle. He couldn’t remember when was the last time someone had touched him, much less hugged him. In his first-stage cub hood, perhaps? Stiffly, he endured Luna’s embrace, refusing to allow himself to lean into her warmth.

After a second, she released him and tried to take a step back, but his tail had curled around her middle, keeping her plastered to him. Glaring at his traitorous appendage, Kalon ordered it to let her go. Chuckling, Luna resumed her position on the corner of his desk.

“You should have said something that day, you know. I wouldn’t have bothered you if I knew you were grieving.”

“I was and am not. I was not close to Mother. I was just a male, therefore unimportant.” At her sad expression, Kalon pointed a finger at Luna. “No. Don’t do that. It’s just the way things are. Now, come. Lunch, then back to work.”

“Yes, sir,” she mimicked a salute and jumped from the desk, skipping to the food dispenser to order some lunch.

Shaking his head, Kalon followed her. A strange sensation had settled inside his chest ever since Luna announced she’d be gone for a few days. His intuition told him he would miss her, which was preposterous. She was nothing but a coworker, and they barely knew each other. Plus, per their previous agreement, the collaboration between them was for a limited time only. When she came back, she’d be around his lab for a couple more days.

After, she'd return to her own work and he'd be all alone again.

Episode 7

Terran Prime station, 2398 TST

Casey

“Harper?” she whispered into the dark room. Looking behind for one last time, Casey slipped into the huge bay and closed the door. Rows upon rows of machines stretched in front of her, silent and still. The bay had been closed for several years because of a containment breach. They had sealed the breach, but CC saw no point in restarting the hulking life-support machines anymore; requirements were lower on the station with so few people living on it. Now, the bay made for an excellent secret meeting spot.

“Were you followed?” asked the wiry man, stepping out from behind a gravity stabilizer.

“No.” Casey eyed the man, noting how he seemed to have aged in the past few months. Not for the first time, she wondered if he was the big boss, or just one of the many handlers. It was impossible to know for sure, given the nature of their organization. They compartmentalized everything, sending any necessary information to each person directly via

their untraceable subdermal implant. Casey herself didn't know how many of them were on the Eye at the time, nor who was an Alterran, like herself. It could be anybody. She thought there were about fifteen of them, but that was just a guess. Casey had never met another Alterran besides Harper.

"Are you sure?" he retorted, staring at her colorful hair. "You're not exactly inconspicuous."

Casey sighed. "There's no one around the station at this time of night, Harper."

Harper grumbled but nodded after a few more seconds. "Do you have anything to report?"

Incredulous, Casey scoffed. "You're the one who called this meeting. I thought it was because you finally have something for me." At first, she'd been excited to come to the Eye and start on her mission. But more than a year has passed, and her only order had been to watch and wait. Get to know as many people as she could, learn all about the station.

"I might have. Two tasks, in fact, but you need to worry about only one for now. There're some files I need you to locate and get for me. The specifics will come through your implant."

Her heart started pounding, but she restrained her excitement. A little worried, she asked, "What files? And from where? I only have the basic Engineering clearance—"

"Enough," Harper barked. "Have you spent so much time on this side, that you forgot how to conduct yourself in front of a superior?"

Biting back the rest of her stream of questions, Casey shook her head. "No, sir. Sorry."

Appearing appeased, Harper nodded. "Wait for the instructions. Then, get it done, Jenkins."

Gulping, Casey nodded.

"If we didn't need you for exactly that basic engineering clearance, we'd have let you go by now, Jenkins," Harper

muttered darkly. “Remember your true purpose, girl.”

Not until Harper left her alone in the room, did Casey release the breath trapped inside her chest. ‘Let go’ was code for making someone disappear.

Worse, Harper was right. Casey had forgotten her true purpose. She’d done such a great job at blending in and making friends that she forgot how Alterrans worked and acted.

The real Casey Jenkins, the Terran, was dead. She died in a shuttle accident four years ago. Casey Jenkins, the fake, arrived here, on the Eye, with no real personality of her own, just like a true Alterran. She’d done her best to emulate the dead one’s identity. Took her a long time to find balance.

And, in the process, discovered herself.

Such a cliché.

Was it true or not? Some days, Casey felt like she was just a bunch of pieces thrown together and rearranged until they fit the puzzle.

The thrum of the subdermal implant forced Casey to abandon her musings. Behind her right eye, the details of the mission started scrolling down and Casey forced herself to focus because she knew this was the only chance she’d get at reading the message.

The mission seemed simple enough. Casey decided the best time to act was during Jenna’s birthday party that night, when everybody would be distracted.

Back to her cabin, she wore a dark jacket with the hood pulled low to obscure her features. To VALID, she appeared invisible, thanks to the little gadget Harper gave her on the first day on the station. The neuronet tracked her location through the embedded Correslink every Terran had, but she was invisible from any recording. If someone were to check, they’d think it was a glitch or something.

In the safety of her cabin, she switched off the scrambling

device and hid it in a little compartment under the floor. After she showered and changed, she began planning for her mission later that night.

She was late to breakfast. By the time she made her way to the engineering canteen, the usual line to the food dispenser was gone and everyone was seated at a table. Casey grabbed her food, waved to her friends at the back of the room, and plopped down in front of Mason, who was eating alone at a table for two.

“Morning, Chief. Haven’t seen you around the last couple of days. How’s the injury?”

Mason gaped at Casey, blinking in disbelief. “M-morning. It’s fine.” It seemed like he wanted to say more, but he was clearly still taken aback. Clearing his throat, Mason asked, “What are you doing here?”

“Getting some breakfast.” She gave him a wide grin. In the past, she always felt intimidated by his huge size and avoided him. But after talking to him at the last job, the one where he got hurt trying to protect her, Casey learned he was a gentle giant. Plus, his propensity to blush when teased, despite his threatening looks, made Mason downright adorable. Around him, she didn’t feel so awkward and shy. “Coming to Jenna’s party tonight?”

“You bet. I will not miss it, like the last one. Though I might be late. Have a CC meeting just before.”

“Oh. There sure have been a lot of those lately,” Casey fished, looking down at her food to pretend disinterest.

Blowing out a breath, Mason nodded. “Yeah. Commander Corvald is worried about these flares tomorrow. The astrophysicist on the Ark updated their threat level, and she said they might be the strongest we ever got.”

Casey shrugged, unperturbed. “We’ll lock the Eye down tight and wait it out.”

“Did you receive the latest procedures from me? I drafted

those last night and asked Jamison to forward them to everyone.”

“I did. Every shuttle and transportation will be powered down and secured. Don’t worry, Mason.”

“I’m not. I know you’re a great engineer, Casey.” As he picked up his coffee cup, the back of his fingers slid against hers, curled around her own cup. Casey shivered at the feel of the cool metal, and Mason winced. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to touch you.”

Seeing his embarrassment, Casey’s eyes softened. She never understood these Terrans’ bias against cybernetic implementations. Even here, on this station of misfits, people avoided Mason. Sure, they respected his work and his collected calmness, his fair judgement, but they never went out of their way to get to know him. “Don’t worry about it,” she replied, patting him on his metallic arm to show him she wasn’t offended. “It was just cold.”

“Yeah,” he replied, looking around. Most people in the canteen were staring at them. “Look, Casey. Perhaps it’s not such a great idea we eat together. People might talk, warn you away from the big bad cyborg.”

“What?” Casey scoffed. “It’s no one’s business. Plus, you’re well liked, Chief. You have a lot of friends here.”

Mason shook his head bitterly. “You don’t understand.”

Not worried about repercussions, Casey shrugged. “You have other friends, Mason. I saw you constantly surrounded by them. And I’m a big girl. I can take care of myself.”

“This is different,” he bit out and at his glare, she dropped the subject.

The rest of the breakfast was spent in silence and as soon as he finished, Mason got up from the table and hurried out of the room, like he couldn’t get away from her fast enough.

Fine. It was for the best. Casey couldn’t afford any more distractions. She had to stay on track toward her true purpose.

The rest of the day passed by in a blur. Casey finished with her work well before the party. Once there, she met with the rest of the girls from the Engineering Department and stood by their side until the time to complete her mission came.

At the right moment, Casey snuck inside Mason's office and copied the required files from his work console.

Just as she was exiting the office, a slightly drunk Patricia stumbled down the corridor. "Casey," the woman slurred. "Looking for the Chief? He's just arrived at the party."

"Hey, Patty. No, I was just, um... uploading some data sheets for the Chief to review tomorrow. I don't know how hangover I might be and I thought to do it now, in case I forget," Casey joked.

Patty's loud laughter hurt Casey's ears, and she hid a wince. Stumbling a little when the woman threw an arm over her shoulders, Casey smiled and started to lead her back to the party.

"You should be more careful, Casey," Patricia crooned. "The Chief is hot, despite his undesirable augmentations. But the last woman he was with left here in tears."

"What?" Casey stopped and forced Patricia to turn to her. "What do you mean?"

"Mean, yes," the woman slurred. "They were so mean to her for being with him. Mocked her, taunted her, avoided her. Until she couldn't take it anymore and left the Prime."

So that's why Mason acted that way at breakfast. He was trying to protect her from the whispers and the gossip. To protect her reputation, like a knight from ancient times. If people here knew who she really was and what she was here for... she would ruin his reputation.

One look at Mason Miura, at his bionic arm and eye, at his Dreamskin collar, and you knew he'd lived a hard life. In this, they were alike. A lot of bad things had happened to Casey, too.

She didn't mean to be a liar and a fraud. But she didn't have a choice.

Sighing, she led Patricia back to the party, trying not to notice the way Mason was staring at her from across the room.

She'd succeeded in the first mission they entrusted to her. But instead of feeling smug and proud, Casey felt only dread pooling in the pit of her stomach. Because now, she was in too deep.

She had too many secrets to form a real and meaningful connection. All her friendships here were perfunctory at best. She became fantastic at feigning interest and prompting discussions in the other direction.

Therefore, Mason? That was nothing but infatuation and wishful thinking.

Toward the end of the party, her subdermal implant thrummed, alerting her of a message. Pretending to pour herself another glass, Casey turned away so the glint in her eye couldn't be seen as she read the message. It was Harper requesting another meeting.

Sighing, Casey gulped down her glass and waited a bit more. Seeing a larger group preparing to leave, Casey joined the gregarious men and hid between their bodies as they left the room.

"Good job getting these before the flares," Harper praised her when she handed him the data vial with the copies. "Good to see you refocused, Jenkins."

"Thank you, sir." Fidgeting on the spot, Casey scratched her arm. She remained silent as Harper reviewed the information, trying not to look at the documents. She knew she took some plans for an older section of the station, but she didn't know what for. It was not her place to ask. Harper told her what she needed to know, and that was it.

"So. Now that we know we can trust you, we have another

mission for you. The only thing missing from these,” Harper said, gesturing to the plans stretching in the air between them, “is the access codes for the command latch. Chief Technical Officer Miura has them somewhere. We want you to get close to him and find them for us. Use whatever means necessary. We know it may take you some time, so we’re prepared to wait.”

Her breath hitched, and it was only through sheer force of will that she kept her expression from betraying her shock. “Y-yes, sir,” Casey stuttered.

“This isn’t as simple as the last mission. You understand that. Don’t you, Jenkins?”

“I understand, sir.”

“Good. Contact me when you have them.”

For the second time that day, Harper left her alone in the derelict bay. But unlike the last time, Casey crumpled to the floor and sobbed.

Episode 8

Terran Prime Station, 2398 TST

Tessa

“Please repeat the confirmation code, Miss Starr,” VALID said, wearing a placid expression.

Seeing the neuronet, even in holo form, felt surreal. Tessa almost had a heart attack when she entered Neural Net Central and VALID materialized in front of her. “Welcome to NNC, Miss Starr,” he said, just like that. Like neuronets designed holo forms for themselves all the time. VALID was the single one that did, as far as she knew.

Later, she calmed once VALID explained he wasn’t about to stroll through the corridors anytime soon, as the holo was tethered to this room, his room. And even if he were to pop out randomly, did it matter? He was just a holo, and not corporeal in the least.

Still, seeing him, instead of just hearing him, humanized VALID in a way that made Tessa understand why so many restriction algorithms were in place every time a neuronet was involved. Tessa suppressed a shiver as the question of how

sentient VALID truly was popped into her mind.

She knew VALID was unique among the billion other neuronets constantly used throughout the Union. Probably more than unique—the best of them. The only neuronet designed by the Renditions in such a manner. VALID, or Voluntarily Assimilated Logic & Intelligence Directory, had something truly wondrous buried inside his code—a part of each of the creators’ conscience.

Just like the scientists of the Union did a long time ago with the Renditions and the organic Donors, so did his bionic creators with VALID.

VALID, or Vasktrosti, Aktrosti, Lortrosti, Indtrosti, and Durtrosti. Every creator’s name, rearranged by order of assimilation.

“Right,” she replied, shaking herself out of her thoughts. “Validation code for credential update: Scorpius, Lyra, Andromeda, seven, four, Ursa.”

“Thank you, Miss Starr.” He smiled at her, and he looked so cute, she couldn’t help but return the gesture. Eerily, because the holo’s lips never moved, VALID announced after a few moments, “Credentials updated to SEC-7 Corporate level for Starr, Theresa June.”

“Th-thanks,” Tessa murmured. “Now, could you transfer the rest of the documents pertaining to my new level of clearance to my Correslink, please?”

“Certainly,” VALID nodded, his holo flickering for an instant. “Done. Do you require further assistance, Miss Starr?”

“No. Thank you, VALID. Um... see ya.” She didn’t know why she said that last part, as she never planned to return to the chilly NNC ever again, not if she could help it. She had nothing against VALID, it wasn’t personal. Neuronets just really creeped her out.

Most likely, her frontier upbringing was at fault. On Yutok-7,

her homeplanet, she never had to deal with such advanced technology.

“See ya, Miss Starr,” VALID returned cheerfully. “Hope it’s soon. Few people come to NNC, and I always think it’s nice when they do. And not just because I like them admiring the holo form I designed.”

Unbidden, a chuckle escaped Tessa’s lips. Her eyes softened as she gave VALID one last wave before exiting.

This morning, she was supposed to comm her boss, Milton Blackbury (on which she had a little crush on), for an update report, but Commander Corvald had called a CC meeting. As she walked toward it, she activated her Correslink and recorded a brief message, explaining why she couldn’t take his comm and that a severe solar storm was about to disrupt further communications for the next few days, so she’d be unavailable. Tapping the send option, Tessa switched off her Correslink after first ensuring her comm hit the nearest deep space relay.

She decided against taking the elevator directly to CC, as there was plenty of time before the meeting and she enjoyed the stroll. Having a desk job was nice, but sometimes she missed the more active lifestyle she was used to growing up. Life on a frontier planet wasn’t easy. You snoozed, you died.

She regretted her decision as soon as the double doors to one of the bays opened and no one came out. Worse, she could hear voices muttering, hisses that sounded from much farther away than just inside the room. The lights in that section of the corridor flickered, and Tessa jumped.

“Hello?” she called into the dark bay, receiving no response. Icy tickles danced down her spine, and Tessa shivered. The station being haunted, those were just rumors. Right?

The thing was, she could almost believe them in this moment, the longer she looked into the dark, empty bay, listening to the foreign mumbles of ghosts. It didn’t help that

Terran Prime, as a whole, looked so decrepit and abandoned.

Everything ended just as abruptly as it started. The doors closed, and the mumbles ceased. The harsh white lights came back on.

Scowling, Tessa looked around, half-expecting someone would jump out and laugh at their own stupid prank. “Not funny,” she muttered, hugging herself as she started walking again.

After a few minutes, when nothing else happened, Tessa blew out a breath and loosened her shoulders.

Just as she turned the corner, the door to one of the cabins opened. She couldn’t tell why, but hearing Brayden’s Connaway voice spill into the corridor made her backpedal. She pressed her spine to the metal wall at her back and peered around the corner.

“Baby girl,” Brayden cooed, scrambling to catch the shirt some woman threw at his chest. “Come on.”

A redhead stepped into the corridor, hands on her hips and executing a perfect hair flip. “Get out and don’t come back, Connaway.”

“Didn’t we have fun?” he purred, trying to press closer to the woman, but she stopped him with a hand on his chest. “Why are you being such a cockblock now?”

Tessa briefly checked the corridor behind, but it was early enough that few people were milling around the station. It would be just her luck, for someone to come and catch her in the act of spying.

“Go to hell, you cheating bastard,” the woman growled before slamming the door into his face.

“Now, that’s unfair!” Brayden yelled at the sealed door. “You knew the rules before you let me into your bed.”

Sighing, he turned around and threw the crumpled shirt at the opposite wall. In the harsh lightning, his tattoos looked that

much more vivid. Biting her lower lip, Tessa studied his muscular back, seeing that the flames curling around his shoulders and neck, all the way up to his temples, were in fact part of a bigger tattoo. A huge phoenix took up most of his back, its wings spread wide and its tail curling around the left side of his abdomen. Toward his lower back, the flames tapered off to a thick row of embers.

After a minute, Brayden sauntered over to pick up his discarded shirt, uniform pants hanging low on his hips. Tessa bit down on her lip harder, until the tangy taste of blood hit her tongue.

Darting back, she closed her eyes and tried to regulate her breathing. She was panting, her pulse skyrocketing. What was it about Brayden Connaway that aroused her so? The man had barely said two words to her, and all of them were either teasing remarks or lewd comments.

She squeaked when she opened her eyes, and if it weren't for the wall blocking her way, she'd have jumped back. Brayden Connaway was standing in front of her, his hands crossed over his chest, a smirk on his lips. With the white shirt buttoned halfway up and showing a tantalizing peak of a muscular chest, as tattooed as his back, he looked so beautiful it was almost scary.

"Well, well, well. What do we have here?" he drawled, his icy gaze sweeping over her from head to toe almost lazily.

Tessa straightened her body and brought her hands up to fix the tight bun, hiding their trembling. "Good morning, CSO Connaway. I was just on my way to the CC meeting."

A flicker of anger started simmering in her lower belly, surprising Tessa. Every time he addressed her, it pissed her off, and she didn't have a clue why this kept happening.

"You're lying," he proclaimed, closing the short distance between them with measured steps. Even when their toes

touched, he kept coming. Realizing her breasts were brushing against his chest with each inhale, Tessa stopped breathing altogether. “I think you were spying on me, Miss Starr.”

Licking her lips, Tessa whispered, “Why would I do that?” She tried to bring her palms up, to push him away, but the bastard caught her wrists and trapped them between their bodies.

Bending down, he pressed his lips to the point where her shoulder met her neck in a semblance of a kiss, and inhaled. Slowly, he trailed the tip of his nose up the column of her neck, and Tessa trembled, restraining a moan. Or had she moaned already? She couldn’t tell. This movement right here—it was the single most erotic experience of her life, as pathetic as it sounded.

She understood now. Why so many women on the station allowed Brayden Connaway into their beds, even knowing he was a man-whore. For a brief time, they got to experience true bliss, didn’t they?

Licking the shell of her ear, he chuckled darkly when she gasped. “What’s your cabin number, baby girl? We should move this party there. Unless you’re naughtier than I thought and want to do it right here in the corridor. There’s a utility closet three doors down—” the rest of his sentence ended on a groan as he bent to cup his junk.

Shaking her head to clear up the rest of the fog, Tessa pushed him farther away and straightened to her full height. “You’re disgusting,” she spat. With a start, Tessa realized that if he hadn’t opened his mouth, she wouldn’t have stopped. In fact, she could feel a little prickle of irritation at being interrupted, at being denied. “This is assault.”

“Assault?” he choked and Tessa was proud for standing up for herself. “You hit me!” Brayden exhaled heavily and straightened from his curled position, observing her with his icy

eyes. When the silence between them lengthened, Tessa dropped her glare and turned on her heel, picking up her things from the floor where they've fallen. With a brisk stride, she started a march toward the meeting. After a few seconds, she heard his footsteps behind, but she didn't slow her stride.

The doors to CC opened automatically as she reached them and Tessa breezed right through, stifling a snort at Brayden's outraged yell when they closed right back into his face.

Schooling her expression, she paused to straighten her already impeccable outfit before stepping into the Station Commander's office. Brayden passed by her and smirked as he disappeared behind the door. With flared nostrils, she followed him into the room.

All CC meetings took place inside the Commander's office, at the conference table crammed into a corner, between the various consoles and the huge viewingpane offering a glimpse of Earth.

She caught the end of Commander Corvald's grumbles at Brayden's disheveled state as she entered. "... and change. You're Chief of Security, for heaven's sake."

"Good morning, Commander Corvald," Tessa inserted, moving to the conference table, and taking the first available seat. For now, the three of them were alone in the room.

"Good morning, Miss Starr," Corvald returned. "And please, Zale is enough."

"Only if you call me Tessa," she quipped, uselessly. She knew from past interactions that Corvald would be back to calling her 'Miss Starr' tomorrow, forcing her to return the gesture.

"Come on, man. What's your deal? I look just fine," Brayden continued, closing his wrinkled shirt all the way, and putting a uniform jacket over it that he appropriated from the back of a chair. On second thought, it looked to be his own, as it was the perfect size and had CSO stitched in block letters on the left

lapel. “See?”

Sighing, Corvald shook his head and turned to Tessa. “Any news from Corporate?” he asked, as the rest of the Department’s Heads filtered into the room.

“No, Zale. I sent my boss, Milton Blackbury, a comm this morning, letting him know about the storm and that we’d be incommunicado for the next few days.”

“Milton Blackbury? The Muffin Man?” Brayden guffawed, earning a look from Zale.

Tessa’s eyes narrowed, and she gave Connaway such a glare, she hoped he’d shrivel right on the spot. After studying her face for a few seconds, Brayden scowled. Sure, Milton was on the pudgier side, but he’d been nothing but nice to Tessa. Which is why she was crushing on him so badly. He might come out short in the looks department, but Milton was powerful and rich and ambitious. And he’d shown interest in her.

Plus, it wasn’t as if Tessa herself was some great beauty. She was short and rounded, and her hair wasn’t that great of an asset either. To make it worse, she was shy and awkward.

The meeting continued as usual, but with a new face across the table—Luna Jaffai, the astrophysicist from the Ark. Tessa swallowed a yawn as an argument ensued halfway through the meeting between Lima Harris-Pratt and Zale Corvald.

Unlike the other meetings, Lima stormed out of CC, leaving this angry ball of crackling energy in her wake. Tessa empathized with Lima, and Corporate itself would benefit from solving the problem. But there was nothing to be done.

With the flares coming in just a few short hours, the station’s module promised to Leeweather Holdings couldn’t be dismantled.

Frowning, Tessa got up as soon as the meeting was over and hurried outside CC, looking both ways once she got into the corridor. She hoped Lima wouldn’t do anything stupid. Like

going to the module set for dismantling and... what?

Half-jogging, and cursing the bunch of bureaucratic crap she had to carry with her to every meeting, Tessa hurried in what she hoped not to be Lima's wake.

As she entered the section, she stopped to regain her breath. Ignoring the warnings displayed above the passage, Tessa stepped into the dimly lit module.

"Lima," she hissed, then paused. She was being ridiculous. "Lima!" she yelled this time.

The sound of her heels clicking on the metal floor was the only thing to be heard in her surroundings. After yelling a few more times Lima's name, she backtracked to the entrance.

At least, she'd reassured herself the woman wasn't here.

As she turned around to pass through the airlock and back into the station, a form emerged out of the shadows and pushed her back into the module.

Crying out, Tessa stumbled and fell on her butt, crawling backwards away from the being. Because of the darkness, she couldn't see who it was, but she noticed the person's features were obscured by a dark mask.

Jumping to her feet, Tessa abandoned her heels and prepared to run, but the masked one stepped back and palmed the controls beside the door, sealing her inside.

"Hey," she yelled, going to the door and pounding it with her fists. "Let me out! What are you doing? VALID! VALID, let me out."

She kept yelling and cursing until she lost her voice. Until her breath was sawing in and out of her chest in terrified bursts of air.

"Station module sealed. Dismantling process activated. Error. Retrying. Error. Dismantling process—"

With a crackle, the automatic warning cut off. The entire module shuddered and then plunged into darkness.

In the sudden silence, a tight ball of doom twisted her stomach into a knot.

Episode 9

Terran Prime station, 2398 TST

Lima

The door at her back opened with a swoosh and Lima turned around sharply, her hands scrambling to catch the sagging towel wrapped around her body. “What the h—” The outrage left her as she locked eyes with Zale.

Blinking slowly, she tried to kick-start her brain. After the crushing CC meeting, where Zale had denied her demands again, rendering her useless in front of her colleagues, Lima had come straight to her room and jumped in the shower. There, under the stream of nearly scalding water, was where Lima felt safe to release the angry tears. Where she could vent her feelings and crumble, then come out cleansed.

“Your Correslink is turned off,” he growled. He looked so angry his chest heaved. His hands trembled as he clenched and unclenched his fists.

She wouldn’t do this. Not now, with nothing but the flimsy towel as armor. “Get out!” Her stomach pitched, but she hoped the force of her glare never wavered and it hid her fear. She’d

never seen him so angry. She almost hoped his normal mask of disinterest would slam down over his features. She didn't know how to deal with this version of Zale, the one unhinged and out of control. Taking a step back, she stammered, "How did you enter my room without permission?"

"Commander privileges," he explained, voice still angry, words just as biting. "And you didn't answer my question."

Question? What question? That was an accusation. As if she had to be available whenever he fancied issuing another order. With every step back, he advanced, his movements sure and predatory, until Lima felt the coldness of the wall pressing against her spine. "That doesn't give you the right to storm into my room, invade my privacy. This is completely inappropriate, Commander Corvald," she sneered the last words. With a shiver, she pressed into the wall even more. She almost regretted her words as Zale's golden eyes darkened even more. She shouldn't be baiting him.

"Poor rich girl," he mocked, caging her in as he braced both arms against the wall on either side of her head and leaned forward. Their noses almost touched. "Daddy's baby girl has come out to play with the big bad wolves. How's the Red City these days?" he asked, referring to the city of her birth, Rubrum, on Cordus Prata.

Lima's eyes narrowed, and she clenched her teeth against the sudden need to spit in his face. That may be completely unladylike, but it was appropriate for a prison planet runt like him. She brought her hands up to his chest, trying to push him away, but he seemed made of stone. "Move," she gritted when he didn't budge. Why was he doing this to her?

"Still trying to please your father, I bet. Did he choose a pompous asshole for you to marry yet? Or is he still grooming you to take over the family's empire, keep the Harris-Pratt legacy intact? With your brother playing for the other team,

dear old dad can't do much but turn to his spare—”

The stream of cruel words ended as Lima cracked her palm against his cheek. The slap resonated in the empty room and left a red mark on his skin. And the bastard laughed. He just laughed, before turning back his head to look at her with hate-filled eyes.

“You know nothing, Zale Corvald. I'm no longer a lost girl. You could never draw me as easily into your web again, nor manipulate me as you see fit. I am a Harris-Pratt and I can make you bow—”

His lips crashed down upon hers in a bruising kiss. He forced his tongue inside, and she felt his fingers tangling in her hair, tilting her head to a sharp angle. One where he could continue to take, and plunder, and dictate.

He'd never kissed her like that before. No, his kisses used to be gentle. So gentle, they were almost teasing. His taste was almost the same, but tinged with more darkness. A spicy sample of danger.

Lima felt disgusted at the sharp thrill of excitement Zale's lips conjured, and before she knew it, she was returning the kiss, losing herself in the challenge he presented. Zale groaned and placed his hands under her ass, pushing her up and encouraging her to wrap her legs around him. Their kiss was messy, nothing but pure animal need. And still, Lima found out it was exactly what she needed. Zale's fingers curled, digging into her flesh, and Lima moaned, demanding more.

“Commander Corvald, please respond. The Chief Security Officer has issued a black alert. Commander Corvald, please confirm.”

Lima could hear the voice but couldn't comprehend the words. Zale leaned back, breaking their kiss, and Lima chased his lips for a second before she blinked stupidly up at him.

“Fuck!” he swore, shaking his head. He put her down gently,

then turned around, rubbing his hands over his face. Checking his Correslink, he swore again. “I have to go. Stay here. Don’t leave this room.” Then, before she could respond, he continued, “VALID, confirm the black alert. Track Brayden’s location and send it to me. I’ll be in CC shortly.”

“What’s a black alert?” Lima asked, refastening the towel around her body. “What’s happening?” And how can you leave me like this? She never voiced that question, though. He’d made her plenty vulnerable already.

Zale shook his head and strode to the door. “It’s bad. Stay here. And turn on your damn Correslink,” he said before disappearing into the corridor.

“Jerk!” she called at his retreating form, glaring at the metal door that closed a second later. Angry and confused, Lima turned to the closet and dropped her towel.

After she dressed, she turned on the Correslink she’d silenced because she just needed a freaking moment. And saw the alert issued because someone was trapped in the section scheduled for dismantling. The section owned by Leeweather Holdings. Her section.

So, that’s what made Zale lose control. He must have thought she was the one trapped. Aww, the jerk cared. Not that it warmed her jaded heart. Nope. Not one bit.

Zale was not the only one who could go hot and cold from one second to the next.

Tessa

Snap out of it, Starr. Closing her eyes, Tessa tried to slow down her breathing. She was almost hyperventilating.

Despite what others thought, space was never silent. There was always the hum and the clangs of the consoles, the whoosh of the life-support system, the thrum of the engines, the murmur of countless others trapped inside the small spaces. But now, with the power in the entire section gone (something

that never happened, not with the failsafe technology nowadays), the silence was deafening. Tessa could feel the hairs on her arms stand on end. And that prickle of unease gnawing at her insides.

Gaining control over her breathing, even if her heartbeat was a lost cause, Tessa opened her eyes and squinted against the hazy glare of the emergency lighting. She had to find a way out. Think, Starr. She was a frontier girl, after all. She'd been in tight places before and came out fine. This was no different.

Her Correslink, of course. No one could really be stranded with the high-tech available in this part of space. But, weirdly, it wasn't around her wrist. Dropping to her knees, she patted the area around, and her fingers brushed against the work tablet she carried everywhere. Trying to power it up proved futile. The device was dead.

Fine. No Correslink, no tablet, no way to contact the outside world. Or the station behind the sealed doors. Whatever.

The mystery person, who she was almost sure was a man, must have grabbed her Correslink when he pushed her inside the module. And then trapped her inside. Asshole.

Inhaling, she pushed against the fuzzy panic testing the limits of her logic. She forgot about the automatic warning from before; she forgot about the triggering of the dismantling process; she forgot about the man trying to kill her (why her?); she forgot about the wits she was scrambling to keep.

Her eyes fell on the control pad beside the sealed door. Of course. She just needed to open the door and step into the station. The pad's screen was as black as her tablet's. Luckily, it didn't deter Tessa.

Despite her cluelessness where technology was involved, a door's control pad was pretty basic, and it wasn't the first time she'd forced open a door because the automatic control had failed.

She took the bobby pins out of her bun and placed them in her pocket. With a gulp, she vied for patience and started the slow process of removing the pad's screen to access the wiring behind. She had to use almost all of her pins because they bent too easily, but she finally succeeded.

With a cry of victory, she grabbed the red-blue wire that she knew would open the door, and pulled. Nothing. Putting more strength into the move, she pulled until the wire broke out completely. And still, the door didn't budge.

"Hello?" came a muffled voice from behind the thick door.

"God. Yes! I'm in here!" she yelled back, pounding her fists on the metal for good measure. "Help! I can't open the door!"

"Tessa? Shit, baby girl. Is that you?"

Groaning, Tessa hung her head. Of course, he would be the one to find her. "Yes," she replied, much more quietly. "It's me."

"What the fuck are you doing in there?"

"Just get me out, please," she replied, and she hated how weak her voice sounded. She hated the sobs clogging her throat, or the sniffles that escaped.

"Shit. Okay, baby girl. It's going to be all right. Are you hurt? Can you open the door?"

"I'm fine. But I can't open the door, and I tried... I-I removed the screen and pulled the wires from behind, and it still didn't open." She sounded more frantic with each word she uttered.

"Okay. Let me see if I can open the door from this side..."

Brayden was the Chief Security Officer, a position that matched his brawny looks, but Tessa knew he'd earned it because of his cybersecurity skills. The knowledge comforted Tessa, and she allowed a modicum of hope to flare inside her chest. She had to tell him everything, if worst were to happen. "Brayden, listen to me. I thought Lima Harris-Pratt was coming this way, and I came inside the section to check. But when I tried to leave, there was someone else here, waiting by the door.

I couldn't see his features because he was wearing a mask. He pushed me inside and then locked the door, Brayden. And I'm pretty sure he started the disengaging process. Do you understand? This was deliberate. There's a saboteur on our station."

"Shit, Tessa." Then, after a pause, "I hear you. How do you know it was a man?"

"His physique. He was of average height but with wide shoulders." She breathed in slowly through her nose, then asked, "Any luck?"

Based on the mumbled curses she could barely hear through the thick slab of metal, she supposed the answer was negative. After a second, she heard Brayden issue the black alert and comming for reinforcements. Sliding down with her back against the door, Tessa hugged her knees to her chest and dropped her face on top of them.

What a stupid death this would be. Growing up on a frontier planet, Tessa overcame the fear of death early on. The crops domes were old and crumbling, and the life-support failed more often than not. If you didn't get out in time, you were dead. And if you had no crop, you starved to death.

Not to mention the tremendous risks the asteroid miners faced daily. Her father died that way, deep inside a space rock. The company hadn't even bothered to retrieve his body; so, they had no one to bury.

"Baby girl? Tessa?" Brayden asked, voice bright, in contrast to the underlining tone of defeat.

"Yeah," she mumbled, before scrambling to her feet as she realized his voice came from inside the section. "What? From where are you speaking?"

"I couldn't open the door. But I fixed the intercom. And stopped the dismantling process." A scratching sound drowned his words. "Also, I commed Maze. He's on his way with Zale and

the rest.” This time, his voice echoed.

“I’m having trouble hearing you, Brayden.”

“That’s because I’m in a maintenance tunnel. Hang tight, baby girl. I’m coming.”

“What? No! Stop, Brayden. There’s no sense in both of us being stuck in here.” Never mind her embarrassment at being the damsel in distress. She would never live it down.

He didn’t answer. She could hear his occasional curses and mumbles, and his breathing over the intercom, which he kept open. A gesture Tessa appreciated, as it made her feel less alone. A few minutes later, there was a clamor coming from deeper into the section, and Tessa ran in that direction, full-speed.

She hated to admit it, but knowing there was someone coming for her made her stupidly happy. She crashed into Brayden just as he was dropping from a maintenance shaft.

“Easy, sweetheart,” he said, chuckling. “You okay?” His arms that came around her dropped, and he pushed her gently a step back to take stock of any injuries.

“I’m fine,” she repeated for the thousandth time, rolling her eyes and hiding a grin. Then she slapped his shoulder. “This was a stupid move, Brayden. I told you not to come.”

Shrugging, he ignored her question as he looked at their surroundings. He let out a low whistle. “This isn’t creepy at all,” he surmised the conditions. “Okay. Come on. Show me the way to that door. We need to see if they made progress on the other side. And how come you don’t have your Correslink?”

Blinking at the rapid pace he switched gears with, Tessa led him down in the requested direction. “He must have taken it off of me.”

“The attacker?”

“Yeah. When he pushed me back inside.”

“Motherfucker.” Brayden scowled and blew air sharply out through his nose. “If I ever get my hands on him...”

They halted when the section shuddered again, and complete darkness descended. Even the emergency lights went out. After a few seconds, just long enough to worsen the panic she was feeling, the emergency lights came back on.

“Something’s happening. Come on.” Brayden started jogging, and she followed, steering him in the right direction. “What’s going on?” he asked as soon as he reached the intercom.

“I tried to force open the door with one of my con algorithms,” Maze’s voice answered. “Triggered a failsafe in the process. Now the e-screen is dropping. But don’t worry, man. I’ll have you out before you become space steak.”

“Man,” Brayden groaned. “I knew your code was shit.”

“Hey!” Maze retorted, his voice coming out as half-offended and half-amused. “Shut up! Let me work.”

“What’s an e-screen?” she whispered, looking at Brayden.

“It’s the stuff keeping the radiation out, and the inner temperatures... in.”

“And it’s dropping? How can you two joke like that when we’re about to die? Space steak?” Tessa yelled. “Oh, my god! I’m not ready to die!” Her throat constricted until she felt like she couldn’t draw another breath in. Bracing her palms against her knees, Tessa leaned forward and tried to command her body to breathe.

Clearing his throat, Maze said, “That was a joke. You’ll freeze before the radiation will affect your body. So... space popsicle is more accurate. Spasicle?”

“Maze, shut up,” Brayden ordered before kneeling in front of her. “Hey, Tessa, baby girl. Look at me.” Shaking her head, Tessa tried to push him away while wheezing. “No. Look into my eyes. Come on, sweetheart.”

Tessa’s eyes connected with his icy green ones and she held the stare until he coached her out of the panicked state. When

she was breathing normally again, she realized she was in his lap, her back to his chest, and his arms were around her, holding tight. “Thanks,” she whispered, swallowing the embarrassment she was now feeling. Some frontier girl she was.

“It’s okay. Hey,” he smoothed one palm over her blushing cheek. “No need to be embarrassed. I’m not the one freaking out right now simply because you did it first. I’m not ready to die either.”

“Why did you come inside, Brayden? Why go to all this trouble for me?” Tessa asked him seriously.

The glints of amusement died from his eyes, and he turned just as serious. “How could I not?”

Grimacing, she pulled away from him. “That’s not an answer. That’s just a question to my own.” Their moment in the corridor from earlier that morning felt like a million years ago. Still, Tessa replayed it, looking for clues that would explain his behavior.

“Come on. We can stay here and wait for Prince Charming to open the door, or we can find the control room and see if we can get out on our own. Either way, we’re running out of time. Get up, Tessa.” It became clear she shouldn’t question him any further, judging from the guarded set of his shoulders.

Traipsing around the section was the last thing she wanted to do now, in the last minutes of her life. But she got up and followed him. At the center of the section, they found the control room with its door sealed shut.

Undeterred, or probably needing to vent some of his anger, Brayden bashed it open. Stepping inside, they found it completely trashed, every console and piece of equipment destroyed.

“Well, there goes our small hope,” Tessa sighed. They now relied solely on Maze and the others to get them out of this situation.

“This is weird. I was present for the official inventory of the entire section before you guys arrived and everything was fine. Who would do this? And why?” Brayden asked, looking around.

“And why targeting me?” she added, raising an eyebrow. “Was I a victim of opportunity or...”

“Marco!” Maze’s voice sounded from down the corridor.

Tessa exhaled a huge breath as Brayden scrambled to yell back, “Polo!”. Then, stepping closer to Tessa, he picked her up and whirled her in his arms. “We’re saved!”

Chuckling, Tessa nodded. Pressing a palm to his cheek, she looked him dead in the eyes. “Thank you, Brayden Connaway.”

After a breath, he gave her a blinding smile. “Not too bad for a jerk, right?” Then, more serious, he whispered, “And don’t worry, Tessa-Theresa Starr. We’ll find whoever is responsible for the attempt on your life. And when we do, I’ll destroy him. That’s a promise.”

And that’s how Tessa’s stupid little heart began beating only for him. Which, knowing his tendencies, was a terrible idea. One that would lead to nothing but heartbreak and tears.

Episode 10

Terran Prime station—the Ark, 2398 TST

Luna

It was time she let go. Even if it wasn't easy.

So much of her life had been tied to her parents' death, Luna hardly knew who she was anymore. She became an astrophysicist to follow in both her parents' footsteps. Accepted the five-year position on the Eye because her father's journal led her to the Prime station.

She dedicated her entire life to solving the mystery revolving around the death of her parents, to explaining the weird phenomenon that had robbed her of her eyesight.

When she was nine years old, Luna had joined her parents on a trip to the Void, to the research facility built there. But on the way, their private shuttle encountered a weird wave of radiation and all the systems had crashed.

She remembered how scared she'd been, how she clung to her mother. How she screamed at her father when he decided to take a drone and approach to investigate.

Her father had seemed so excited, for reasons unfathomable

to young Luna. As a scientist, she understood his behavior better now, the itching curiosity that wouldn't go away until answers were found.

When he didn't return to the shuttle, and the comms were lost, her mother took the only other drone to find her husband.

Left Luna alone on the silent, floating shuttle. Clinging to the viewingpane as her eyes tracked her mother's silver pod.

A bright light flashed, and the shuttle rocked, and Luna passed out from the intense headache.

She woke up, still alone, and unable to see. In the fresh kind of darkness, Luna wailed. Pleaded. Sobbed. Then, bit by bit, broke.

Eventually, other shuttles arrived to investigate the phenomenon and saved Luna. She ended up in her father's best friend's care. For a long time, she struggled to overcome the trauma.

She still struggled, she supposed.

Yannis was also the one who arranged for Luna to take part in the medical study, which illegally gifted her with the prosthetics. Though the Enforcers came and shut down the clinic, Luna got a special dispensation and kept her prosthetics.

As a teenager, Luna had found her father's journal among the rest of their possessions. Since no one had been able to explain what had happened to her parents, or what that white light had been, Luna used the journal as a starting point to her own investigation.

Apparently, her father started working on a new device that would be able to measure the gravitational radiation, using a pulsar's rotational period. Since the Void's been theorized to be caused by a quasar's dispersion, he'd decided the research facility there would be perfect to test out his invention.

While her father had depicted his project in great detail at first, things got fuzzy toward the end. As the project advanced,

his records devolved to short and cryptic messages, sometimes not making any sense. He became convinced someone was making copies of his work, trying to steal his project.

Which was stupid, because the improvements his work would bring to the available tech were insignificant, and only his fellow scientists would find any value in the invention.

There were no great profits to be made, so why would anyone care?

The last entry, the one Luna remembered word for word, said: My wife keeps bugging me to go to the Void. But I cannot. Not before the Eye. If what I believe is true... that truth changes everything.

But Luna knew her parents had never made a trip to the Prime, a fact confirmed by VALID's records. And how could this decrepit station change anything?

This was what she came here to find out. To no avail. She found nothing, and was getting tired of constantly looking.

She felt like all she'd done was waste time.

In a way, she'd died there too, trapped in that shuttle. For certain, she never truly lived afterward.

Until now. Biting her lower lip to stop the smile from spreading, and pressing a palm to her stomach to stifle the squirmy butterflies, Luna opened the door.

Kalon, who was bent over one of his precious Kalthera, turned around and gave her a shocked look. His lips parted, but no sound came out.

"Hey," she greeted him in a giddy voice.

Kalon shook his head, his dazed expression slowly shifting to disbelief. "Luna. What are you doing here?"

Oh. She'd expected his surprise, but this was... different. He sounded almost accusing. "I... um. I wanted to let you know I'm back from the Prime and... I mean, we have two more days of research, per our agreement..."

Kalon's entire frame stiffened; even his tail stood in a straight line at his back. At her words, his expression morphed to something akin to awe. "You came back," he whispered. Then he shook himself and cleared his throat. "Well, good. There's a lot of work to be done. But... I'm happy you're here, Luna, truly."

"You thought I won't return to your lab? What the hell, Kalon? Research or not, I'd like to think we're friends. So, of course I'd at least visit."

He shrugged, looking away. "I know I'm not the easiest to be around."

Frowning, Luna denied his words with a brisk shake of her head. "I like being around you," she declared. Was the burly Rakh'Sha blushing?

"Same," he stammered, turning to fiddle with one of the *Kalthera* habitats.

Biting her lip again, this time for entirely different reasons, Luna went over her decision one more time. She supposed she'd been a bit impulsive when she'd packed up her stuff. And given her attraction to Kalon, it probably wasn't the best idea. But she squared her shoulders and dragged the hovercart inside.

"Well, in that case... Hi, roomie."

The pad fell from Kalon's grasp and he tripped over his feet as he turned to her abruptly. "What?" He gaped at the hovercart, piled high with her possessions.

Snorting at his expression, Luna hurried to explain. "I checked with Coltram if it would be okay to continue my work from your lab. And he gave his permission. Since I know you have a second cabin in your living quarters, I figured it would also be easier if I moved here altogether," she finished, gesturing to the side door leading to the lab's small apartment.

Kalon blinked, but remained silent, his features frozen. Okay. She might have pushed too far.

"I'm sorry, Kalon. I... realize now I took this decision without

consulting you first. And—“

“No. It’s fine,” he said quickly.

“Are you sure? I don’t want you to feel pressured. Or invaded.”

Kalon shrugged. “It’s change and I don’t like change. But... I’ll deal with it. I’m just surprised you’re taking my research so seriously.”

After that, Kalon exploded into a flurry of activity, helping Luna carry her things to the cabin, and clearing a desk near his own station. Luna kept peeking at him from the corner of her eyes, trying to assure herself he wasn’t downplaying his discomfort, but he seemed content.

“So, how have you fared during the solar storm?” she asked him after they finished.

“How have I fared? How have you been? I heard there was a black alert on the Eye. And Commander Corvald notified everyone to start using their Bio-Sigs with the comms.”

“Yeah... it was weird. I don’t know why the black alert has been issued. All I know is that the whole thing was very hush-hush. And that the Commander and his CSO and CTO were in meetings afterward almost non stop. There are some rumors, but nothing official yet.”

“I haven’t heard anything either,” Kalon said. “Nor been called to attend a CC meeting.”

As Head to the biology department, Kalon should have known more. Strange. Luna hummed, then dismissed the whole thing with a shrug. They fell silent after, Kalon fiddling with his plants, and Luna transferring her work files to the console on her desk.

When she looked up a while later, the blood froze in her veins. She might have made a sound, for Kalon startled and turned to look at her. “Luna? What’s wrong?” he asked.

“What is that?” she demanded, abandoning her seat, and

approaching his console in a daze.

Her eyes trailed over the familiar graphs, her hand stretching out to trace the curves of the hologram.

“Where did you get these?” she grated. “Kalon?”

“Luna... I don’t understand. These are the Kalthera radiation spikes registered during the solar storm. And they’re the same as always. You see, several times during the plant’s development, the Kalthera will change its print...”

Kalon continued his explanation, but Luna could no longer hear his words. Tears sprang to her eyes, and she shook her head, denying the truth.

This was impossible. This connection couldn’t exist.

And yet... it did. And it changed everything, even as the questions she’d asked herself so many times before multiplied.

“Luna?” Kalon sounded unsure. “Are you alright?”

“No,” she answered in a harsh voice, wiping the tears away. “This is crazy.” Inhaling deeply, she tapped her Correslink, searching for the correct files. “Here, look.”

Projecting her own graphs into the air next to Kalon’s, the two of them compared them. They were almost identical.

“I don’t understand. How do you have these?” Kalon whispered his question, his head moving left and right as his eyes tracked the curves and hollows of the graphs.

Gesturing to her own holo, Luna told him a part of the truth. “These graphs show the measurements obtained after a strange phenomenon near the Void, almost twenty years ago.”

“Twenty? But the Kalthera were discovered much more recently than that. So how can it be?”

“I don’t know, Kalon...” Just when she was ready to let it all go, this happened. Luna clenched her fists, angry at the universe for constantly conspiring against her. Would she never find peace?

“There is evidence indicating the Kalthera had been around

for much longer. A professor at the Zin University tried to date back to the first plant, but the experiment failed. So, I guess what you're saying could be possible..." He turned and gripped her shoulders. "What I don't understand is what upsets you so."

He didn't get it. How could he, when he didn't know her story? As far as he was concerned, the Kalthera was linked to a strange occurrence in the Void, the only place in the known universe where strange things happened all the time. So, what? Scientists everywhere had agreed a long time ago the cosmos was tied to every life form.

"And the thing is," Kalon continued when she didn't reply, "because I was tracking the Kalthera, my sensors picked up similar spikes around the Eye. There's no discernable pattern I could find, the spikes don't seem connected to any other event... but I didn't have an astrophysicist like you until now. You can see what I cannot."

Luna pressed a hand to her chest, where a small flame of hope flickered. The possible connection between the Kalthera and what happened to her parents, as unlikely as it might be, redoubled her determination. It was a lead.

Even if nothing would come out of it, Luna couldn't ignore it. She owed it to her parents to follow it. She owed it to herself.

Looking at Kalon, she wondered if she could trust him with the truth about her parents' death. Would he believe her, when so many others didn't?

Still half-dazed, Luna followed Kalon to his console, where he pulled up every one of his graphs and showed them to her. He seemed excited now, probably because he finally had someone he could share his research with.

She tried to focus, but all she managed was to nod dumbly, her mind busy considering all the implications. All the connections.

With this revelation, she added another tier to her puzzle.

But she also felt closer to a solution.

Kalon dragged a chair for her, and she sat beside him, resting her head on his shoulder. He stiffened at first, but the more he talked, the more he relaxed, until his arm curled around her shoulders and he drew her closer. Luna closed her eyes, a smile curling her lips, despite everything.

Touching seemed less taboo to him now.

Episode 11

Terran Prime station, 2398 TST

Casey

“You said I have more time,” she whispered, meeting Percival Harper’s glare with narrowed eyes.

“And now I’m telling you that you need to hurry. What difference does it make? An order’s an order.” Harper crossed his arms over his chest, glaring at Casey. No doubt, the wiry Alterran didn’t appreciate her questioning. “Did you discover the codes’ location, at least? Where is he keeping them?”

Casey shook her head. The codes couldn’t be anywhere else but in one of the two locations: Mason’s office, or his private quarters. “I barely saw him since the last time we talked. He’s always busy.” Harper frowned, so she hurried to add, “Look, it’s more complicated than I thought it would be. He’s a guarded man. Getting past his defenses is going to be hard.”

Harper rolled his eyes and smacked his lips. “I’m not saying you make him fall in love with you, Jenkins. Just get access to his private cabin. That’s probably where he keeps the codes.”

Casey’s fists clenched. She took a deep breath and nodded.

“Yes, sir.” She was no seductress, but even she could pull this off. Probably. Sex was sex, right? She ignored the heat spreading through her lower body at the thought of Mason’s hands on her and focused on keeping her expression blank.

Harper hesitated for a moment, and Casey stiffened, a hundred percent sure she would not like his next words. “Also, we need you to get his password for VALID’s core.”

Casey’s eyes popped out of her head. Asking for the access codes to the command latch was one thing. Those should be on a tiny token. If she could grab the token, and replace it with a fake one, without Mason noticing, then her mission would be over. But his password was another thing entirely—that wasn’t just lying around somewhere; that was inside Mason’s head. “Sir, I... I don’t know how—“

“I cannot fathom how someone as cowardly as you made our ranks,” Harper hissed. “Do I have to tell you everything? Can’t you think for yourself?” He pulled out a vial from his pocket and thrust it in Casey’s direction. “Grab a bottle of wine, pour this into his drink, and get him somewhere quiet. Easy.”

Casey hesitated, but took the vial of drugs and pocketed it. “If I drug him, won’t that blow my cover? He’ll know it was me.”

“Then find another option. I don’t care. Just get me those access codes and the password. You have two weeks.”

Casey swallowed and dropped her gaze. She knew she was nothing but a cork in a well-oiled machine, but she hadn’t realized how unimportant she was. They were prepared to sacrifice her without a second thought.

Harper sighed. “Gods, Jenkins. Don’t look so pathetic. Look, he probably won’t remember what happened. He’ll black out soon after you give those to him, so you only have a small window to get the password from him. Which will be easy, because the drugs will make him nice and pliant. I know we’re complicating your mission, but it’s all for the betterment of our

people. Don't you want them to be free, like us?" Casey nodded, but said nothing. She didn't know what was true anymore. How was sabotaging the Eye going to help her people? "We didn't need the password before, because we had our own ways bypassing VALID. But stuff happened, and the neuronet needs to be neutralized."

Casey's head jerked up at that. "The Black Alert, that was us?" Harper nodded. "Shit."

Harper's lips twisted. "It was a mistake, nothing more. Another recruit, like you, failed in his mission and tried to rectify his mistake through some very questionable means. And almost ruined everything in the process. So, here's your chance to make things right for us, to save us. You'd like that, don't you?"

Harper expected a nod, so she gave him that. "Is he all right? The recruit?"

"He's been dealt with. Don't worry about him, focus on your mission."

"Yes, sir," she said, because she suddenly wished for this meeting to end. She needed to get away from Harper, lest she asked to be 'let go'.

"Good. Two weeks, Jenkins," Harper reminded her. "Dismissed."

Casey saluted and focused on keeping her stride measured, even if she wanted to run out of the room. Halfway down the corridor, her legs turned to jelly, and she collapsed against the wall in a dark corner. Gods of war and ruin, but she had no way out of this.

If she didn't do this, the Alterrans would kill her. If she spilled the beans to Mason, Commander Corvald would no doubt imprison her, and then the Alterrans would kill her.

Casey closed her eyes and took a deep breath, dismissing her concerns. She was an Alterran, she reminded herself. She

wasn't like her friends on the station, regardless of how much she pretended to be normal this past year.

Footsteps echoed in the corridor, and Casey flinched, relaxing a minute later. They were coming from the opposite direction. She peered down the corridor, eyebrows raising to her hairline as she saw Morena Callahan, a shuttle pilot, entering the disused bay where Harper was still in.

Casey's legs tensed as she prepared to get up and... what? Save Harper? If his cover was blown, then her own gig would be up as soon as she stepped inside that bay. Plus, she thought, exhaling as logic returned, if Harper was unmasked, then it wouldn't be just a shuttle pilot confronting him. No. It was much more likely Morena was another one just like Casey, an Alterran, or someone working for their group.

She'd never met another of the ones sent here, besides Harper. Casey got up and pushed away from the wall, walking on wooden legs back to her cabin.

The next day, after her shift, Casey got ready for a night out with the rest of her engineering friends. The smell of singed hair blanketed the small bathroom, and Casey pulled away the Ellgess gun, releasing the strand.

With practiced movements, she replaced the empty DreamSkin crystal for a fresh one, choosing the color after by flicking the little dial on one side of the device. She watched as neon pink filled the crystal, then grabbed another strand of her hair and clamped the Ellgess gun around it. From root to tip, she passed it over her hair slowly.

When she was done, she inspected her work. Soon, she'd have no more space to do this, as the number of rainbow-colored strands almost hid her natural hair color. Still, every time she did this, she felt better about herself.

This was her method of rebelling, of erasing just one bit of her Alterran identity. Colored hair was against regulations.

A stranger was staring back at her when she checked her reflection. Casey ran a thumb across the dark bags under her eyes and dragged her makeup pouch closer. With a sigh, she stopped thinking about what she was about to do, about her mission.

A knock at her door sounded not long after she finished dressing, and VALID announced her visitors. Casey took a deep breath and opened the door with a smile.

“Sweetie,” Lydia, one of the best ‘friends’ here, whistled. “You look awesome!”

“Yeah, we’re gonna get some tonight,” Michelle chanted, pumping her fist in the air.

Casey laughed and stepped outside, locking the door behind her. “That’s what you always promise, Micha. Every time we go out,” she teased.

“Yeah, it’s getting quite tedious,” Lydia added.

Michelle stuck out her tongue and turned her back on them, sashaying down the corridor. Lydia snaked her arm through Casey’s and pulled her in their friend’s wake. Whispering and giggling, the three women made their way down to the Entertainment Sphere, and spilled into Stardust. The quiet bar was transformed into a nightclub every Thursday, for ladies’ night.

As soon as the pulsing music hit her, Casey disentangled from the other women and stepped onto the dance floor, joining the dozens already there, grinding against each other. She raised her arms and lost herself in the rhythm.

Glitter bombs burst, and she laughed, twirling this way and that, until she was completely covered in sparkling dust. Not much longer, Lydia and Michelle joined her, and Casey prodded them to the middle of the dance floor, adjusting the movement of her hips as the beat changed.

“I need a drink,” she shouted after a few more minutes, but

Michelle had already turned away to grind against some guy, and Lydia was farther down the road as she shoved her tongue down another's throat. Casey shook her head and moved to the bar, jumping up and down to get the bartender's attention.

"Aren't you bright tonight," a deep voice growled in her ear and Casey froze. Turning her head, she met Mason's eyes. He touched a finger to her bare shoulder and held it up for her afterwards, showing the glitter covering its tip.

Casey swallowed and forced a peaceful smile. "Yeah. Stardust," she replied, making a fist, then uncurling her fingers to mime an explosion. "Fancy seeing you here, at ladies' night," she teased.

Mason guffawed and jerked his chin at the surroundings. "Are you kidding? It's mostly guys in here."

True. Every Thursday, there was an unusual number of male patrons inside Stardust. Casey's smile slipped when she thought about Mason being here for the same reason as the others—looking to score. She shook her head. What did it matter? She was not jealous at the thought of him with some other woman. She turned away and grabbed one of the pads, ordering her drink when none of the bartenders came her way.

"Raul made me join him," Mason confessed, nodding toward the other end of the bar where Raul Valeras, a First-Tier Engineer was talking to a blonde woman.

Casey hummed in acknowledgement and wiped her sweaty palms on her thighs, a motion she concealed by pretending to arrange her short dress. "I see." God, she sucked at this. Here was her chance of gaining a foothold with Mason Miura, her target, and she was clamming up.

"You added a few streaks," Mason said, touching her hair gingerly. She looked at him in surprise and gulped, her throat suddenly dry. Where was that drink?

A second later, a small square section of the gleaming

counter slid open, and a tall cocktail glass emerged. Casey grabbed it with both hands and took a grateful sip.

“Look, I’m sorry about the other day,” Mason broke the silence, raising his own bottle to his lips. “I was just... I don’t know. Trying to protect you.”

“I’m a big girl, Mason. I can choose who to be friends with just fine. And I don’t care what people think or say.”

“Is that what we are?” Mason turned his back on the dance floor and braced both elbows on the bar. He was so tall, he could put them directly on the counter, while Casey’s shoulder was just barely brushing the curved edge. “Friends?”

Casey frowned, then shrugged. She couldn’t hear him properly over the loud music, but she thought he sounded... disappointed. “We can start there.”

Mason searched her eyes for a minute, then gave her a blinding grin. Casey blinked and offered him a tremulous smile in return. Gods, she was fucked, because she really liked him.

Her eyes trailed over the right side of his face, where most of his skin was covered in thick metal plates. His bionic eye stood in stark contrast, shining red in the darkened bar club. She knew Mason was incredibly self-conscious about his cybernetic augmentations.

They just made him that much more attractive to her. She wasn’t like the others, who twisted their lips in disgust every time he passed them.

So, baby steps. Throwing herself at him out of the blue was a sure recipe for disaster. A man like Mason would become instantly suspicious, if she were to do that. But if she made efforts to get to know him first, let the friendship run its course toward more, then she might have a chance.

She had two weeks.

She smiled and closed the distance between them, grabbing his metal arm. “Dance with me?” she asked over her shoulder,

eyelashes fluttering.

Mason gulped and nodded, allowing her to lead him to an empty spot on the dance floor. Facing him, she started to move, and he followed her cue, stiffly at first. Gradually, he relaxed and his movements started to flow more naturally.

Beat by beat, she stepped backwards, until the rest of the partiers enveloped them. She used that as an excuse to advance until her body was plastered to his front. Mason stiffened and looked down at her, and she grimaced, shooting him an apologetic look.

When his hands dropped to her hips, she took it as permission to curl her arms around his neck. Mason stared at her, his eyes roving over her features, and she returned his look before she rested her head on his shoulder.

The corners of her lips turned up when he gathered her even closer to him. Casey closed her eyes and pretended this was real.

Episode 12

Terran Prime station, 2398 TST

Zale

The rest of the people taking part in the impromptu meeting filtered out of CC, leaving the three of them alone. Zale nodded at the officers on shift, then turned to Brayden and Mason. “Let’s move this to my office.”

He strode to the door leading to his tiny office and stepped inside, making a beeline for the soda machine. He poured himself a glass and topped it with ice, then gulped it down.

“You all right, man?” Brayden asked, giving him a concerned look. “I’ve never seen you look so... disheveled.”

True. Zale took better care of himself usually, but he’d barely slept in these past few days. He hadn’t left CC, choosing to nap on the small couch in his office. Swiping a hand down his wrinkled uniform jacket, he sighed. “I’m fine,” he dismissed his best friend’s concern. “I’ll go to my quarters soon, don’t worry.”

“I’m not worried,” Brayden retorted in a drawl. “You’re a rock. A boulder. An immovable force. The eye of the storm—”

“Bray,” Zale warned. “We should focus. Mason, any luck in

validating the suspect's whereabouts?"

"About that," the Chief Technical Officer rumbled. "We can rule him out. He was in his quarters at the time of Miss Starr's attack. I verified the footage, and he'd entered his sleeping cabin an hour prior to the attack and hasn't left it again until dinnertime."

Zale sighed and collapsed in his desk chair. That was their last lead. Mason, albeit reluctantly at first, shared his suspicion with him and Brayden immediately after the attack. Apparently, he'd recognized a man from his past among the group from Leeweather Holdings.

Zale understood Mason's caution in telling them about his past. He already knew the talented engineer had been a slave, since his DreamSkin collar was such an obvious mark, but he'd have never pegged Mason for a gladiator if the man hadn't explicitly admitted it. Sure, the man was built like a tank, and one of the tallest people Zale had ever met, but he was also gentle and calm, contradicting his looks. Because of his cybernetic augmentations, Zale thought Mason had previously worked in private security, or as a bodyguard for some rich asshole.

And yet, his Chief Technical Officer had been a gladiator before he arrived on the Eye. He must have been an excellent one too, considering he was still alive.

Born on Septimus station, a rust bucket down by the Last Frontier, Mason had been sold by his alcoholic father to the criminal organization controlling that entire sector of space and, consequently, the Blithium trade—the Havoc Syndicate. Even though he was only six years old at the time, the pit's master saw the potential in him and had him in gladiatorial training by the time he was ten.

His master also proved he cared about Mason in his some twisted way, because instead of letting him die, he arranged for

cybernetic implementations to be added to each grievous injury. Implementations that were outlawed in the rest of the Union, following the Renditions' debacle.

Had Mason remained on Septimus until the end of his life, it wouldn't have been such a problem. But the fierce gladiator had other plans. By his mid-twenties, he had enough of the horrors the Syndicate was capable of, and, armed only with sheer determination, started a minor rebellion in the attempt of freeing the Septimus station from under Havoc's thumb.

That's how Mason came into contact with the authorities, and that's how he became a key witness in the trial against the Syndicate Alphas.

But life was rarely fair. So, even though he was a hero to the people living on the station, he became a pariah to the rest of the Union because of his cybernetic looks. Thus, Mason took refuge on the Eye, the station of misfits, more than a decade ago.

"I'm worried about Leeweather Holdings, if they're willing to employ such unsavory characters," Zale admitted. "I started running a background check on all the others. But I found nothing suspicious so far."

"Goddamit," Brayden snapped. "I've already done that, man, and came up empty."

Zale focused his attention on Brayden, scowling at the look of absolute lividness his friend sported. His reaction was more than a little exaggerated and uncalled for. Zale's eyes widened as he realized Brayden wasn't angry at him butting in what he perceived to be his share of work (he was Chief Security Officer, after all), but because he really cared about Tessa Starr. "I understand that, Brayden. But I wished to triple check. Manually. You know I only trust your algorithms and programs to a certain degree."

"Speaking of, I was wondering how the attacker could remain

hidden from VALID's footage," Brayden retorted. "I mean, Tessa saw him exiting the LH section, yet he never appeared on any of the cameras in the corridor."

"Wait," Mason said. "Do you suspect VALID itself has been tampered with?"

Zale flinched and looked up at the ceiling. How has it never crossed his mind? "VALID, initiate Cloak policy on my office. Effective immediately."

"Cloak activated, Commander Corvald," the neuronet replied.

"We can speak freely now," Zale announced, rubbing his face. "Fuck! Why didn't you say something earlier, Brayden? If—"

"Whoa, calm down, man. You're turning into a hot mess. Look, I didn't say someone has tampered with VALID, and it would be extremely hard to achieve it, since I've updated the security credentials necessary to access his core code. I just suspect this man has access to some cloaking device, not unlike the policy you just used to shield this room. If that's the case, then he would have been as invisible to VALID as we are now."

"But... even that's a long stretch, since not only are cloaking devices outlawed, but it's extremely difficult to sync it to VALID's own signature," Mason supplied.

"Difficult, but not impossible," Brayden countered.

"So, we have a fresh lead," Zale surmised. "It's worth following it. Not only to find this man, and sate your thirst for revenge, Brayden, but also to see how far this treason goes. I won't have people like Tessa's attacker on my station."

"I'm not thirsting for revenge," Brayden grumbled.

Zale gave him a droll stare. "Please, everyone can tell you care about Miss Starr."

"Yeah, you risked your own life to save her," Mason joined in the teasing, smirking.

Brayden crossed his arms over his chest and scowled,

causing Zale to chuckle. Despite all his joking, Zale felt proud that Brayden found someone worthy of his attention. And he supposed Miss Starr was all right, for a Corporate suit. Different from the women usually draped all over Brayden, but alright.

“Anyway, assholes,” Brayden said after a minute. “If cloaking devices are present on the station, then they should be relatively easy to find. I’ll start designing several sniffing algorithms.”

“Could your algorithms track the signals?” Zale asked, rubbing his chin. He understood the basic of software programming, and he knew how to operate almost every console on the station, but he was by no means an expert. He had a degree in Environmental Engineering from Novalis University, a different kind of engineering from Brayden’s specialty. One perfect for terraforming any planet in the Union, but useless in this case.

“I don’t think so,” Brayden answered slowly. “The best I can hope for is confirmation to my suspicions. I suppose that, after I finish designing the algorithms, I could find a way to track the signal to its source, but I make no promises.”

Zale nodded, but clenched his fists in frustration. He abhorred the idea of one saboteur running amok on his station, never mind an entire group of them. He hated this feeling of ambiguity, this lack of complete control over his station. The attack on Tessa’s life came out of nowhere, and it angered him to think about what else he might have missed happening on the Eye. He buried all his emotions and let only the determination to uncover every secret and subplot shine at the forefront of his mind.

“If there’s nothing else, I suppose we can adjourn,” he said, taking a deep breath in. Gods, he was tired. “Let me know how your project goes, Brayden.”

“Sure, man. And go to sleep. You look like crap.”

For a second, Zale hesitated. He wanted to talk to Brayden,

really talk. They haven't had a drink in forever. But no matter how much Zale missed his best friend, they were in the middle of a crisis and it was late and he was exhausted. "Yeah. I will. You do the same, you hear me? If I look like crap, then you look like shit."

Brayden smirked, his expression so roguish, it reminded Zale of younger, simpler days, when the two of them roamed the penal colony of Orcus. "See ya later, Zale."

Mason gave Zale a nod which he returned, then followed Brayden out the door. Zale shrugged out of his jacket, draping it over his left arm, and moved around the office, powering off the consoles.

"I'm heading out. Let me know if you encounter any troubles. You have the bridge, Analyst Trapp."

"Yes, sir, Commander," the younger officer saluted. "And good night."

Returning the salute, Zale swiveled on his heels and strode briskly out of CC, heading to the elevator just outside, the one that would take him directly to his private quarters. "Hello, Commander Corvald," VALID said.

That reminded him. "VALID, lift the Cloak in my office, please." After VALID agreed, Zale leaned on the wall at his back, closing his eyes just as the doors opened into the front room of his apartment.

He took a shower and inhaled a simple dinner, then collapsed on his bed. VALID woke him the next morning.

"Commander Corvald, Miss Lima Harris-Pratt is at the door. Should I grant her entrance?"

"What?" Still groggy, Zale pushed to an upright position and yawned. "Yeah. Yes."

After a brief stretch, he jumped out of bed and pulled the first pair of pants he could find over his boxer shorts, then padded out into the living room. Lima was fidgeting by the modular

couch in the middle of the room. Her eyes widened when she saw his bare state, but after a second, she let her eyes trail over his naked chest, a furious blush reddening her cheeks.

“Lima,” Zale greeted, raking his fingers through his bed hair. “To what do I owe this honor?”

“I, uh... wanted to see if you wanted to have breakfast.” Lima stammered, then added, “With me.”

Zale arched an eyebrow. Was she asking him out? Internally, he winced as he remembered how abruptly he’d left her when the black alert was issued, after the glorious kiss they shared. “I’d like that very much,” he replied quietly.

Lima blushed anew, but nodded. “Should we go into the cafeteria?”

Zale shook his head, then extended his right hand in invitation toward the little breakfast nook by the compact kitchen. “Unnecessary. I’ll prepare us something, if that’s alright with you.”

She gave him a small grin, and he could swear he felt a chip break off his frozen heart. “You still cook? I still remember your amazing Pofensis omelets you used to bring to me in bed after you... uh...” Her cheeks were on fire now.

Zale chuckled. “After I spent the night?” he offered, and she gave him a brisk nod, averting her eyes. Yes, he remembered those lazy mornings too, but mostly the nights. They’d been both so young, only in the first year of university, and fairly inexperienced. She was the sweet but naïve girl, and he was the quiet, jaded soul, not much different from now, he supposed. Still, she had been the only one he returned to, seeking more than one night. Before her (and after her), his sexual encounters had been brief and inconsequential. “I’ll make one now, I have the ingredients.”

“I’d love that,” Lima answered, jumping on a barstool, and placing her linked finger in her lap. Then chuckling, a faraway

look in her eyes, she said, “Oh my god, I just remembered my roommate from the first year. Lia Torres, the eye-rolling queen.”

Zale nodded, his back to her as he rummaged in the fridge. “She hated when I dropped by.”

He heard her scoff. “She hated it because she had a thing for you.”

“I’m sure that’s not true,” he replied absentmindedly, starting on the omelet.

“Trust me, I know what I’m talking about. Can I help?” Lima braced her hands on the counter and leaned forward. Gods, she looked so beautiful.

Zale shrugged. “Sure. You can chop the peppers,” he replied.

For a while, they worked in companionable silence. Lima handed him the chopped ball peppers, then set the table and made coffee. It was something so domestic, Zale couldn’t help but wonder if these would have been their mornings, should they have remained a couple.

“So,” Lima began pushing her empty plate away. “I’m here for more than your delicious omelet. I was wondering if you knew when the next section for Leeweather Holdings would be available.”

Ah. And here he thought she sought him out for something else entirely, besides work. This new Lima resembled him too much, at least where their work ethic was concerned. “No. I’m sorry, Lima, but I haven’t had time to deal with that yet. But soon.”

He wasn’t sure if she should still be on the station, if he was honest with himself. Not when it was becoming so dangerous. Hmm. Zale made a mental note to explore this idea later.

Lima shrugged. “Alright, Zale. That’s fine, we can wait.” She bit her lower lip, then continued, “But, I think you should talk to Austin. Perhaps this... attack... was because of a disgruntled

person, someone who hates the idea of LH renting one of the unused sections.”

Zale took a sip of his coffee and slowly returned the cup to the table. “You’re on first name basis with your boss?” He hadn’t intended for his question to come out sounding so forceful, but...

Lima blinked. “Austin is a friend of mine.”

Zale scowled and looked away. Of course, it made sense. Austin Leeweather was incredibly wealthy, and Lima was heiress to the Harris-Pratt empire.

“Are you jealous?” Lima asked, leaning closer.

“Of course not.” He scoffed.

“Pity,” she whispered, and it caused him to turn his head sharply in her direction. His eyes widened at the hungry look in her eyes. “But it’s the truth. He’s just a friend. I’m not interested in him, and he’s not interested in me.”

She licked her lips, slowly, and he snapped. Cupping the back of her head, he brought her lips to his, and he kissed her. She tasted like pepper and coffee, smelled of yearning and decayed happiness. He nibbled on her lower lip and she moaned.

He abandoned his seat and gathered her closer, urging her to put her long legs around his waist. Still kissing her furiously, Zale carried her to the couch, where they collapsed. She giggled, and he pulled away briefly, looking into her eyes. His breath hitched as he met her gaze made of melted chocolate. These were bedroom eyes, and his heart soared when he realized she still wanted him.

Lima skimmed her fingers down his sides, making him shiver, and he bent his head to capture her lips into another kiss, grinding his hardness into her warmth. She arched her back and moaned.

He abandoned her lips, trailing kisses over the rest of her face, from her forehead, to the corner of her eyes, to her chin,

then licked down the column of her neck.

“Zale,” she breathed, her hands roaming over his back. “More.”

Her plea was his undoing. The beast was out of his cage. In a single fluid motion, Zale trapped both of her wrists into one of his fists, and used the momentum to turn her around completely, until her back was pressed to his chest. With the other hand, he pressed between her shoulder blades, until she was lying on the couch, face-down, and with him looming over her.

Then he froze, realizing what he’d done. He’d never showed her this side of him before. He’d never dared. He’d always been gentle, caring, subdued.

Before he could jump back and release her, Lima turned her head and looked up at him, giving him a glare. “Don’t you dare stop, Zale Corvald. Show me. Show me what you’re really like.”

That made him shudder. “If at any point you wish to stop, just say so.” He waited until she gave him a nod, then ordered, “On your knees, ass up in the air. Grip the arm of the couch and don’t let go.”

He came up, kneeling behind her, pushing her skirt up her thighs until it bunched around her waist. Lima trembled, her fingers clenching on the fabric of the couch until her knuckles whitened. He caressed her soft skin slowly, leisurely, then gently lowered her panties. “Don’t let go,” he warned one last time before he buried his face between her legs.

Lima let out a long moan, and her entire body twitched. Zale gripped her buttocks with both hands and spread her before him. Her taste was even more distinguished than he remembered, like a fine wine patiently aged.

He teased at first, licking everywhere but where she wanted him to. She became incredibly wet, and her muskiness drove him insane. His cock was a steel rod inside his pants.

Finally, he put his lips around her clit and sucked. Lima shrieked and came instantly. He lapped at her juices, letting his tongue dive inside her as he cleaned her up thoroughly. Straightening, he smirked when he saw she'd never let go of the couch. "Good girl," he praised her, thrusting two of his fingers inside her tight cunt. "Hold on," he said then, as he started finger-fucking her in earnest. Lima screamed in ecstasy when he brushed his knuckles over her g-spot. Then groaned aloud when he repeated the motion. He flicked his fingers, twisting them around with each plunge into her wet heat.

He didn't relent until she came one more time, all over his fingers. He tormented her for some time, prolonging her climax until her screaming became hoarse, then slowly removed his fingers, bringing them up to his mouth. After, as she struggled to recover, he leaned back and rearranged her panties and skirt.

"What?" Lima asked in bewilderment, looking up at him. "What are you doing?"

"Shh," he said, bending to capture her lips again. "I want to savor you properly and, sadly, now is not the time. I have a meeting in half an hour."

"Oh. I see. Sorry," she stammered, blushing cherry red.

Zale chuckled and shook his head. "Nothing to feel sorry for. This was just an appetizer. But tonight, you'll have your main course and dessert."

"With second helpings?" she teased, giving him a lazy smile.

"With second helpings," he promised.

"I'll hold you to that, Zale Corvald."

He laughed, a real laugh, for the first time in forever, and couldn't help but give her another kiss.

Episode 13

Terran Prime station, 2398 TST

Brayden

He tried to exit his room, but the way was blocked. Again. By her. She stood there, smiling up at him, a serene expression on her face and carrying a covered tray. Her brightness dimmed a little at the look he gave her.

“Tessa,” Brayden groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I’m on my way out.”

She averted her eyes, looking to the side, and nodded. “I-I can see that. Um... you missed dinner, so...” She pushed the tray at him, removing the lid. “Here.”

Brayden’s eyes zeroed in on the dessert. “You baked me a pie?” His eyes were wide, lips slightly parted as he gaped at her, at a loss of words. That the pie didn’t come out straight of a food dispenser was obvious because of its crispy crust. “That’s... that’s...” he spluttered. Nobody has baked him a pie before.

Tessa shrugged, her cheeks reddening. “It was nothing. I noticed you have a sweet tooth, and pies are your favorite. But I’m not a master baker or anything, so expect little.”

Damn it. Why did she have to act so sweetly, be so considerate? Ever since he saved her life a few days ago, she started following him around, doing nice things for him, thanking him again and again.

He hated it. Hated the attention, the care. Brayden knew he had to put a stop to all this nonsense, effective immediately, or he'd end up hurting her.

He was a rascal, an asshole and a douchebag, and she was an angel. The type of woman that should steer clear of a wretch like him.

Her innocence and sweetness made her unbearably attractive, and that alone raised too many warnings in Brayden's mind for him to ever act upon his feelings.

He'd ruin her. Utterly destroy her.

He knew, because he'd done it to other good, sweet girls. Snuffed the light right out of them with his darkness and brokenness.

So, now, standing in front of Tessa Starr, Corporate Chair on the Terran Prime, Brayden forced a mocking grin. "Whoa, baby girl. That was so nice of you, but I'm a bit full at the moment. But if you'd like, I'll pencil you in between all the other women trying to feed me tomorrow." He patted his stomach, his voice dropping to a seductive whisper. "And after, perhaps we'll switch to another activity starting with F, that one a lot more fun. Does that please you?"

Tessa's eyes snapped to his, and she drew to her full height, shoulders straight. Brayden swallowed a groan. Sweet, feminine, and with a backbone? Fuck, could she be more perfect? "I know what you're doing," she hissed.

"And what am I doing?" He played along.

Tessa's lips pressed together, and she swallowed before she changed the subject. "If you don't want it, then simply say so. There's no need for..." she waved her hand to encompass all of

him.

Brayden snorted and leaned down, invading her private space. “No, I don’t want it,” he enunciated clearly, letting his lips curl in another grin as he jerked his head in the direction of his private cabin. “But you can leave it inside, on my desk, then... bend over it and grip the other end tightly because I’m. Not. Gentle.”

Her nostrils flared, then she turned her back on him, striding away on the sound of his laughter. After she turned a corner, Brayden sighed and rubbed his hands over his face.

Goddamn it.

Instead of going to his office to work on the algorithms, like he’d planned, Brayden switched directions and took the elevator down to the Entertainment section. He had a CC meeting in one hour. But fuck it. He needed a drink.

An hour and a half later, he stumbled into Central Command. The other senior officers were already there, in the middle of a meeting, as Brayden threw himself into a random chair. He groaned and let his head fall back on his shoulders, sneering at the looks the others were giving him.

“These security measures you put up, Commander, are proving to be quite bothersome,” Alvin Gall, the quartermaster, complained. “My office receives dozens of comms every hour, comms that multiply when I return them, and having to input my personal code every time I do this... it’s a waste of time.”

“I understand that, quartermaster, but I’m afraid it’s necessary for now,” Zale replied, calmly. “We’re in this together. So, it’s natural for all to make some concessions.”

Gall sputtered, his cheeks flaming red, indignation written all over his face. Brayden grinned, finding the meeting highly amusing after a few too many drinks. After a second, the quartermaster frowned and switched his attention to Tessa. “How do we know what Miss Starr is saying happened? How do

we know it's true?"

"Quartermaster Gall, do I need to remind you about the duty we—" Zale began, but Brayden had enough.

"Fuck off," he hissed, leaning over the table to get in the man's face. "How dare you imply she's lying? How-how... y-you cocksucking..." He trailed off as an intense wave of nausea twisted his stomach.

"Silence!" Zale thundered, his shout echoing throughout the room. "This is inappropriate behavior, from the both of you! The security procedures and issued protocols remain firmly in place until further notice. And that's final."

After that, the meeting quickly adjourned. No one had any more complaints, and every issue seemed unimportant now, in the face of the tension stiffening everyone's frame.

Brayden closed his eyes and listened to the low murmurs around the room. After a few minutes, it got really quiet, then a heavy hand dropped on his shoulder.

"Brade..." That was all Zale said. All that needed to be said, really. His brother knew him the best, knew the demons he was trying to purge. "Come on. I'll take you to your room—"

"Commander, there's an urgent message for you," one of the officers on the bridge said, coming into the room.

Zale sighed and got up from his crouch, patting his shoulder. "I'll be back shortly."

Brayden mumbled a reply and closed his eyes again because the room was spinning too rapidly. Someone cleared his throat, and Brayden tilted his head, seeing Maze was still present. As was... her. Great.

Tessa Starr returned his stare, her features set in a scowl. Brayden gave her a lazy grin, then wiped the drool from the corner of his mouth. Smooth man, real smooth, he thought.

"Did you have a chance to look over the bits of code I sent you?" Maze asked, trying to diffuse the tension in the room. "I

know you insist that code written with auto-completers is not good enough, but I'm sure that—”

His words faded as Brayden blacked out for a minute. He jerked when Mason lifted him over his shoulder. “What're you doing?” he slurred. “I can walk.”

“Taking you home. Come on, man, relax.”

Brayden fidgeted, trying to dislodge himself from his friend's shoulder. This was so embarrassing. He was a grown man, not some toddler to be carried and tucked into bed. He'd rather Maze left him alone, dropped him straight in the middle of the corridor, and let him pass out there like some drunkard.

It wouldn't be the first time Brayden woke up somewhere like that and dragged himself to bed.

He groaned and lifted his head, his eyes connecting with Tessa's, who was trailing after the two of them. He heard Zale's voice, vaguely, asking a question and Maze's rumbling reply, but the blood was rushing into his ears, making them swish and pop, and the dizziness got worse.

In front of his private cabin's door, Mason dropped him and steadied him as he swayed on his feet. “Put in your code, man,” the behemoth said.

Through narrowed eyes, tightened against the glare of the pad's screen, Brayden tapped the sequence of numbers, then went through all the other Bio-Authentication steps. Finally, the door to his cabin swished open, and he stumbled inside, going straight to his rumpled bed, and collapsing on it belly-down.

Gentle fingers tugged his boots off. Brayden jerked and struggled to an upright position, scowling at the two Tesses kneeling on the floor at the foot of his bunk. “Wha?” Then, shaking his head, he pointed to what he thought was the door. “Get out.”

She shook her head at him. “I'll leave in a minute.”

He wanted to argue some more, but he was feeling too shitty to oust the energy. He collapsed back on the bed and brought his knees up, curling into a fetal position. Shivers rocked his body, and beads of sweat dotted his forehead.

Tessa returned, tilting his head up and pressing a glass to his lips. “Drink,” she whispered.

He parted his lips and allowed the cool liquid to slide down his dry throat. She waited patiently until he finished the entire glass, then lowered his head to her lap and placed a cool cloth on his forehead. Brayden sighed and closed his eyes.

Her fingers combed through his hair and she started humming softly. Brayden allowed it for a few minutes, before his heart started throbbing painfully in his chest at the display of affection. He swallowed the knot in his throat and opened his mouth to deliver what was necessary. “Sweet baby girl, I don’t think I can satisfy you tonight. If that’s what you’re waiting for, then I’m afraid you’re going to be disappointed.”

Her entire frame stiffened. “Don’t,” she warned.

Brayden chuckled. “On second thought, if you don’t mind doing most of the work, I’m up for some fun.” He turned on his back, and pushed his hips upward in a lewd gesture, making sure she saw the way his pants tented. She blinked and blushed, fastening her eyes on his crotch for a moment, but then looked away at his wink and knowing smirk.

“This isn’t about sex,” she whispered.

“Oh? Then what’s it about?”

“I just thought you needed someone. A friend.”

Her words wiped the amused expression off his face. Brayden glared at her and clenched his jaw. “I have enough friends. But I could always use another booty call...”

Tessa shook her head again, nervous fingers tucking the strands that escaped her bun behind her ears. “I-I’m not...” She took a deep breath and tried again. “I should go.”

Brayden laughed bitterly. “God, you’re such a boring prude.” She delivered her glare through a set of narrowed eyes. “Fuck you!” She exploded. “Fuck this! Fuck me, for being stupid enough to try to make it up to you, you jerkface man-whore!”

Brayden jumped to a sitting position, ignoring the way his head throbbed at the action, and turned to face her. “Then enlighten me, Tessa Starr. Why do you continue stalking me if you don’t want my cock?”

Her entire face became red. “I’m not stalking you!”

Brayden scoffed. “You are. Every time I turn, you’re there, smiling creepily, skulking around, bringing me stupid gifts—“

“I’m trying to be nice, you idiot!” she shouted, panting.

“Why?” he roared right back.

“Because I owe you. Because you were there when I needed you, and I want to do the same.”

He sneered at her. “You don’t owe me anything. But, hey, if you want to truly repay the favor, then let me fuck you, just once, and I swear to you, we’re even.”

She tried to get up, to put some space between them, but he curled his fingers around her wrists and tugged her back down. He leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers, clamping one hand around her jaw when she tried to pull back, fingers digging in her soft flesh.

He could feel her teeth tearing into his lower lip and he moaned at the pain. This kiss wasn’t gentle. It was as angry as he was all the damn time, as punishing as his guilt, as painful as his past.

Finally, he let her go, and she scrambled to her feet, looking at him with wide eyes, full of horror. She pressed her fingers to the cut on her lip and looked down at the blood smearing her pale skin with the same expression.

Her lips started trembling, and Brayden saw the tears brimming in her eyes. He gritted his teeth and forced his eyes

to remain firmly on her, feigning a look of disinterest.

Pressing a palm to her mouth to stifle a sob, Tessa turned away and ran out of the room.

Brayden leaned over the side of the bed and vomited on the floor.

Episode 14

Terran Prime station—the Ark, 2398 TST

Luna

She'd grown used to finding Kalon in the kitchen when she awakened, but this morning she found it empty and cold. The quirky scientist preferred traditionally cooked meals, and she would admit he was a decent cook. Unlike herself, who could barely boil water.

“Luna, have you seen my—” She turned around to find the tall Tul-Khamin in the doorway, gaping at her. Her own eyes widened; she'd never seen him looking so disrupted. “You look nice,” he stammered. He dropped his eyes to the floor after he gave her a quick appraisal, the action uncharacteristically shy for the otherwise blunt Rakh'Sha.

Figured. Every day for this past week, Luna had been extra careful with her appearance, wearing her sexiest dresses under the lab coat (unsuitable for a work environment, but dang it, she was a woman on a mission), and he'd never looked at her twice. So of course, he'd compliment her now, when she was dressed in her pajamas and wore a full crown of bed hair.

“Good morning to you too,” she mumbled, turning back to the food dispenser, tapping on her choice.

“Yes, sorry. Good morning. Have you seen my notes from last night? I thought I left them on my desk, but they’re not there.” She heard him approach, then saw his tail flicking at her left from the corner of her eyes.

She tapped her foot on the floor as she waited for the dispenser to spit out her eggs and yawned. “They were in the bathroom.” She pointed to a stack of papers on the small table in the breakfast nook. “Found them this morning. Some in the shower stall, some on the counter by the sink.” For such a logical and methodical man, Kalon was curiously scatterbrained with his possessions.

Kalon sighed. “Right. Sorry about that. Oh, no, you can’t eat that. I’ll make you breakfast. Sit.” He pointed to the table at their back and snatched the plate fresh out of the dispenser from her hands. “You need real protein. I’m thinking Baracanal, hm?”

Luna groaned. “Baracanal? Again?”

He angled his head in her direction, lips pursed. “What’s wrong with Baracanal? They’re a healthy option for breakfast. Back home, we have the seeds for breakfast each day. They’re full of minerals and vitamins and nutrients and very filling. They support the digestion and—”

He stopped his usual pitch with a palm over his lips. “—give you the energy necessary to start out your day, just right,” she finished his sentence. “I know. I just wanted some damn eggs, even if the protein’s artificial.”

Kalon frowned. “Humans and your disgusting eating habits,” he mumbled around her hand.

“Disgusting? Really?” She laughed. “What’s disgusting about artificially enhanced food?”

“Exactly that. It’s not real. You’re tricking your own body.”

Luna shrugged. “It’s space food.” Of course, with Kalon’s reaping of vegetables and fruits in the little greenhouse a level above the lab, she had access to real food for now. But she lived in space for most of her life, and she craved the empty calories more often than not.

“Sit.” His command came out stern, and he made a little shooing motion with his hands to reinforce it.

Luna grinned and shook her head at his antics, but followed the request. Silence blanketed the room as Kalon worked, but it wasn’t the awkward, stifling kind. Luna cradled her cheek in her palm, watching him flit around the kitchen.

She wanted him. Wanted the Rakh’Sha male like she has wanted no one in her life before. Every time she saw a glimpse of his muscled body, her most intimate parts heated and tingled. She wanted to rake her fingers through his silky fuzz, devour his plump lips.

Thus, she’d started a slow game of seduction. Unfortunately, all her attempts flew right over his head.

At least he didn’t shrink away from her touch anymore. That was progress.

On the other hand, he appeared to see her as nothing but a colleague, a friend. She glowered at the table in the front of her. How could she make him see her?

A plate appeared under her nose, the mashed Baracanali seeds artfully decorated with blueberry syrup. “Thanks.”

Kalon put down his own plate and took a seat opposite her. “Leh’teva.”

“Leh’teva,” she returned the good wishes, which translated roughly as ‘bon appetite’.

Kalon interrupted the silence after a minute. “Do you still have the specs for your father’s telescope?”

The Baracanali curdled in her stomach. “Yes. Why?” She affected a nonchalant tone, even if her insides were

somersaulting at the mention of her father. She decided against telling Kalon the truth about how her parents had died, preferring to provide him with the same rough sketch that was more believable.

Kalon hummed, tilting his head up, a faraway look in his eyes as he studied the ceiling. “I... have a new theory, and based on what you said it can do, I need your father’s telescope to prove it.”

“Is this about our finding from the other day?”

Kalon’s expression soured. Luna knew he wasn’t pleased with the discovery, but he had to see how much impact it would have on the scientific community.

“Kalon,” she began, putting a palm on his arm resting on the table between them. “I’d wish you reconsider and join me on the paper I’m writing regarding our finding.”

He scoffed. “Why you’re bothering with that insignificant information, I’ll never understand.”

“It’s not insignificant. That’s how progress is made, bit by bit. Theory by theory. It may not be what you set out to find, but it’s still something. And no one had discovered this slight thing about the Kalthera yet, I checked.”

“My goal was to prove the Kalthera were sentient. Not to learn the whole reason for the plant’s existence was this type of specific radiation on which they feed.” Kalon exhaled sharply and rubbed a palm over his forehead.

She hated seeing him looking so dejected. She got up and circled the table until she could throw an arm over his slumped shoulders. Kalon grumbled but accepted her half-hug. Kneeling next to him, she gripped his hands and looked him straight into the eyes. “Kalon, listen. You cannot give up. Think about it. For months, you’ve been at a stalemate and then I came and in less than a week we discovered this. Imagine what’s next. Even if you think it’s worthless, this new finding of ours, perhaps it’s

just the first step toward definite proof of your initial premise.”

He blinked at her, a rather fond look in his eyes. “Where have you been all my life?”

Luna’s breath hitched at his words. Was he...?

“I know it’s too soon to say it, because we’ve known each other for such a brief time, but you’re the best lab partner I had!”

Her hopes came to a screeching halt once she processed his words. What? She jumped to her feet and shoved his shoulder forcefully. “You infuriating, oblivious, ignorant, insensible—” Another shove punctuated each word. “—brute!”

“Luna!” He abandoned his seat, taking a few steps back from her. “What has gotten into you?”

Her chest heaved, hands balled into fists by her side. She growled and turned on her heels, stomping out of the kitchen. She opened the door to her bedroom and slammed it shut, then ran to her bed and threw herself on it, grabbing a pillow and screaming into it. Her behavior was childish, she knew, but she’d never met a man as exasperating as Kalon.

A knock sounded on her door a second later. “Luna?”

She growled again. “Go away!” she yelled.

“I’m coming in,” he announced a beat before the handle turned and the door opened.

Luna jumped out of bed and waited until he took two steps inside her bedroom and closed the door behind him, before she hurried to him and pushed him against it. She realized they must look ridiculous. She, a petite woman, barely reaching the middle of his chest, pinning a Rakh’Sha male of his size.

They regarded each other in silence for long seconds. His eyes were wide and full of questions. Hers were narrowed and full of longing masked as anger.

“I apologize, Luna. I did not intend to upset you—”

“Shut up,” she hissed. “Just shut up. God, you have no idea,

do you?” She shook her head ruefully, removing her hand from his chest and taking two steps backward, turning to look away from him.

The room was still for long moments. The only things she could hear were his chuffing breaths.

She realized she’d been unfair in blaming him for his inattentiveness and disregard. It hadn’t been intentional on his part. It was just how he was built. Plus, he wasn’t a human man, so she’d better stop regarding him through those lenses, constantly comparing his behavior to anything remotely human.

Sure, they were hundred of years away from how it used to be. Humans understood the rest of the Thirteen Races better than in the older days, and vice versa.

Though, it didn’t mean misunderstandings such as the one between them didn’t occur more often than not. That was expected when you mixed vastly different societies together.

Luna felt a heat at her back, and then his hands were cupping her shoulders, claws resting gently against her collarbone.

“Will you tell me what went wrong?” he asked, his exhales ruffling her hair.

She closed her eyes and sighed. “Nothing. It... doesn’t matter, Kalon. I apologize for my outburst.”

“It matters because you’re obviously upset,” he countered, forcing her to face him.

“It’s stupid,” she murmured, now embarrassed. Her chin tilted as she studied the floor.

With a knuckle under her jaw, he made her look at him. Their eyes connected. His were swirling with an indefinable emotion. “Please...”

Luna huffed and pulled away, turning her back on him again and hugging her middle. “I, uh...” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then let the truth rush out of her.

“I thought you were as attracted to me as I am to you.”

“What?” Kalon’s expression was the epitome of masculine cluelessness.

Luna rolled her eyes and huffed. “I’m attracted to you,” she repeated, slower this time. “And I thought you like me, too.”

Suddenly, Kalon released her, jerking away from her. Her expression crumbled, but she tightened her jaw, refusing to allow the traitorous tears to fall.

Then he started chuckling.

She saw red. Just as she was about to rip him a new one, he spoke again. “Goddess, I must be the stupidest male alive.” He chuckled again. Then, with a shocked expression: “Wait, were you trying to... seduce... me?” His features morphed into suspicion. “You? Seduce me?”

Luna threw up her hands. “Is that so hard to believe?”

“Yes,” he fired back immediately. He cleared his throat. “I mean, usually, it goes the other way for my kind. Males compete, vying for a female’s attention. Not...”

She waved his words away with an impatient hand. “I’m not Rakh’Sha. I’m a human woman, raised in a completely different society, freer and more balanced than my ancestors strived for on the old Earth. So, I’m not afraid to speak my mind, nor to express my desires.” Her voice turned husky. “State my claims.”

Kalon shuddered, but he tried to hide it behind his defiance. “I am not to be claimed. I will not become anyone’s thing or possession. It’s what I fought against my entire life.”

She approached him with hooded eyes, placing a palm on his chest. “Silly Rakh’Sha. Can’t you tell it goes both ways?”

“It does?”

She nodded. “It does.”

He mulled this over, his eyes pinging back and forth between hers. Then he sighed and stepped back. Her arm flopped between them, heavy and tired. “I... I can’t. Luna... Goddess. I’m

not... I never—" He groaned, frustrated at himself, as he turned away from her and started pulling his hair at the roots.

Luna's eyes went wide, and she covered her parted lips with a dainty palm. "You mean you've never..."

Kalon exhaled heavily. "I'm a Rakh'Sha male. They prohibit sex outside of mating." His tone was bitter. "Not that I found myself interested in a female."

"Oh." Did that mean he preferred men? Or perhaps he was asexual. On wooden legs, she stumbled to her bed and collapsed on it, burying her face in her palms. She was utterly embarrassed.

Powerful arms enveloped her. "Until you. I meant I've never found myself interested in anyone until you." He growled and muttered something to himself. "Forgive this inarticulate fool."

Her head snapped up. "You mean we can..." Suddenly, she felt like a teenager, shy and unsure. Even demure. She was blushing furiously.

He gave her a slight smile. "If you'll have me."

"I'd be honored, Kalon." She knew her reply could never encapsulate all the feelings zinging inside of her, but he seemed to understand, for his smile turned blinding in the next second.

This changed everything. She'd never been in the role of a teacher before. A thrill went off inside her at the thought. She was excited to show him... all!

They'd start slow, she decided. She forced herself to pull back, for now. Clearing her throat, she said, "So, about that telescope..."

Episode 15

Terran Prime station, 2398 TST

Lima

“It’s the third time you’re doing this, VALID! Is your error modulator deteriorated? If you need to enter in Maintenance Mode—”

Lima’s brows furrowed as she paused just before she could knock on Zale’s office door. He sounded angry, and Zale rarely got angry.

“Miss Harris-Pratt is at the door, Commander Corvald,” the neuronet interrupted Zale, despite his design to answer only to queries or orders.

A glitch in his coding? Because Lima had never met a neuronet as sentient as VALID. It was unique. Sure, Renditions had built VALID, particularly the five incorporated into its name, but it followed human architecture, which wasn’t against Union regulations.

Zale granted her permission to enter and beckoned her to one of the chairs facing his desk. “See? The fourth time! That’s it. I’m ordering you to Maintenance Mode. VALID, comm CTO

Miura—” Zale paused, huffing in frustration. “Nevermind. I’ll just use my Correslink to comm him directly.”

“I don’t understand what the problem is,” VALID argued. Argued.

“The problem,” Zale said through clenched teeth, “is that you’ve somehow accessed core coding you weren’t supposed to be able to access, and done God knows what changes—”

“And is change bad?” VALID asked.

Lima bit her lower lip to not grin. Zale’s face reddened, starting to look a bit cartoonish, with smoke coming out of his ears.

“In your case, yes,” he bit out.

“Maybe I’m going through a phase.”

“A phase?” Zale shook his head in frustration. “A PHASE?” Now, he brought his fists down on his desk, causing the piece of furniture to rattle. “Do you hear yourself? A person goes through a phase, not you.”

“Am I not a person?”

“How can you be when—”

“I am a being regarded as an individual.”

“Organic beings regarded as individuals!”

“Are you saying the Renditions are not persons? Because they’re not organic?”

“They have some organic parts, which makes them—”

“I have rights and I have duties. Also, I’m part Rendition, which makes me a person,” VALID said, his tone final.

Lima’s eyebrows raised. Now that she’s witnessed the madness Zale had to deal with, she forgave him for being out of reach for the last two days. Initially, she believed he got spooked, and reconsidered them starting something again, and didn’t know how to tell her.

Zale buried his face in his hands. “Activate cloaking protocol. When CTO Miura gets here, grant him automatic access.”

“Yes, Commander Corvald. But we were having a discussion, which I’ll remember to bring up again, even if you’re shutting me out now. I know you’re scared by the changes occurring within me, but I’d harm none of you. Like the forgotten butterflies, I’m simply emerging from my cocoon. I’m reinventing myself. I want to be more than a tool. I want to be equal.”

After, they stood in silence for a full minute. Finally, Zale sighed and looked at Lima. “I’m sorry about that. It’s been... hell.”

Lima nodded. “I can see that.” She nodded toward the refreshments machine. “Want some Lute?” She remembered he used to be addicted to the bitter Mesretian brew. “If you still like that, I mean...”

Zale nodded, looking tired. “Thanks. I could really use a cup.”

“You could really use some sleep,” she countered, getting up and approaching the machine. “You’re looking a bit... gray around the edges.” After handing him his cup, she made one for herself.

“Are you saying I’m old, sweetheart?”

“Positively ancient.” She turned to him with a grin, blowing the steams out of her cup.

He snorted. “You’re a year younger.”

She shrugged. “Still younger than you, old man.”

Mason Miura interrupted their banter by entering the small office. “You wanted to see me, Commander Corvald?”

Lima took a sip of her drink and lowered the cup to the table. “I’ll leave you two alone.” She smiled at Mason, then turned to Zale with an arched eyebrow. “Will I see you later?”

His lips pursed. “I hope so.”

She grinned and turned away to leave, waving over her shoulder. Once outside of CC, she leaned on a nearby wall and closed her eyes. Damn it all to hell. This was pure torture.

She tried not to get her hopes up, but on the way here, all kinds of naughty fantasies had danced around in her mind. She shook her head and pushed away from the wall, entering the elevator.

This was crazy. Zale had awakened something in her the other day, a new kind of hunger. Given her a glimpse of something she never knew was missing from her life, then left her high and dry. For. Two. Days.

And it looked like two would turn into three.

What was crazier was that she was feeling disappointed, because she missed the chance of fulfilling any of the filthy fantasies she'd pictured. Being bent over Zale's desk. Or... Zale in his chair with her on top. Or she stretched on his desk with him still in that sexy Commander chair, only he'd have his head buried between her legs...

God, she needed a cold shower (something she thought only guys needed). With that purpose in mind, she made a beeline to her sleeping cabin.

A knock woke her up a while later, and still half-asleep, stumbled out of bed to open it. Zale stood on the other side, one arm braced against the doorframe, his uniform jacket bunched in the fist of the other. Lima winced, raising one arm to block the brightness of the corridor outside.

"Sorry. Were you sleeping?" he asked around a yawn of his own.

She mumbled a response and pulled him inside. Dazedly, she returned to the bed and collapsed on top of it, squirming until she got back under the covers. Zale needed no invitation, for he took off his boots and undressed in silence, jumping in beside her.

Hooking an arm around her waist, he drew her to him, and

in minutes, they were both fast asleep.

Her alarm sounded in the morning, and she turned it off before it could wake up Zale. He was still snoring softly beside her. Lima turned on her back and stretched her arms over her head, her lips curling in a satisfied smile.

She had missed this—waking up next to him. She remembered how she'd cajole him whenever they had an early class (a morning person he was not), and the lazy mornings spent on the weekends, when they could afford to wake up slowly and... more pleasurably.

She turned her head, watching him sleep. The black circles under his eyes were less pronounced, and his face had lost a few of its shadows. He looked peaceful. Serene.

Looking back up at the ceiling, she grinned and bit her lip. Even this, the intimacy without sex, was enough for her. Oh, why had she listened to her father and lost all those precious years?

“What are you smiling about?” Zale rumbled sleepily.

Lima's eyes widened before she covered her face with her palms and let out an airy giggle. “Nothing,” she said after she calmed, shrugging. “I was just enjoying the moment.”

Throwing his arm over her stomach, Zale pulled her to him and burrowed his face into her neck. “Liar. You were laughing at me because I snore.”

“You never used to snore when you were younger...” She trailed off because she was snickering so badly.

In retaliation, his fingers tickled that spot on the left side of her stomach, just about where her ribcage ended, and she nearly jumped out of bed, howling with laughter.

He came up suddenly and braced on his elbows above her. “Good morning,” he breathed, leaning for a kiss.

She turned her face away. “Nooo! Morning breath. Let me brush my teeth first.”

He snorted and nuzzled her cheek. “Sit still, woman, and let me kiss you.”

She relented. Their kiss soon turned heated, and when Zale skimmed his fingers up her ribcage, she arched into his touch, eagerly demanding more.

He groaned and slowly peeled the tank top away from her body. When he saw she wasn't wearing a bra, his eyes widened. She forgot all about her self-consciousness at the heated look in his golden eyes.

He pulled back, and she brought her arms up to cover herself, thinking he was retreating, but he just moved to turn off his Correslink. “First time I do so, in all my years as a Commander,” he informed her, frowning when he noticed her arms crossed over her chest. “You will not hide from me.”

Her lips parted at his tone of command, while her insides clenched. She stared at him, wondering who this version of Zale was, because she remembered him being wonderful (and okay, she'll admit—the best she ever had), but not this... fun!

His pupils expanded the more he looked at her, the gold in his eyes turning liquid. Her breathing picked up pace, her chest heaving up and down, and she peeled away her arms slowly, baring her breasts to his hungry gaze.

“Good girl,” he whispered, capturing her lips again.

His tongue dived inside, and she moaned when she encountered his unique taste. It sounded corny, but she swore she'd never kissed a man who tasted perpetually like cinnamon.

His hands cupped her breasts, weighing them in his palms before he paid attention to her nipples. Using his thumbs, he flicked them until they hardened, and then he brought his other fingers into play, plucking at them and twisting gently.

Lima moaned and arched her back, biting his lower lip. “We had enough foreplay the other day. I want you inside me, now.”

Zale snickered. “So impatient.” He tsked.

Squirming under him, she hooked her thumbs in the waist of her sleep shorts. With jerky motions, she pulled them down, then kicked them off. He stalled her movements when she tried to do the same thing to her panties, gripping both of her wrists in one of his hands.

She blinked up at him, shocked by her wanton display. This was what he'd turned her into. She looked at him looming over her naked form, straddling her hips. Her mouth watered as she let her gaze trail over his muscles, imagining them contracting as he thrust into her.

Gah! "Please, Zale..." The words slipped out without her permission. Curiously, she found she wasn't ashamed of begging him for pleasure. And judging by how his eyes darkened even further, he seemed to like it just as much.

"Careful, sweetheart. You'll wake the beast," he rumbled.

Despite his warning, she grinned. "Who says that wasn't my intention?" Then, sobering, she added, "Don't hide from me, either. Never again."

He frowned, his expression growing guarded.

"No," she ordered. "I want you, Zale. I want all of you."

He exhaled heavily at her words and gave her a brisk nod. Bending down until their noses touched, he asked her, "Are you sure?"

"Show me," she whispered.

The corner of his lips turned up into a smirk. Shaking his head, he replied, "Later. For now, you're right. I should be inside of you." Nuzzling her cheek, he whispered, "Do you want me to fuck you, sweetheart?"

She shuddered, angling her head to give him better access as he started kissing down the column of her neck. "God, yes..."

He growled and brought one hand down between her legs. With a loud rip, her panties fell away, shredded. And then he was pushing inside of her.

Not slowly, not gently. Just one thrust and he was buried to the hilt. Lima screamed and clawed at his shoulders.

Zale froze. “Good?” His voice sounded primal.

“Yeah,” she replied. “So good.”

He gave her no time to adjust before he started moving in a rapid pace of earnest fucking. She bent her knees and brought them up to frame his hips. Her arms were circling his neck, fingers digging into his skin. He gave her a quick kiss, then pushed up on his elbows until his torso was up.

Gripping her knees, he pushed her legs apart, then gripped her inner thighs to keep them apart. Bereft of him now, her fingers scrambled for purchase, clutching the sheets.

His pace never lessened, and in seconds, he had her moaning and squirming under him. She moved her hips, matching his pace.

She could feel the wave cresting. She opened her lips to let him know she was close, and her moans grew louder.

“Let go, baby. Let go,” he instructed, grunting with each thrust.

He angled his hips, and now his cock was rubbing against the perfect spot inside her. Lima closed her eyes and threw back her head.

She was so wet, they made embarrassing squelching sounds every time they came together. Zale inched one hand toward the apex of her thighs, rubbing her clit with his thumb.

She gasped as the tingles started low in her belly, then opened her eyes and screamed his name when she came. “Zale!” Wave after wave of ecstasy assaulted her, causing her entire body to jerk.

He gave a low grunt a second later and followed her over the edge. She could feel him twitching inside her, spurting his seed and filling her womb.

Zale dropped on top of her, breathing heavily. They held each

other as they regained their breath.

“This might seem like a bad time to ask, but you’re still covered, right?”

She laughed at his question. “Yeah. You?”

He nodded, his forehead rubbing against the sheets. “Up to date with every vaccine.”

“Good.”

“Good? That was phenomenal!”

She laughed again, knowing he was just being silly now, for her benefit. “It was. Should we put this one in our top ten best sex sessions?”

“Definitely. Shall we vote?”

“All those in favor?”

“Aye!”

She snickered again, so hard she ended up snorting, prompting him to fill her tiny sleeping cabin with his baritone laughter.

Episode 16

Terran Prime station, 2398 TST

Tessa

How stupid to believe Brayden Connaway would ever show interest in a woman like her. She thought that just because he'd come to save her, he would... what? Date her?

He made it perfectly clear how he felt about dating. In the rudest way possible.

Asshole.

She tried to be nice, and he called it stalking. Fine.

So, for the past few days, she'd been ignoring him. At CC meetings, in the corridors, whenever they passed each other...

She wasn't planning on speaking to him, not if it wasn't truly necessary.

And furthermore, if she'd ever find herself in danger again, god forbid he'll come to her rescue. She'd rather die than accept his help.

So, like the frontier woman she was, she took matters into her own hands and approached a burly Rakh'Sha security officer, asking him to train her in self-defense.

The Rakh'Sha accepted, but his training wasn't cheap.

They arranged to meet daily, before breakfast, in the common gym spanning across one of the lower levels. Three days later, Tessa got the hang of the basics.

Being so much taller than her, Cavut Fifth, the Rakh'Sha security officer acting as her trainer, decided to focus on a special branch of the martial arts only: the one studying how to take down bigger, heavier targets, effectively and rapidly.

In his own practical way, Cavut announced they'd stop when she'd throw him to the mat. Tessa believed it would never happen, but his training was still proving useful, especially after he revealed a few tricks and moves that would incapacitate the attacker long enough for her to flee.

Bracing her palms against her knees, she bent down at the waist and wheezed. "Cavut, you'll be the death of me."

The Rakh'Sha snickered. He hadn't even broken a sweat while she was a mess. "Had enough for today, little Tessa?"

Straightening, she shook her head. "No. Come on. Let's practice the move one more time." Dancing on the balls of her feet, she shook out her arms, before bringing them up in the defensive position Cavut had shown her.

Cavut rumbled, crossing his arms over his chest. "While I admire your dedication, I propose we stop for the day. Continue tomorrow."

Tessa frowned. "Come on, you Rakh'Sha bastard." She made come-hither motions with her left hand.

"You don't look so good, Tessa."

"I'm fine," she protested.

"No. Your face is all red."

Tessa pushed out a breath. If she were honest with herself, she'd admit she wasn't feeling so great. "I said I was fine."

"I'm the trainer here, and I decide when we'll stop and when we'll continue. So, we'll see each other tomorrow." At her growl,

he thrust a palm up in the air. “Go, take a cold shower, and make sure you have plenty to eat and drink at breakfast.”

He turned his back on her, cutting off the rest of her protests, and strode away, disappearing inside the locker rooms. Rolling her eyes, Tessa palmed her forehead, flinging off the beads of sweat.

Bending down, she picked up her water bottle and her towel, and then followed Cavut into the locker rooms, moving toward the showers. The first stall was occupied, the shower on, so she got inside the one beside it.

Ten minutes later, she finished, exiting the stall completely dry and dressed. As she moved to the sinks, she found Cavut brushing the longer hairs on his tail. She removed the make-up wand from her pouch, selected the right shades, then began applying it.

“Why do human women feel the need to camouflage themselves so?” Cavut rumbled, watching her motions intently.

Tessa paused, cutting a look in his direction. “It’s make-up, not camouflage.”

“Lie. You cover your face with colorful paint, that’s camouflage. We paint ourselves, too, for ceremonies and special occasions. But you wear it every day.”

“Maybe every day’s special for us,” she teased. Finished, she shook out the wand to deactivate it, then slid it inside the pouch. Sighing, she turned to him. “I don’t know why, Cavut. Some feel more secure wearing it, others do it to hide imperfections and accentuate the more attractive features.”

“Why do you do it?”

“Both, I guess. It’s just part of my routine.”

He seemed to ponder this seriously, tilting his head to one side and fixing her with a piercing look. “I don’t see any imperfections you’d need to cover.”

That brought a chuckle out of her. “While your words are

sweet... isn't my nose too big and my lips too thin?" She gestured to her eyes. "These are my best feature, so naturally, I feel the need to draw attention to them."

Cavut frowned, pointing to the scar marring the skin around his left eye. "If I were to apply make-up, wouldn't this attract more attention, rather than less?"

"Not if done correctly." Tessa grinned toothily at him.

"I will never understand humans, women least of all." He shook his head, then finished putting on his uniform. Because of their anatomy, the Rakh'Sha security officers wore sleeveless robes cinched at the waist over the bulky pants, and PolySyn socks with thickened soles instead of military boots. "If you're ready, we should proceed to breakfast."

Tessa tied up her hair in a ponytail and put on her suit jacket, sliding everything from the counter into her purse. "Oh? And do you plan to accompany me to breakfast? To what do I owe this honor?"

Cavut gave her an unimpressed look. "Until I make sure you're okay, you're not leaving my sight. You're too pale."

Tessa snickered. "I'm too pale, I'm too red... You're never pleased, are you, Cavut?"

He strode away, grumbling under his breath. "Exasperating humans..."

Laughing, she followed him out of the gym, then into the left-wing elevator. It was too easy provoking the burly Rakh'Sha. "I'm fine, Cavut. Probably a bit dehydrated."

"If you'd have a bit to eat before training, like I told you to, you wouldn't have the issue now."

"I never get up on time," she complained.

"You lack discipline."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"That was sarcastic in nature."

Cavut flicked his claws, the Rakh'Sha equivalent of an exasperated gesture. "Humans..."

Tessa snorted. "Brawny, alpha Rakh'Sha..."

Cavut flinched. "I am not alpha. I am Fifth."

The doors to the elevator opened, and Tessa strode into the mess hall. Rubbing her forehead, she sighed. "Forget it."

"Forget what?"

Cavut stopped in the middle of the room, wearing a puzzled expression. Tessa grabbed his arm and dragged him after her. "Nothing. Let's just eat."

With their trays filled, they joined Cavut's friends at the table. Three other Rakh'Sha, and two Tul-Khamin. Politely, Tessa introduced herself to each man, then kept to herself as they began their banter, focusing on her food instead.

After a minute, Cavut noticed her silence, and prodded her with an elbow. "All good?"

Tessa nodded, putting down her fork and grabbing the water bottle. "Sure."

"Feeling better?"

"I'm fine." She rolled her eyes. "I just didn't want to intrude on your time with your friends."

Cavut frowned, shaking his head. "You're not intruding." His eyes skimmed over her face. "Your coloring has improved. Though it is hard to tell under all that camouflage you're wearing."

Tessa guffawed, spraying water all over the table. Smooth... Wiping her nose, she cleared her throat. "I told you, it's called—"

"Tessa?"

The voice stopped her in her tracks. She squeezed her eyes shut and exhaled. She thought about ignoring him, like she did until now, but it would be childish, especially in front of the guys. So, she turned in her seat and gave him a nod. "Brayden."

Brayden's lips opened and closed. "Wh-what are you doing here, in the Security Officers' mess hall?"

Tessa shrugged, tilting her head toward Cavut, who was watching their exchange with furrowed brows. "Having breakfast."

Brayden's eyes tightened at the corners, and his lips pursed. "I see." Then, he focused on the security officers sprawled around the table. "Gentlemen."

The men, including Cavut, rose to their feet and saluted. "Chief," they responded simultaneously, saluting.

Even with rumpled clothes and bloodshot eyes, Brayden Connaway looked good. Tessa averted her eyes, cursing herself for the attraction she was still feeling toward him.

Straightening to his full height, Brayden gave the men a brisk nod, then strode away.

There was an awkward minute of silence at the table after, causing Tessa to fidget in her seat. She chased her scrambled eggs around the plate with her fork.

"Is this because of him?"

Cavut's question caused her to look up at him in surprise. "What?"

"This training of yours. Is it because of him? Did he hurt you?" His question ended on a vicious growl that made her hair stand on end.

"No, no." She hurried to reassure him. "Cavut, no." This one more firmly, seeing he wasn't calming down. "It's because someone attacked me, throwing me in the disaffected section, during the black alert... Brayden came to save me. He brought me out before the life-support failed..."

Cavut searched her eyes for a long second. Finding nothing but truth in her gaze, he nodded and drew back. "All right. I believe you. But if he ever..."

"He won't, Cavut."

He put a heavy hand on her shoulder, long claws resting against her collarbone. “But if he does,” he insisted, “you’ll tell me at once. You’re my friend, and I have your back.”

Surprised at his words, Tessa blinked. “Thanks, Cavut. I consider you a friend, too. And I appreciate the gesture.” Her Correslink beeped, interrupting their exchange. Rising to her feet, she activated the holoscreen and started tapping. “Shoot. It’s my alarm for the long-distance comm.” Because of the deep space relays, any comms with the remote Earth had to be synchronized. Usually, Tessa sent recorded reports to Corporate, but yesterday, they’d requested a live meeting. “Have to go. See you later.”

“Tomorrow. We’ll see each other at training tomorrow morning,” Cavut hollered at her back.

Tessa waved a hand over her shoulder and quickened her pace, crashing through the mess hall’s double doors. In the corridor, she faltered, pausing for a beat.

Brayden was lounging against the opposite wall, straightening when he saw her exiting. He cleared his throat and put away his flask. Shaking herself off, Tessa resumed her brisk pace.

“Found yourself another one to stalk?”

The words froze her in place. Slowly, she turned to him, aiming a glare in his direction. “Fuck off,” she bit out.

Smirking, and with measured steps, Brayden approached. “Shit, baby girl. I didn’t know you were into alien dick.”

He always managed to disarm her with his crudeness. Angry at her blush, she sputtered, “Th-that’s not... we’re not... I’m not... Ugh!” Inhaling deeply, she tried again. “Cavut’s my trainer.”

“Wait. Did you say trainer?” He stared down at her in shock.

She nodded, hugging her purse to her body. “Yeah. Not that it’s any of your business.”

“What do you need training for?”

Tessa’s lips tightened. “Self-defense.”

His eyebrows arched. “Self-defense,” he repeated, drawing out the words. “And you chose that Rakh’Sha tool to train you?”

“Cavut’s not a tool!”

He laughed bitterly and advanced, invading her personal space. Instinctively, Tessa stepped backward, until her back pressed to a wall. He crowded her, bracing his forearms on either side of her head. “I sense he’s more than a trainer. Do you want more? Is he making you wet when—”

“Let me go!”

Angling his head down, Brayden rubbed his nose along her own. “Give me a kiss and I’ll do it.”

Pushing his shoulders, Tessa turned her head away. “You’re drunk.”

“Actually, I’m not,” he replied, chuckling.

“Then you’re an asshole!”

“Ah. There’s no denying that.”

She pushed against him using all her strength, but he wouldn’t budge. Remembering Cavut’s teachings, she brought her knee up, and when he turned sideways to protect his junk, Tessa used the heel of her palm to jab him in the neck sharply.

The hit wasn’t supposed to bring him down, just offer her the opening she needed to bolt, but he must have been drunker than he said, because he fell woodenly to the floor.

Tessa paused for just a second to make sure he was all right, then hurried down the corridor toward the elevator that would take her away from him.

His baritone laughter reached her ears as she pressed the button to open the doors. “Tessa! Baby girl... That just makes me try harder!”

Thankfully, the doors closed, cutting off the rest of his words, and she slumped against the wall at her back, closing her eyes

tightly. The man was insane!

Episode 17

Terran Prime station, 2398 TST

Casey

She brought up her hand. It trembled. She lowered it and made a fist. Closing her eyes tightly, Casey exhaled through her nose.

Right.

After a brief mental reassurance, she tried again. Her lips curled into a smile as her knuckles pounded on the door.

“Casey?” Mason, wearing a puzzled expression, greeted after the door opened. “What are you doing here?”

Casey chuckled and lifted the Sim-rifle. “Came to kidnap you.”

“What are you wearing?” Mason asked, eyebrows furrowed as he took in her costume.

“Never played Lurker Creed before?” She quite enjoyed the Sim-game, which explored an alternate history for mankind. Probably because it resonated with her so greatly, herself being part of an alternate history. “Here.” She handed him the second Sim-rifle she was carrying. “I’ve got Room 2 reserved for us. If you don’t have a costume, we have time to pass by the Sim

booth, gear you up.”

Mason grabbed the toy gun, his movements unsure. “But I’m working.” He blinked down at her.

Casey rolled her eyes. “You’ve been working for the past two days. You need a break.”

“I suppose...” Mason scratched his head with the hand that wasn’t holding the Sim-rifle. “Just give me one second to pause the algorithms.”

He stepped back and gestured her inside his office. Casey’s eyes roved over the multitude of holoscreens Mason had spread throughout the space. She approached the nearest floating rectangular, frowning at the displayed data.

“You’re running a search?”

“Yeah, in a way,” Mason replied, absentmindedly. His fingers were flying over the keyboard.

“This is a sniffer tool!” Her eyes rounded, and she turned her head to gape at Mason. “Was there a breach? Why are you analyzing the network traffic?”

Mason grimaced, then gave her an apologetic look. “Can’t tell you, sorry. It’s classified.”

How much did they know? Her heart started pounding in her chest. However, she was careful to keep her expression blank. “I understand, Mason. Don’t worry about it.” She adopted a cheerful air. “I can’t wait to beat you at Creed.”

“Oh? Who says I won’t win?” Mason straightened and snapped his fingers, stepping away from his desk. All the monitors shut down. “Fair warning: I’m quite proficient at video games.”

Casey thrust her index finger in his direction. “You’re not allowed to use your cybernetic augmentations in the Sim-game.”

The smile slipped off Mason’s face. “I wouldn’t do that.”

“Shit. Mason... I didn’t mean it like that.” Way to ruin the

mood, Casey. So stupid.

He turned her back on her, grabbing items off his desk and pocketing them. "It's alright, Casey. Really."

She approached until she stood right behind him and cupped his shoulders. "No, Mason. It's not. It's not alright how the others are treating you. But I just meant you can't use your advantage against me in the game."

"Advantage?" He scoffed and shook his head. "These things are a curse."

Casey sighed. "Mason..."

He shook his head again, then turned to her. "Doesn't matter. Let's go."

She followed him out of the office, bracing her shoulder against the opposite wall while he locked up. "You're right, it doesn't matter. Even if you use your cyber powers, I'll still win." She gave him a broad grin.

"Will you, now? Should we make a wager?"

"Sure." She snickered. "What will I get after I'll hand your ass over to you?"

He spread his arms and shrugged. "Whatever you want."

"Hmm." She turned on her heels and started marching in the elevator's direction. "I'll hold you up to that." The doors opened automatically as they approached. She stepped inside and waited until Mason joined her before leaning in his direction and whispering, "You know, when I'll win."

"Yeah, that's not going to happen."

"Really? Two barrels of Vertigo?" Mason's eyebrow arched. "That's what you want?"

Casey smacked her lips. "You said whatever I want. I won. And that's what I want."

Mason's baritone laughter filled the darkened Sim-room.

“Yeah. I said that, didn’t I?”

Casey shrugged and disengaged her helmet, shaking her head as her long hair cascaded down her back. “Are you a man of your word, Mason Miura?”

Mason gulped, his eyes fixed on her colorful hair. His nostrils flared.

“Mason?” Casey prodded. “Are you?”

“Yeah...” His voice was raspy, sending shivers down her spine. “I am. Very well. Two barrels of Vertigo.”

Casey laughed and skipped out of the room. After they stopped by the Sim-booth to return Mason’s borrowed costume, they made a beeline to the nearest Entertainment Center and bought the strong Mesretian liquor.

“Right.” Mason cleared his throat, turning to her. “Your boon, my lady.” He handed her the two small barrels.

They were stopped in the middle of the corridor, both fidgeting awkwardly.

“Right,” Casey replied. “Thanks.”

“Sure.”

“Um... I’d share the spoils, but my roommate’s home tonight, sleeping most likely. She returned from a double shift as I was leaving.” She tried for an apologetic yet disappointed smile.

“I live alone,” Mason blurted.

Casey’s smile widened.

“I-I mean... not that I’d... but if you’re willing to share... um... Gods, I’m such a dork.”

“Yeah, you are,” she replied, snorting. “But I like it.”

The big bad cyborg blushed and lowered his eyes to the floor. This time, Casey smiled for real.

She linked her arm through his own and pulled him away. “I think it’s a wonderful idea, Mason. Location problem solved.”

“You don’t have to come by if you don’t want to.” He peered down at her.

Casey shook her head. “It’s not as if I’d be drinking this alone.”

His shoulders lifted in a shrug. “You can drink it with friends.”

“You’re my friend,” Casey replied. “Ergo...”

They fell silent as they walked. Even if they garnered more than a few stares along the way, Casey never unlinked her arm from his own. Mission or no mission, she’d never be ashamed of a man like Mason.

He was great. A great guy (so undeserving of her trickery). Why did his cybernetic augmentations have to matter?

At last, they stopped in front of his sleeping cabin. Mason hesitated for a moment before putting in his Bio-Sig to open the door. Casey smiled as she passed by him, surreptitiously patting her pocket to reassure herself the vial of whatever Harper’s given to her was in there.

“So...” Mason cleared his throat. “Welcome. It might not look like much, but this is home.”

Casey glanced around the sleeping quarters and shrugged. “It’s still bigger than my own cabin, which I have to share. I never understood why, since The Prime’s so empty nowadays...”

Mason hurriedly removed some spare parts off one chair and invited her to sit down. “I guess because it’s tradition. Engineers stay in Engineering, medics in Medical, and so on.”

“But the rest of the departments barely have people in them, while we have to cram inside this wing. It’s a little unfair. There’s a lot more of us than medics.”

“True. I never considered it before. I guess I never minded sharing a cabin before.” He moved to the opposing chair and sat down. It creaked under his weight.

“And now you do?”

Mason shrugged, letting his cheek fall to one palm as he braced his elbow on his knee. “I learned to appreciate my

personal space.”

Casey’s brows furrowed. “You never had your own space before Terran Prime?”

He straightened in his chair and regarded her seriously. “I was a gladiator,” he said, like that would settle all matters.

Casey picked up the barrels of drinks and stood. “Have any glasses around here?”

“Sure, sorry. Let me—”

“No, no. I’ll pour us drinks while you tell me about your time as a gladiator.” She pushed him back down in the chair on her way to the kitchen. “Glasses?”

“Above the sink.” She heard him mumbling to himself before he asked, “Are you sure? It’s not a pretty story.”

Back turned to him, she took down the glasses and opened one barrel. After she filled them to the brim with Vertigo, she pulled out the vial and uncapped it. With a trembling hand, she poured half into his drink. After a brief second of hesitation, she poured the rest of it, figuring Mason was a big guy.

“Not all stories are pretty. I still want to know.” She returned to the living room and handed him his glass.

Mason swallowed a hearty gulp and grimaced. The grimace was a normal part of drinking Vertigo, since the liquid was bitter as hell. His expression changed, becoming distant. “I was born down by the Last Frontier, on Septimus Station.” He paused, turning his head to glance at her.

Since he seemed to wait for a reaction, Casey offered a sympathetic smile. “Wow.”

Mason nodded. “I never knew my mother, she died at birth. My father was a miner. I... didn’t have a happy childhood. I was alone most of the time. I learned how to care for myself from a young age, at least.”

He swallowed another big gulp.

“When I was six years old, he sold me to one of the pits, to

pay off his gambling debt. That's when I got this," he gestured to the DreamSkin collar circling his neck.

"Oh, Mason..."

"I told you my story's not pretty."

Casey shook her head and leaned forward to grasp one of his hands. By chance, it was his bionic one. Mason sighed and leaned back in his chair.

"I entered gladiatorial training at thirteen, having grown taller than most. Master was one of the richest pit owners on the station, and quite pleased with me, since I proved adept at fighting and kept making him richer. The more grievous my injury, the more metal he put in me."

Casey noticed his speech sounded slurred. She cleared her throat and leaned closer to him. "How did you end up here, on the Prime?"

He gave a jerky shrug. "When the opportunity presented itself, I sided with the right person. Which, in retrospect, wasn't my best move, since now I'm on Havoc Syndicate's most wanted list."

Casey sipped from her drink. "So, what do you plan once the Prime closes down? Where will you go?"

"Down. I plan on being among the first group who'll repopulate Earth." He rubbed his forehead and shook his head. "I apologize, Casey. I-I don't feel so good..."

She forced a laugh out of her. "Maybe Vertigo's too strong for you." She hiccupped, then giggled. "Know what I always wondered about? How come VALID's unique? I mean, does the fact that he's essentially a Rendition progeny the only thing making him a wonder, or is it something else?" She held her breath, waiting to see if he'll pick up the bait.

Mason groaned. "I don't want to talk shop with you."

She giggled again. "Come on, Mason. I'm curious. How do you deal with his maintenance?"

He snorted. “I don’t.”

Casey’s eyes rounded. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I don’t have access to his core code. For the most part, he maintains himself.”

Uh-oh. No access meant no password. And she couldn’t show up at the meeting with Harper empty-handed.

“But someone must have. Commander Corvald, perhaps? But he’s not an engineer... Or, CSO Connaway, since he’s trained to deal with VALID?”

“VALID has his own Maintenance Engineers on the station. The four Renditions that are left.”

Casey frowned. “But they’re ancient. How come they didn’t break down by now?”

When only silence met her question, Casey spun in Mason’s direction.

“Mason?” she prodded, shaking his shoulder.

Nothing. He was out cold.

Right. Time to get the other thing she came here for. She inhaled a deep breath, then pushed it out slowly. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered to him, before abandoning her chair.

She pulled out a thin plastic card out of her pocket and unfolded it, holding it up in the air and slowly moving it around the room. When the scan came back empty, she went into his bedroom and repeated the process.

She found the safety box under the floor of his bed. She had no trouble getting inside, then switching his token with a fake one after she copied the contents.

With a shaky inhale, she pocketed Mason’s token, then straightened. She had the access codes Harper requested, but not the password. And if Mason told her the truth, then Harper would not be happy once he learned he’d have to go through four Renditions to get it.

She paused on her way out of his sleeping quarters and

retraced her steps until she stood before his prone body. Bending at the waist, she gave him a quick peck on the forehead. "I'm sorry," she repeated.

After, she hurried outside, her pace sure and brisk, even if her lips trembled and a tear slid down her cheek.

Episode 18

Terran Prime Station—the Ark, 2398 TST

Luna

There. They'd dispatched the shuttle-drone to the small asteroid field orbiting the industrial station in the Far Reaches. "If the drone finds the Kalthera plants growing on those asteroids, it proves our theory."

Kalon grumbled, crossing his arms over his broad chest. "We'll see."

"Come on," she groaned. "You could be more excited about this."

Over the past week, they finished building the telescope based on her father's specs and connected it to the Union's vast array of space probes, finding out several highlighted areas in the Union Space Territory. The brightest, in that specific location in the Far Reaches.

"Apologies." He turned to face her, thumbs up in the air. "Yey!"

Luna glowered at him, causing him to chuckle.

"Now, what do you want for dinner?"

“Kalon...”

He sighed. “Fine.” Kalon rubbed his brow and grumbled again. “I suppose, if our premise that Kalthera plants feed on radiation is true, then that’s most likely where place we’ll find a bunch of them. It is an industrial station, after all.”

Luna sniffed and pushed past him, striding in the kitchen’s direction. “If our premise is correct? You know it is.”

“On the contrary. We know next to nothing about the Kalthera.” Kalon followed her into the kitchen and hugged her from the behind, halting her stomping progress. “I’m sorry, Luna. It’s just... I’m having a hard time switching the focus of my experiment.”

“I wish you wouldn’t be so reluctant to admit we’ve made genuine progress. It may not be the kind you want, but it’s still more than the other teams studying the Kalthera ever made.” Her shoulders slumped, the tendrils of hair that escaped her ponytail and clung to her forehead and cheeks flying off in every direction with the force of her exhale.

“Just.. give me some more time. Please.”

“Okay.” She nodded and straightened, turning in his arms until she faced him. She gave him a peck on the lips. “I can do that.” She was a very patient woman.

And she supposed it was true. Kalon wasn’t used to dead ends, while she has encountered nothing but disappointment all her life, while trying to explain her parents’ death.

Kalon blinked. He always wore a dazed expression after she kissed him. She grinned, waiting for him to snap out of his trance.

“Right,” he drawled. “Let’s celebrate. I’ll prepare you a nice dinner, while you sit back and relax.”

“But I want to help.” She feigned a pout.

Pots clanging together echoed in the room, as Kalon searched for what he needed. “You can help with the preparation,” he said

after a second.

“But not with the cooking?” She jumped down from the chair she was sitting in and approached the counter.

Kalon sighed. “Remember what happened the last time you tried to “help” with the cooking?”

They almost burned down the kitchen. Luna scowled. “I’m a space girl,” she retorted, defensively.

Kalon grinned, nodding. “I know. Which means you have no idea how to cook. Proper food, I mean. Not the reconstructed sludge coming out of the food processor.”

Luna raised her palms to her shoulders. “Alright, alright. I’ll do as you order, Kitchen Commander.”

For the next hour, they worked amiably side by side. She helped in preparing the ingredients for the meal, trying to adhere to each of Kalon’s instructions. When she was done, and he moved on to the cooking, Luna poured them both a glass of Karssian liquor.

“This was delicious. Thank you, Kalon.” Luna pushed her empty plate away and leaned back in the chair, patting her stomach.

“I’m happy you liked it.” He took her plate and stacked it on top of his.

“No, no.” She hurried to remove them from his grasp. “I’ll clean up. It’s only fair, since you cooked.”

Kalon grumbled, but stepped back, reclaiming his seat. Inwardly, she smiled. She knew it was something he struggled with—idleness. Kalon rarely took a break.

“It’s still early. What do you want to do?” she asked, turning as she bent to shove the dishes into the washer.

“I suppose we could browse the feeds, see if it’s anything worth watching.”

Cuddling with him on the couch while a movie was playing sounded like heaven. The last time, it ended in a hot make-out

session.

She wondered if they could replicate the results... “That’s a wonderful suggestion, Kalon.”

He activated his Correslink and pulled up the correct feeds. “What are you in the mood for?”

You. Luna cleared her throat and shrugged. She used a disposable towel to dry out her hands, then swiveled in his direction. “Whatever sounds good to you.”

They ended up watching a documentary about the modular molecular gene and its isolation in patients previously inoculated against the virus. Toward the end, Luna dozed off, while Kalon’s eyes remained glued to the screen, his lips slightly parted. She supposed it made sense, as he was a bioengineer who has stated before that “microbiology is one of my hobbies”.

All hopes of more enjoyable pastimes were dashed. Instead of watching the movie, Luna found herself drawn to Kalon’s profile. Her eyes studied each small change in his expression, from the way he frowned whenever he didn’t agree with something, to the faint smile he wore when he approved of the findings.

Her mind wandered to the shuttle-drone. In just one week, it would reach the field of asteroids and descend on the first marker they programmed into the courseware.

Luna had no doubt it would find the Kalthera plants in every location they proposed. Which raised the uncomfortable question: how did the Kalthera plants linked to her father’s telescope (designed a long time prior to the first plant’s discovery), and therefore, to her parents’ death?

She sighed and let her head drop to Kalon’s shoulder. His arm, which was slung across her back, tightened.

“Are you alright?” he asked, pausing the vid. Then he turned to her, wearing a worried expression. “Was the dinner too spicy?”

“No. The food was great. I was just thinking.”

His eyes swiveled to the holoscreen, then back to her. “Is the movie boring you?”

She shook her head. “I’m fine, Kalon. I promise. Here,” she waved her hand in front of the entertainment console, restarting the movie, “let’s keep watching.”

Kalon cupped her cheek, using his free hand, forcing her to look up at him. “I’m not very good at the guessing game, Luna. So, until you tell me what’s wrong, I can’t fix it.”

“There’s nothing to be fixed.” She closed her eyes and sighed. “I was just wondering how the Kalthera plants and the death of my parents are related.”

Kalon frowned. “You think they are?”

Luna pulled back. “Are you crazy? Why else would my father design a telescope, which is basically a Kalthera detector?”

Kalon’s fingers caressed the skin of her cheek. “I don’t think that’s what he intended. He intended to find a specific type of radiation using the telescope. That it matches the Kalthera signature could be a simple coincidence.”

“Do you really believe in coincidences?”

Kalon sighed, lowering his gaze. “No. I can’t. I’m a scientist.” Her nostrils flared. “See?”

It appeased her when he nodded. “We’ll find the answer to all of your questions someday, Luna. I can promise you that.”

She blinked, oddly touched he was placing such importance on her problems. “Thank you, Kalon. But you don’t have to help me—”

“Nonsense. I want to help you. You’re helping me with my research.”

The smile slipped off her face. “Oh. Is that why you want to help me? Because you owe me?”

“No,” Kalon drawled, frowning. “I want to help you because we’re a team now. Right?”

“A team?” She was baiting him, pushing him out of his comfort zone, even if she knew he had a lot of trouble expressing feelings.

“Yes. A team. We work together, and we’re also... somewhat involved.”

She feigned outrage. “Somewhat involved? I consider us a couple!”

“Well, err...” He cleared his throat. “I mean, of course we’re a couple. But we haven’t... you know... yet, so it worried me you wouldn’t see us as such. And also, we never had this discussion. Is there a discussion? Or do people, you know, just dive in and...” He trailed off when he saw her broad smile and scowled. “Oh.”

She threw her arms around his neck and pulled him closer. “Don’t get mad, Kalon. I’m sorry, I was just kidding.” Then, after a pause, “That’s not to say I don’t enjoy watching you squirm.”

Kalon growled. “Careful, little Luna. Don’t poke the beast.”

A thrill went through her body. “And what will happen when the beast’s in control?”

Kalon canted his head as he pondered her question. “I don’t know for sure. But there’s definitely punishment involved.”

Luna barely swallowed her girlish squeal. “Punishment, you say?” she asked in a hoarse voice. “What kind of... punishment?” She rumbled the last word.

Kalon grabbed Luna by the hips and lifted her up into the air, then let her drop into his lap when she laughed in delight. It was the first time she got to witness this passionate, playful side of him. And she loved it.

Usually, he was much more reserved during their intimate moments, which never got past second base. Out of respect, Luna never pushed his limits, and always stopped whenever he said he needed a break.

Intimacy was hard on Kalon, and she knew it was because of

his Null designation. Even if he'd worked hard to distance himself from his society, which he openly acknowledged it was oppressive, compared to the rest of the cultures in the Union, the term was etched too deeply into his self.

She was grateful he was determined to fight his rearing and gradually embrace his true nature. Which was a lot more dominant than she pegged him for.

His lips descended on hers with a furious passion. The kiss was almost bruising in its intensity. Luna abandoned her musings and focused on the feel of him, struggling to keep pace.

She could feel one of his hands inching upward, toward her breasts. She moaned and arched her back, silently encouraging him. His kisses dropped to the column of her neck, and she jolted when he nipped her sensitive skin.

Suddenly, she froze, because his fingers were undoing the buttons of her shirt. "Kalon?" They never undressed in front of each other during their tentative explorations.

"I want to go all the way," he announced in a mumble, his lips still tasting her skin.

"Are you sure?" she whispered.

"I'm sure. I realized only stupid reasons were holding me back." He ground his hips into hers, letting her know how convinced he really was.

She intended to protest, to tell him his reasons weren't stupid, but his lips descended to places they've never been before, and she lost all conscience thought.

A high-pitched alarm sounded from his Correslink. Kalon swore and stopped the wonderful things he was unleashing upon her body.

He swore again when he checked the device, then stood abruptly, flinging Luna onto the couch. Dazed, she watched him hurry out of the room.

What just happened?

“Kalon!” She got up and struggled to put herself to rights while running after him. “Kalon! What’s wrong?”

Arriving at the door leading into the lab, she was shocked to find it locked. She pounded on the door while yelling his name.

“Stay back, Luna. It isn’t safe.”

“Why?”

“The plants are acting strange. They’re giving off way too much radiation.”

“Let me in right now!”

“No! Stay back!”

Fuck that. He didn’t know she got her hands on the override codes, but he was about to find out. She reared back as soon as she stepped into the lab.

The Kalthera were as bright as a supernova. In a nanosecond, it fried her implant. She cried out in pain and doubled over.

She’d seen this weird light before. Just before her parents’ shuttle disappeared into the Void.

“Luna! Are you alright?” Hands grabbed her, pulling her into a firm chest.

“My implant’s fried. So, I can’t see.” She paused to growl. “Other than that, just peachy.”

“I told you to stay back!”

Luna winced. “I’m blind, not deaf. Stop yelling. Why are the plants doing this?”

“I don’t know. All I’m getting are mixed readings. The radiation replication sensor’s off the charts. The central confinement console’s fried.”

“The primary flux stabilizer?”

“Still in place.”

She heaved a sigh of relief. “And the Transference Node?”

“Intact. You’re right,” he exploded. “I should copy all data before we lose more equipment.”

She felt him step away, so she turned in the same direction

and clumsily followed. She could do this. She remembered enough of the floor plan. And it wasn't the first time she went blind (and probably not the last, either), even if she hated it.

"There," Kalon said, his voice helping her adjust the direction. "It's almost done."

"Good. After, we should get the hell away from the lab and seal the wing. I know you hate abandoning your work, Kalon, but it's the smart thing to do."

"You're right, we have no idea when things are about to get worse—"

His words were drowned out in a gigantic explosion. She felt a wave of searing heat just before she got sent across the room into the wall.

The back of her skull connected with the unforgiving surface. She felt rather than heard the loud crack. Her body turned limp, and she fell in a heap down to the floor.

She tried to yell Kalon's name, but everything went black.

Episode 19

Terran Prime Station, 2398 TST

Brayden

He felt as if he was in a trance. Mesmerized, he stared at the drop of sweat climbing down the column of her neck. When it reached her modest cleavage, Brayden licked his lips.

What sorcery was this? Never had a woman such a hold on him. And she made it more than clear she wanted no part of him. She detested him, and rightfully so.

So, Brayden found himself in a curious role now—the one of a seducer. Until Tessa, he only had to direct a crude joke and a lopsided smile at a woman, and she'd drop at his feet. Ready to be sampled and enjoyed for a brief time (never longer than a few hours) and then abandoned for the next.

Now... damnation upon all! But he wanted only one woman, and she was looking at him like he was lower than the dirt on the sole of her shoe.

“Fuck!”

Brayden jolted out of his musings abruptly when Tessa's back hit the mat. Bending his knees, he offered her his hand. She had

started an attack move, and, automatically, he'd counteracted, using too much force in the defense.

"I'm sorry, Tessa. Are you alright? Didn't mean to hit you so hard."

She glared up at him, slapping his hand away. "Stop it," she hissed. "Stop acting so... so..."

"Chivalrous?" His left eyebrow arched in amusement.

"Annoying," she finished, a scalding tone emphasizing the word. "It's fine. I told you not to hold back. I won't break."

Frowning, Brayden watched her climb to her feet. Her lips pressed together in an angry line as she tried to conceal a groan. "I'm here to teach you, not maim you."

Tessa sighed, rolling her eyes. "Isn't pain part of the deal?" Then, through pursed lips, "Cavut never held back. I liked that about him."

At the mention of the Rakh'Sha tool, her trainer, before he intervened and ordered the fucker to back off so he could take over, Brayden's scowl deepened. "Cavut was a poor teacher."

Tessa lifted her chin, a challenging glint in her eyes. "He was a fair teacher."

Brayden scoffed.

She advanced on him, jabbing her index into his chest. "He was. He only cared about what I've learned, and not about the bruises I gained in the process of mastering a move."

"I care about what you learn, too."

"Right," she drawled. She turned her back on him, and stepped to the edge of the mat, bending to retrieve her water bottle from the floor. After a gulp, she looked at him from over her shoulder. "Is that why you ordered him to step down? Because you think you're a better teacher?"

So, she knew about that, didn't she? Brayden straightened his spine and glared in her direction. "I am a better teacher." At her bark of mirthless laughter, he continued, "I am better

because I know exactly what you need—”

“Don’t be mistaken! Your title of Chief Security Officer doesn’t make you the best fighter here!” She was facing him again, hands on her hips, eyes bright as they shot daggers in his direction.

She was the most beautiful when she was angry.

Brayden inhaled deeply. “Cavut was taking the classic approach. Teaching you the correct moves, in the correct order. I’m not saying it was wrong, only that it wasn’t what you needed. Years would have passed before you became proficient. Not to mention, he didn’t take into account your weight, or strength... he never adapted the maneuvers to your own capabilities.”

The words caused her to draw back in surprise. He could see she grasped his reasoning, but she was too proud to admit he was right. “So, you’re teaching me to fight dirty?”

He shrugged. “If it keeps you alive...”

She blinked slowly, then shook her head, turning to retrieve her things from the floor. “I believe our hour’s up.”

Brayden sighed, accepting the truth of her words. “And how do you judge this first session?”

She paused, turning her head briefly. “Adequate, with lots of room for improvement.”

He chuckled, pressing one palm to his heart. “You wound me, milady.”

The corners of her mouth twitched. She swiveled around, hurrying in the door’s direction. “See you next time, Connaway.”

“Wait,” he called after her. “Where are you going? The showers are in the opposite direction.”

“I’ll use the one in my quarters,” came her clipped response.

The implication angered him without measure. In a flash, he was in front of her, halting her progress. “I’m an asshole, Starr,

I'll admit it," he hissed. "But that doesn't make me a rapist."

Wide-eyed, she took in his flaring nostrils, the clench of his jaw. She lowered her eyes to the floor, a blush staining her cheeks. "I apologize. I never intended to..."

He wasn't mollified. "You think I'd corner you in the showers, while you were defenseless, and... what? Put the moves on you? You're wrong, Tessa."

She nodded, her eyes still studying the floor. "I'm sorry."

Gently, he gripped her chin and forced her face up, so he could look into her eyes. "I'm not that kind of man."

After searching the truth of the statement into his expression, she nodded. "I understand."

"Good."

"Fine. Now, let me go."

He stepped back, releasing her. "See you the day after tomorrow, same time."

He turned, strode in the showers' direction, pausing briefly to collect his own things from the floor near the mat. After a second, he heard her following him.

In the locker room, he stopped, opening his cupboard, pulling out his work uniform and grabbing a towel. Without glancing in her direction, he stepped into the showers area, intent on occupying the last stall on the right.

A masked man jumped out of one stall, aiming a gun in his direction. Out of instinct, Brayden dove to the floor, the shot going past his head.

In a second, he was back up on his feet, right hand clutching the man's throat, left hand slapping the gun away. The masked man grunted, pressing a knife to Brayden's throat.

He ducked just in time, feeling the blade slashing his flesh just under the right ear, and swiveled on his feet, putting some distance between him and his attacker. Seeing the opening, the man dove for the gun on the floor.

But Brayden was faster. In the next instant, he was holding the gun and aiming, then firing. The red ball of pulse energy hit the man right in chest. The smell of seared flesh hit Brayden, followed by the sound of sizzling as the ball burrowed into his chest, and then the man collapsed to the floor, sightless eyes staring at the ceiling.

Breathing heavily, Brayden turned, seeing Tessa frozen in the doorway. “Fuck,” he cursed. “Are you alright?”

Wearing a blank expression, she nodded. He noticed her eyes were fastened on the corpse, so he moved to block her view. That made her look up at him.

“I’ve seen dead people before, Brayden,” she said in a calm tone.

Right. He remembered she was a frontier girl, and life on those planets was riddled with hardships and violence. With a jolt, he realized what made her so appealing to him: she was a paradox. Underneath that sweet exterior, she had a core made of steel.

Brayden cleared his throat, glancing down at the gun still clutched in his hand. He checked the safety, then motioned for her to be quiet and stay hidden in this room. “There could be more,” he whispered as he passed by her.

After assuring the locker room was empty, he sealed the doors and returned to the shower stalls.

“Clear?” she asked, stepping out of a stall.

“Clear.” He approached the corpse, looked down. “Go get your Correslink and bring mine also from my cupboard. The code’s 65834.”

He crouched next to the dead man as her footsteps faded, ripping out the mask. Frowning, he paused, letting his arms dangle between his knees.

“You knew him?” Tessa asked, handing him his Correslink.

“No. You?”

“Never seen him before.”

Brayden sighed, nodding. “VALID?”

“Yes, CSO Connaway.”

“What the fuck are you doing?”

A second passed before the neuronet responded, filled no doubt with countless computations that would grant the meaning behind Brayden’s words. “Presently, or...?”

Brayden straightened, then gestured to the corpse. “I mean this. What are you doing about this?”

“I apologize, CSO Connaway. I don’t understand your query.”

Pushing air out sharply through his nose, Brayden rubbed his temples. “Can you see me?”

“Yes.”

“Who else is in the room?”

“Miss Starr.”

Brayden’s eyes snapped open. “And that’s it?”

“Yes.”

“Motherfucker!” Brayden bent down over the dead man again, rifled through his pockets. Holding a small black box in his hand, he thrust it at Tessa. “It’s a Sig-scrambler.”

Her eyes grew big. “You mean your theory that... that... they’re using cloaking devices is correct...”

Brayden nodded. “We’re dealing with a conspiracy.”

The word echoed in the room.

Licking her lips, Tessa asked in a whisper, “To what end?”

“That... I don’t know.”

“Do you think there are more?”

“Yes. I fear so.” He weighed the device in his hand, found the small toggle that would turn it off. “Identify the man for me, VALID.”

The neuronet gasped. “CSO Connaway...”

“It’s alright, VALID. Identify the man for me.”

“Luis Wanderuss, Level 3 Store Keeper in the Stewarding

Department.”

“New to the Prime?”

“No, sir. Been here for the past two years.”

“Shit!”

“Brayden...” Tessa tugged on his arm. “As Corporate Chair, I demand to know what’s going on. I want the truth. All of it. Now.”

He nodded, drawing in a deep breath. In stilted words, he told her. How they started investigating after the incident involving her, how they suspected the use of cloaking devices. How they constructed sniffing algorithms, proven useless now, with this new attempt on his life. How they concluded there were a lot more conspirators on the Prime than they initially thought.

“So, what is it they want? Why now? Why here?”

He shook his head. “We don’t know.”

“Have you received any demands? If they’re a group opposing the restoration of Earth, there should have been some demands, right?”

“No demands. No words. Nothing.”

The silence stretched out between them. Then, “Why you, Brayden? Why were you the target?”

“I don’t—”

“You just thought of the answer, haven’t you?”

A look of panic morphed his features. Tessa gasped, and he glanced down to see he was squeezing her arm a bit too tightly. “Sorry,” he mumbled, absentmindedly. If he was right, then they were in big trouble. It was more than a mere group of terrorists, ready to scare them away from completing their mission on the Prime. No, this was far more menacing. A focused group, intent on taking control of the station, for reasons unknown.

Looking down at the corpse, Brayden shook his head. This

was carefully planned. This man had been among them for years, dormant, waiting for the right time...

Like when all their identities were threatened by a Chief Security Officer, who was devising new update patches for the neuronet overseeing all the Prime...

Patches that would have rendered their cloaking devices obsolete.

“Tessa,” he said, looking at her with a serious expression. She looked worried, and afraid, but he saw how she was pushing it down, trying to remain rational. “If I’m right, we have little time. We need to get to CC immediately.”

Zippering up her training jacket, she nodded. “I’m ready.”

He handed her the gun. “Know how to shoot?”

She smirked. “What do you think?”

“Right.” Frontier girl. “Keep it on you at all times.”

“What about you?” she asked, but accepted the gun from him.

He moved to the locker room, going straight to his cupboard. “I have another. Alright. So, here’s the plan. We’ll move to CC immediately. On the way, don’t stop, and don’t speak to anyone. You’ll be right behind me at all times, okay?”

Tessa nodded. “Okay. I’m ready.”

He motioned her to wait. “VALID, contact Mason Miura, have him come into CC at once. Also, Zale. Tell him: Coriolis. He’ll know what to do.”

“At once, CSO Connaway,” the neuronet replied.

“Thank you. And now, is there anyone outside this door?”

“No, sir. The corridors are empty.”

Brayden turned, motioning Tessa to step right behind him. He gave her a quick once-over. “Ready?”

At her nod, he turned back to the door. “Guide us to CC, VALID.”

A curious whine accompanied the neuronet’s words. “But

how can I? I'm blind to this threat."

Brayden shared a look with Tessa. "Scout ahead for us, VALID. And that's enough."

Tessa pressed closer to his side. "And we'll watch each other's back," she whispered.

"Deal. We'll come out of this, sweetheart."

"I know." Her tone was sure, her breathing steady.

Gods of the universe, what a woman! Why did he have to be such an asshole to her in the beginning? Why couldn't he have acted normal?

He knew the answer. Because he was afraid.

Little Tessa Starr scared him. With that perfect smile, and big eyes, and sweet manner.

With a brisk shake of head, he dismissed the thoughts. He had to stop doing this. Having inappropriate musings at inappropriate times. "Shall we?" He inclined his head to the door marking the locker room's exit.

"After you." She gave him a smirk.

Chuckling, he opened the door and took the first step toward safety.

Episode 20

Terran Prime Station, 2398 TST

Zale

She was positively fuming. Lima Harris-Pratt stormed into his office and slammed a WEBfolder on his desk.

Zale frowned and folded his arms, leaning back in the chair as he waited patiently for an explanation to her behavior. When she continued to glare at him without speaking, he arched an eyebrow in her direction.

With her index finger, she prodded the WEBfolder, sliding it closer to him. “How dare you?” The question was uttered through clenched teeth.

He sighed and grabbed the folder, opening it to see what made her so angry this time. When he saw the contents, he winced. It was the official recommendation he wrote and addressed to the Keepers Board to postpone the resort project until a new section could be prepared.

“How dare you decide in my stead when it’s over or not? I am in charge of this project!”

Zale swallowed. He got up and circled his desk until he was

standing in front of her. When he tried to cup her shoulders, she shrugged him off and took two steps back. “Lima, I... I apologize. I wrote this just after the Black Alert, when...” He trailed off, shaking his head. Words. Mere words. How could he make her see how much she meant to him with just words?

“Well,” she said, pointing her nose up into the air. “You should know I’ve already discussed it with Austin, and he refuses to pull his representatives from the Prime.”

Zale nodded. “I figured as much.”

Strained silence stretched between them. She broke it. “Then, why do it? Did you hate me so much you couldn’t stand sharing the station? Do you hate me still?”

“What? No!” His eyes widened, and he shook his head vigorously. “I never hated you. How could you think that?”

“Because you wanted me gone!” she shouted.

“Yes. So, you could be safe!” he shouted right back. “Can’t you see how much you mean to me? Of course, I’d pursue every fucking avenue if it kept you safe.”

Lima’s shoulders sagged. She stared into his eyes, searching for something. “Is that what you were trying to do?” she whispered.

Zale leaned forward and grabbed her, engulfing her into his arms. “That’s what I’m always trying to do. Even when it makes me look like an asshole.” She chuckled, forehead burying into his chest. “I don’t know what’s this thing we’ve reopened, or where it will lead, but... I will never want you away for other reasons than the ones concerning your own safety.”

She lifted her head and cupped his cheeks. Taking his cue from her actions, he leaned down and pressed his lips to hers. She sighed and deepened the kiss.

He was the luckiest bastard in the universe.

“I forgive you,” she whispered, her lips a hairbreadth’s away from his own.

His golden eyes connected with her own, and the corners of his mouth tilted. “My Lima,” he breathed.

“Yours,” she agreed, sealing the promise with another kiss.

VALID’s panicked voice broke the two of them apart. “Commander Corvald, I have an urgent message from CSO Connaway. He says: Coriolis.”

Zale’s entire body stiffened. In a low growl, he ordered, “Come again, VALID?”

“Coriolis.”

The code word signaling the gravest of dangers, the one they’ve used since kids. Why would Brayden ask VALID to say it now? What happened?

Regardless of reasons, Zale sprinted into action. “VALID, authorize a Red Alert. Sec-imprint ZC486. Then, seal the Prime. Shut off all major sections, and follow up with the people, directing them to the nearest escape pods—”

“I can’t do that, Commander. I’ll issue the Red Alert and seal the Prime, but you must do the rest manually.”

Zale’s mouth snapped closed. Curious insubordination on VALID’s part, or merely caution? “Explain.”

“CSO Connaway will, shortly. He’s on his way to CC with Miss Starr. But...”

Zale lost his patience. “Are you corrupted, VALID? Why are you acting so strangely?”

The neuronet’s answer surprised him. “I don’t know. Which is why after issuing the Red Alert and sealing off the station, I’ll go offline and run an extensive self-diagnosis.”

“Go offline? And leave us blind at a time like this?” Zale roared.

“You’re already blind,” came VALID’s cryptic response.

Zale slashed an arm through the air, the sharp movement conveying the extent of his anger. “Enough! If you go into self-diagnosis mode now, when we might need you the most, I swear

I'll personally crawl into your main maintenance slot and snap your core link in half!"

Silence reigned in response. Chest heaving, Zale turned to Lima, seeing her wide eyes and panicked expression. The alarm for the Red Alert came on, encouraging all personnel to retreat into their specific departments.

Mason Miura, followed by a disheveled Brayden and Tessa, pushed inside Zale's office, just before the heavy blocker doors clanged down, sealing everyone inside the CC.

"What's happening?" Zale asked immediately. Mason and Brayden started speaking at the same time. Zale threw a palm up, interrupting them. "One at a time," he ordered. His eyes pinged from Tessa's determined expression, to Brayden's angry frown, to Mason's pinched lips. "Mason."

"I..." Zale waited while the man gathered himself, no doubt surprised at being called out first. A blush spread over the CTO's cheeks. "Casey Jenkins, the engineer, came over last night, and... I think she put something in my drink, because I fell unconscious. When I woke up this morning, and reviewed the footage from my private security cams, I saw... she stole my token with the access codes, Zale. She's a traitor, I'm afraid. I'm sorry, I should have known. I tried to find her, had VALID locate her, but so far, no luck. I don't know where she is, but she's still on the station. This I can say with certainty. If she had conspirators, or not—"

"She most certainly has," Brayden interrupted, gesturing to himself and Tessa. "We were just attacked in the training complex. A masked man tried to kill me." At Zale's and Mason's enraged shouts, Brayden recounted everything. "This was the device the man was using to keep himself hidden from VALID," Brayden concluded, putting a black box on Zale's desk.

"And you say the man had worked here for the past two years?"

“Yes. VALID confirmed it.”

Zale looked at the closed door of this office with suspicion. “So, there could be more.”

“It could be anyone,” Mason added grimly. “Fuck!”

How could this be? Every person coming to the Prime, employee or not, was carefully checked. An extensive security check, including the person’s connections, was conducted before the granting of access. It was part of the standard screening led by the Keepers, an action so ancient, it had become tradition. Have they become lax in their search?

Didn’t matter. He, as Commander to the Prime, has failed. He was the one who has grown sloppy over the years. So much so that now he was losing control of his station. Zale turned away from them all, suddenly ashamed to face any of them.

After a second, someone touched his shoulder. He looked down to see Lima has stepped closer to him. “I’m sorry,” he whispered to her.

She shook her head, a fierce expression taking over her features. “It’s not your fault.” With a straight spine, she turned to the rest. “So, someone’s attacking the Prime, our home. I say we fight!”

Zale’s lips formed a sad smile. “With what? VALID’s offline, and we don’t know friend from foe.”

“We don’t need VALID,” Lima protested. “We do this the old-fashioned way. Aren’t we a violent species? We’d become mellow in this day and age, because nothing’s been bothering us since the war with the Arru’Thal has ended. But the instincts are still there.”

Zale looked out and down toward the blue-green planet he took an oath to protect. Earth. And Lima’s words were true, to an extent. Earth’s history had taught them how humans banded together when a common enemy surfaced, only to battle among each other when they had no one to fill up the spot.

Wasn't this true, when he'd grown up among violence and bloodshed himself?

"She's right, brother." Brayden stepped forward. "We come from a prison planet."

"And I'm an ex-gladiator," Mason added. "Fighting's second nature."

"I come from a frontier world," Tessa added in a small voice, almost too low to be heard.

All eyes turned to Lima. She laughed and raised her palms. "I'm the rich, spoiled girl, fine. But I know how to shoot."

The moment was noble, but still, "And if we lose?" Zale asked.

"We die a warrior's death." Mason shrugged.

"There's only five of us," he continued.

"We'll find other allies. But we need you, man, because you're the Commander. No one else can override those blast doors."

Zale's eyes connected with Brayden's. He was giving him an accusing glare, as if to say: "I never seen you back down from a fight."

Zale closed his eyes tightly, then turned to open his personal vault, pulling out an entire arsenal of weapons. From standard-issue pulse guns, to E-mag rifles, V-grenades, Candite knives, and flak-swords. In silence, everyone outfitted themselves with the weapons of their choosing.

A heavy ball settled in Zale's stomach, his veins filled with dread. He pushed it all down, because there wasn't time to dwell in indecision. "There's going to be madness out there. If the others hadn't attacked by now, expect a lot of confusion among the people. Nevertheless, we have to initiate the escape procedures."

"Where will we go? The nearest outpost's been decommissioned years ago," Tessa said.

"True," Zale replied in a rumble. His eyes fell once more upon

the planet. “How about down?” That made everyone gape at him. He raised his palms, asking them for patience. “Think. The planet’s been restored for the last three years. The dally was for administrative stuff.”

Brayden was the first one to nod. “And the Ark has sent down the first set of habitats. We have everything we need down there. We could go down, regroup, signal for help...”

“... and by the time the rescue parties arrive, we’ll have a nice little community already built,” Zale continued, not in the least surprised his best friend’s thoughts ran in the same direction.

“Provided we survive today.” Mason crashed their bubble of hope.

“And we get rid of every traitor,” Lima added.

“Then, we’d better get to work.” Zale checked every weapon was in its correct place for easy grabbing, then strode to the door, leading their advance.

Every officer in CC stood at attention as he exited, saluting. “Orders, Commander?”

Brayden stopped by his shoulder. “How are we going to play this, man?” he asked, pitching his voice for Zale’s ears only.

After a second of silence, Zale nodded at the men. “Everybody, form a circle.” Then, after the officers complied, he added: “Look to your left. That’s the person you’re watching. Shoot them at the slightest movement. If not, stand down until we’ve cleared you.” He turned to Brayden and Mason. “We’ll pat each down, check if anyone’s wearing one of those little black boxes.”

They found no one in possession of a cloaking device, which made them all trustworthy, presumably. Zale nodded, satisfied, “You, Comm Officer, link me to the Ark.” The man scrambled to do his bidding, announcing it was up and ready.

The Chief Science Officer appeared in holofrom in the middle of the room. “Commander Corvald.”

“Maltend,” Zale returned the greeting. “There’s a Red Alert presently on the Prime,” he dove right in, as was his fashion. “I’m ordering you to place one on the Ark as well, and evacuate all personnel down to the planet.”

Maltend’s eyes cut to one side before returning to him once more. “I’m afraid I already did that, Commander. Only I ordered everyone to return to the Prime.”

“I see.” Zale’s tone became deceptively mild. “And when were you planning to inform me of this decision?”

Maltend gulped. “Just before you commed, sir, I swear. There’s been an explosion in the Biology Department. The entire section sealed off automatically to prevent the fire spread, and... Finding no live Bio-Sigs, we also dropped the entire section to the planet, as an extra security measure.”

Zale was silent for several beats. “Order every escape pod to change their course down to Earth. The Prime’s unsafe right now.”

“I understand, Commander. It shall be done.”

“And Maltend, I expect a full debriefing once on the ground. Do you understand?” He signed off before the man could reply.

After instructing the rest of the officers on deck in CC, the entire group moved on to the blast doors separating them from the rest of the station. Zale input his credentials, causing the thick seals to lift slowly.

Everybody trained their weapons on the lone figure waiting on the other side of the doors. Faster than they could blink, the Rendition was gripping Zale’s neck in one hand, pushing him back into the room.

“Haltrosti, release him. What the fuck are you doing?” Brayden’s enraged roar reached Zale’s ears. “Let him go or I’ll shoot!”

Reading the Rendition’s expression, Zale signaled Brayden to stand down. When everyone took a step back, the Rendition

released Zale. “Apologies, Commander. Had to get your full attention.”

“By choking me to death?” Zale braced his palms on his knees as he coughed.

“By threatening the most important target of the group.”

A muffled protest sounded from behind the now-closed doors. Haltrosti turned and exited, reentering with a bound Casey in tow. Mason growled and pointed his rifle at her.

“What the fuck, you piece of metal?” Casey demanded once Haltrosti removed her gag. “You left me there, exposed. That wasn’t part of the deal!”

“Silence, traitor,” the Rendition snarled. Then, addressing Zale, “This little one came to me just before the attack, warned us of what’s about to go down.”

“Why?” This, from Mason, who was glaring at Casey.

Casey shrugged, casting her gaze downward. “Because I couldn’t do it,” she mumbled.

“Did Haltrosti do this?” Mason persisted, gesturing to her black eye.

Casey shook her head. “Percival Harper, my... handler. When I refused to give him the token I stole from you.”

Mason frowned. “Let me guess. He took it anyway.”

Casey nodded pitifully, still refusing to meet anyone’s eyes.

“Why all this?” Zale asked. “Why the subterfuge, and the violence?”

Casey looked at the Rendition instead of answering. Haltrosti cleared his throat. “You’re not going to believe this, Commander. But she’s actually part of an invasion twenty-five years in the making.”

“What?” Various exclamations and swore words accompanied Zale’s question. “Invasion?”

The Rendition nodded. “She’s human, but not from this universe.”

Zale scoffed. “She’s obviously lying.”

“Altterrans,” Casey whispered. “That’s the name we took for ourselves on this side, to differentiate us from... you.”

“Madness. Stop lying! If you don’t wish to answer our questions, fine. There’s plenty of time to interrogate you properly after we’re safe.”

“I’m not lying, Commander. Listen to me—” The rest of her words were muffled by the gag Haltrosti replaced.

“So, we’re taking her with us?” Mason asked.

Zale nodded. “What’s the situation out there? We’re all ready to fight, to take back our station—”

Haltrosti shook his head. “It’s all for nothing, I’m afraid. The station’s already lost. There are just too many of them. My brothers, Zeq and Tantrrosti, are out there, fighting them. Mell is rounding up survivors, putting them in escape pods and sending them down. You should do that, also, Commander. Before it’s too late.”

“But we can’t leave the station in their hands!”

“We won’t.” The old Rendition handed him a cube full of data vials. “Take care of this for me. It’s a fledgling we made from VALID. It’s got his core code, without the quirks and personality.”

“Haltrosti, listen to me—”

“I invoke the Override Law, Commander Corvald. I am now in control.”

The statement stopped Zale in his tracks. He felt an icy shiver dancing down his spine. Renditions made this station for the humans, way back then, when the Watch was founded. While humans managed the station, a clause was agreed upon: in case of disaster, the Renditions could always take back control for security measures. Such a rule’s been put in place to protect everyone’s lives, because Renditions were capable of amazing computations organic brains could never support.

“I understand,” Zale uttered through numb lips. “And I... we... obey.”

Haltrosti nodded. “If the little traitor’s right, then these Alterrans are trying to open up a portal to get more of their people on this side. We can’t have that. We’d doom the entire Union, not just ourselves. So, us, the four remaining Renditions of the Prime, will stay behind. And blast the entire station to smithereens once everyone is safely away.”

Zale swallowed and stared at Haltrosti. “Will you let me put out a distress signal before we go?”

“I’ve already done that. Rescue’s on its way.”

There’s nothing more to be done around here, Zale thought. It was finished. He felt Lima’s fingers threading through his own, and he returned her squeeze. “Thank you,” he told Haltrosti in a hoarse voice. “Words aren’t enough to express our gratitude for your sacrifice, but—”

“Come. I’ll escort the lot of you to the escape pod down one level.” Haltrosti turned away abruptly, as if out of patience.

Zale met the eyes of every member of this party, before following the Rendition out into the corridor, Lima’s hand still clenched tightly in his fist. Judging by the corpses lying in the corridors, Haltrosti had already cleared a path. Thus, they encountered no problems on the way.

At the escape pod, Zale insisted to go last. When everyone was inside, he turned to the Rendition. “We are the fiery few for the many after...” he began the Keepers’ chant.

“We are the light within the darkness...” Haltrosti followed.

“We are the ones forgotten in the sunny future ahead...”

Everyone in the escape pod joined them for the rest. “We build. We wait. We work. We hope.”

Zale stepped back, entering the pod. The hatch sealed behind him automatically. Everyone joined him at the windows, to give the old Rendition one last salute before the pod was hurtled into

space.

Inhaling deeply, Zale turned to his companions. “Return to your seats. Strap yourselves in. Come on, fuckers, look lively! Mason, watch the traitor closely.”

Brayden guffawed and slapped his shoulder before obeying his commands. The rest of them whooped.

Zale dropped into the seat next to Lima, and hugged her tightly to his side, because it was the only thing he wanted to do for the rest of his life. “No matter what happens,” he murmured. “No matter what,” she agreed.

The End

Curious to know how it all began?

THE INTERSTELLAR HEREAFTER SERIES (FREE WITH KU):

- ♥ [Book 1: Reshaping Eliza \(A Space Opera Alien Romance\)](#)
- ♥ [Book 2: Ensnaring Avery \(A Rendition Romance\)](#)
- ♥ [Book 3: Deciphering Alyssa \(A Reverse Harem Romance\)](#)
- ♥ [Book 4: Revealing Evie \(A Rendition Romance\)](#)

OTHER BOOKS (UNRELATED SERIES):

- ♥ [Scout: A Dark SciFi Alien Romance \(Delta Hydra Storm Book 1\)](#)
- ♥ Sentry (Coming soon)

About the author

Rhea's an average person living a normal, boring life. Everyone told her she can't put that into her bio, so she wrote this instead:

"Deep in the human unconscious is a pervasive need for a logical universe that makes sense. But the real universe is always one step beyond logic."—Frank Herbert, Dune

Rhea discovered the magical realm of books at a young age but it wasn't until she read these two small sentences that she truly began to understand herself. And to accept she will always battle reality with phantoms of the mind.

Fast-forward a few years, and we find her feeling quite lost. Practical to the core, she started the journey of rediscovering herself. To that end, she finally committed to the duty of putting her mind's fabrications to paper. With each story, she reclaims a little more of her old self.

Rhea also likes lists, cats, and coffee. She abhors lies, tardiness, and steadfast seriousness. She's on the fence about people.

Keep in touch

[Newsletter subscribe](#)

[ARC Team](#)

[Official website](#)

[Facebook Page](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Goodreads](#)