



Lost Gods

Kim Knox

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This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

Dedication

To Ed, Jack and Daniel for mostly not annoying me.

To Kelly and Jessica, thanks for reading this story in its infancy.

And also everyone at Romance Divas who helped me with the tweaks. Especially the ladies of the Live Chat Challenge.

Chapter One

“When I get you, Paxton, you son-of-a—”

I fell forward, the rusted metal floor rushing up to meet me. I hit it and what little air there was whooshed from my lungs. Lying there, I couldn't move. I'd fallen from a body-tube, a cryogenic storage device. The familiar rank odour of flash-warmed skin swept though me, and I choked, my aching chest heaving as I pulled in new breaths for the first time in too long.

My milky vision cleared, and I found a row of the bulky, black body-tubes disappearing into the shrouding darkness. The single shot of light from high above stung my face and dried the gel to my skin. I shivered. Damp material stuck to my limbs and my shiver deepened.

I drew in an easier breath of stale air and coughed. Where the hell was I?

“Falling at my feet.” A man's smooth voice eased over me. “Really, what have I done to deserve this?”

Turning my head, my chin rested on the cold metal floor, and I stared at polished shoes. They swam into focus, black, real leather shoes with neat hand stitching. The rich scent warmed through me, and I let my face rest back against the uneven metal. Tiredness sat on my cold muscles and bones.

His words rolled through my brain. Something about them triggered a flare of heat under my skin. Yes, I recognised my fight-reflex ... but my body was rubber. Smacking him could wait.

The stranger squatted down beside me and stroked back my damp hair. Unexpectedly, my heartbeat slowed, and I breathed easier at his slow, rhythmic touch. Which was odd, since I'd been ready to punch him only a moment before for being supremely oily. I blamed the fog clouding my brain.

“I've been looking a long time for you. A long, *long* time.” The soothing press of his palm, his fingers over my hair continued. I lay there and a knot in my chest eased. A knot I didn't know I had until it was gone. Who was this man? Or was it simply the warm touch of another human being after the cold grip of the body-tube?

“Tell me your name.”

The soft words fell. It was an easy enough question to answer.

Yes, it was...

“My name?” I pushed hard, scrabbled about in my mind, but the thought was slippery, elusive. What was my name? I didn't know it. My own name, it was gone. Ease vanished and panic fired through my blood. I whipped up, finding my feet and landing in a natural half-crouch.

“Nice reflexes.”

I blinked. I was fast; I knew that. I also knew that my abilities weren't natural, they were ... grown. What the hell...? Another burst of fear lashed words. “Who the hell are you?”

He straightened and stood watching me, his arms loosely folded across his chest. He was beautiful. Tall, with a lean athleticism only accentuated by his smooth, black suit and an easy perfection to his features that made it difficult to look away from him...

The most deadly smile lit his face. I swallowed, my mouth dry, and my heart thudded out an uneven beat. My stomach twisted as more panic surged. Did I know a lot about wickedly attractive men? This stranger had me completely thrown and that wasn't ... me. Who *was* he?

"My name is James Kinsare." He lifted a dark eyebrow and there was a hard glitter to his eyes that I couldn't read. "Sound familiar?"

"Should it?"

James sighed, and he gave me a simpler, less threatening smile. "I always live in hope."

Straightening, and ignoring the protest of unused muscles, I stayed wary. I was in the dark ... about everything. I didn't know who this man was. His name, his pretty face meant nothing. And I would never believe someone who could smile the way he had. "You said you knew me?"

He winced. "I was looking for you. Well, the frozen woman. I only knew you as Katya."

Katya. I rolled the name silently around and over my tongue. There was no corresponding fire of neurons in my brain. It was as blank to me as the stranger's ... as James Kinsare's name. My mind jumped, instead, to another name. "Paxton." I had shouted it the second the tube reactivated. "I need to find Paxton."

James shrugged. "I have no idea who he is." He fastened his jacket and smoothed over his tie.

The incongruous sight of his smooth suit finally hit my addled brain. He was wearing a suit in a rust-thick silo. I had no name left in my mind but I knew wearing expensive civilian clothes here was wrong. I stared down at my body. I wore a brown flight-suit, patched, grubby and still damp. Patting the bulbous pockets proved useless as I came up empty. Nothing to tell me who I was. Damn. "Who are you, James?"

His sharp smile returned, and I took a step back. James' smile brought with it a sudden hot rush and made me nervous. I didn't like being nervous. Not one bit.

"Me? I'm an entrepreneur."

"Yes." My gaze slid down the tailored lines of his coal-black suit. "I can believe that." I met his dark eyes. The spark there had my stomach in a knot. "Though, I think, more creative accounting than salvage."

"What?" He spread his arms, half turning, staring down at himself. "A man can't be well-dressed?"

I wiped a damp hand over my mouth, hiding a smile. I didn't want to like this man; didn't want to trust him. My skin prickled, and it was more than the cramps of new blood reaching my muscles. *Trust*. I didn't *do* trust. That was very important.

"Katya..."

Something about the way he said my name lifted more hairs on the back of my neck. Maybe it was still my worry about trust, maybe a realisation that Katya really was my name or maybe it was just the silky darkness of James' voice. I couldn't decide.

"I know your memory is patchy." My expression fixed. Shit. He knew. I held back a groan. *Of course*, he knew. He'd known I couldn't remember my own name. "You've been in a body-tube for years. You're disoriented, jumpy." His mouth quirked. "Hungry?"

Years? A tremor ran through the hand covering my throat, but to answer his

question, my stomach growled. He was offering food. I had to concentrate on that. For now. “You can feed me?”

He stood back and waved an arm into the darkness. Tracking lights shone a path across the metal floor. “This way.”

I walked ahead of him, the click of his expensive shoes beating out a metallic echo around me. It was the only sound to cut the oppressive silence. I rubbed at the back of my neck and willed away the unease that prickled my skin. I had no memory. Nothing. No childhood, no parents, no friends. The collar of the flight-suit dug into my skin. Was I a pilot? I felt over my right breast pocket, the diffuse light too dull to see. There was no company insignia branding the material.

My hand stilled. I knew to look for it there, *knew* I was wearing a flight-suit. Had I only had my personal history wiped? A door loomed out of the semi-darkness, the lock glowing in a panel beside it. James entered the key code and with a slow gush of stale air the seals disengaged and the door swung back. From the shots of light, a green medical insignia flaked on the doorframe. Beyond the storage room, a narrow corridor curved away, auxiliary lighting tracing the brown walls.

They’d stashed me in a medical bay. I stretched my fingers, feeling the tight muscles strain against fresh movement. My body ached, hung heavy with unused muscle ... but I didn’t feel ill. “Why was I hospitalised?”

“You weren’t. There’s nothing wrong with you.”

I scrubbed at my face, flaking off dried gel. None of it made sense. “What is this place, then?”

“The Deimos drilling platform.” He pulled the door shut, the locks and seals whirring and clanking. He rubbed his hands together, rust drifting slow to the metal grating. “Long abandoned.”

The site name didn’t strike any memory either. Someone had frozen me on a derelict station. What had I done? What *hadn’t* I done? Too many unanswerable questions shot through my dazed brain. I voiced one of them. “You were looking for me. Why?”

James put his hand to the small of my back. The unexpected charge of contact urged me forward. “All in good time.”

I stopped, turned. “No.” My smile became sharp. “I might not know my name, but I know I wouldn’t fall for that line.”

His head tilted, and he looked at me. The edges of his mouth twitched, and I felt a responding tug in my chest. Damn, was it simply the fact that my brain was overreacting to fresh stimuli? And James’ mouth was everything stimulating should be...

“I suppose you wouldn’t. Please,” he waved me forward. “You have something I want, Katya.”

My mind went to places it shouldn’t. Hot, dark places, heavy with the scent of lust and sweat-slick bodies. I pushed those thoughts down. *Bad Katya*. “What would that be?”

“Information.”

I laughed, and it echoed around the curve of the corridor. I ignored the prickle of disappointment that his interest wasn’t more carnal. “Now that might be difficult.” I rapped my knuckles against my skull. “My brain is fried.” And wasn’t that the truth?

He paused and there was a hint of something in his smooth voice. Not knowing what else to call it, I had to label it irritation. “Yes.”

Another door, another keypad and the clunk and whoosh of locks and seals. More

stale air gushed towards me, and I winced. What the hell had I done to deserve being dumped and abandoned in this decaying hole? "How did you find me?" I stepped over the doorframe and waited while James secured the door. "Is there a sign saying 'frozen woman here'?"

He flashed me a grin, and my heart missed a beat. Damn it, that smile really was deadly. "If you know where to look, yes." The corridor branched, and James paused. "The refectory's this way."

"Is that a good idea?"

"Trust me, Katya."

"I don't trust anyone."

James stopped. His jaw twisted and for a second I thought I saw emotion surge behind his dark eyes. His index finger traced my cheekbone in slow exploration. Heat rose under my skin, and my mouth dried. I swallowed. "What are you doing?"

"You *can* trust me. Can't you feel that?"

What I felt was a hollowing in my stomach and the real urge to run. I stepped back from his touch and forced a smile. "Trust is earned."

His fingers curled, and he dropped his arm. A shadow passed over his face as he turned to the locking mechanism. "Yes, so I've heard." He opened then sealed another door, and we stood in the refectory.

I stared. I couldn't help it. "You did this?"

James smirked at me. "I thought that my ship, simply a runabout, would be too confining after your time ... away. At least here there's elbow room."

Rusted tables stacked against the side walls of a rectangular room. Collapsed ceiling panels, which had once hung from the cracked girders, littered the floor, and every joint and tile groaned with age. But in the centre of the room, laid to perfection, sat a circular table covered with a pristine-white tablecloth. Glow lamps illuminated a spread of silver dishes. The scent of warm bread drifted through me, and my soul lifted. Home. It reminded me of home. Pain seared and tears burned my eyes. My home was gone. Dead. A burnt cinder.

"Katya, what have you remembered?"

His question jumped into my thoughts, urgency colouring his voice. I didn't trust James Kinsare. He had sought me out for his own purposes, not as an altruistic act. Drawing in a tight breath, I shook off the ache of loss. I focused somewhere below his right shoulder, unwilling to meet his gaze. I didn't want James seeing what little knowledge I did have. "Nothing."

James took my hand, and the touch of his skin on mine burned. I picked out the fine weave of the cloth, highlighted by the wash of the lamplight. A distraction. Anything, so that I didn't focus on the way he squeezed my fingers and how I took too much comfort from his hold. It was wrong. Completely wrong. I pulled my hand free. "Thank you, James." I waved the hand he had held to the spread of food. "This was thoughtful."

"I don't think anyone's described me as that before."

I glanced at him, stern, immaculate. "I can imagine."

"Only a few minutes out of a tank and already cheeky. What happens when you really warm up?"

The knot of pain eased, and I let out a slow breath. For a moment, I met his gaze and found his eyes gleaming. "I'm certain you'll find out."

He pulled out a chair, the legs scraping over the metal grating and picked up a flat-pressed pile of clothes. He handed them over. The fabric was dry, soft under the rough nap of my hand. I shook out the long suit, laying it over the back of the chair, balancing the underwear on top. Tugging at the fastenings of my flight-suit, I let it fall to the metal grating with a heavy thump. Cool air washed over my damp skin, and I shivered.

James had politely presented me with his back as I dropped the flight-suit over a nearby chair. Odd, I'd never even given my nakedness a thought. Something else I'd found out about myself: I obviously didn't embarrass easily. Or maybe it was just him? Which raised even more questions. Was I so comfortable because I already knew him?

Damn it, not knowing what I was, who I was had my nerves shot. I dug the heels of my hands into my eyes, wanting to quiet the chaos in my brain.

I let out a slow breath and stared down at grubby nakedness. I didn't even recognise my own smooth body. I shrugged quickly into the underwear and black suit, stretching, twisting and flexing my arms, torso, legs into the slick outfit. The material clung, and activating technology warmed me. Fabric tightened and thickened under my feet, forming flexible soles. Letting out a slow breath, I suddenly felt better. "Perfect fit."

James turned. A muscle jumped in his cheek and his eyes darkened. The expression of a moment and then it was gone. "Yes." He waved his hand to the chair on which the clothes had sat. "Please, sit."

I sat and habit obviously made me unwrap the cloth napkin from the gleaming cutlery. My face reflected in the silver knife. Streaked with dirt and dried, flaking gel, it was a lean face with pale blue eyes and a tangled mass of dark blonde hair. I looked young, which was an odd surprise. I felt ... old. Putting that from my mind, I spread the napkin across my lap. "Is there a place I can wash?"

"Washing here is impossible." His eyes glittered. "The suit will absorb body odour and micro scrub your skin. Not a substitute for a shower, I know but I did try for you." He sat to my right and deconstructed his napkin. "What little water there is here I electrolysed into oxygen. Better to be dirty than dead."

"The information must be vital." I watched as he uncovered a metal platter. Thick salad leaves burst up around scallops, curved shellfish and hot ginger. Breathing in the scent forced my stomach to growl in anticipation. My mouth already watered. Well, my body seemed to remember the food even if I didn't. James scooped a generous portion into a bowl.

I stabbed at a forkful and stuffed it into my mouth. Hot, crunchy, with nice little sparks of ginger as I chewed; for a moment, I forgot the nightmare I had just woken up to. I stared around the refectory. The food counters were rusted through, dust thick along what remained of metal storage shelves. The platform had stood empty for decades, maybe longer. Something about the curve of the supporting architecture said the place was old, centuries old.

I held down a shudder and stared back into my bowl. I speared another curled, pink prawn and bit it in two. Waving my fork at James, I chewed and swallowed. "What information did you dig me out of a deep freeze for?"

He was helping himself to seconds. I wasn't the only one to have a hole where my stomach should be. "I need your expertise in genetic manipulation."

I blinked. Was that what I was? A doctor? I couldn't help it. I stared at my hands and found prominent knuckles, square fingertips. I rubbed smooth palms together and knew

they sounded wrong. My gut tightened. Calluses *should* have scored and hardened my skin. I didn't have a surgeon's hands. Not even someone who worked in a laboratory. Pushing at my thoughts only hit the same frustrating blankness. "How do you know I have this knowledge?" Irritation at my lack of history had me snapping at him.

James' fork stilled in the bowl but he didn't look up. "Because you're Katya."

"That's not really an answer."

He shrugged. "It's all I'm willing to give."

I ate the other half of the prawn. "Why do you need it, this information?"

"Full of questions, aren't you?"

Scraping the rest of the platter into my bowl, I smiled at him. "It's all I have, James. My brain's running on empty." I scraped clean my second bowl and wiped a crust of bread around it. I caught James' sideways look and ignored him. He could worry about manners. It was my first meal in ... I shied away from thinking decades. "So what happens now?"

"Now? Now we have the main course."

"Funny." I poured tea into a small white cup and wrapped my chilled fingers around its warmth. Steam rose and breathing in the soft herbal scent eased me. Yes, my body seemed to know this little ritual too. "We leave in your ship and go where?"

James piled the bowls to one side and placed a covered platter before me. "There's a Command Base patrolling the system. I have a larger vessel there."

I took another sip of my tea before placing it back on the tablecloth. Poking at the thick slice of meat with a fresh fork, I didn't look up. It was odd the things I still knew. The face of the first man I kissed was a blank, but I knew that this man, James Kinsare, who could ... park ... at a Command Base had power. Real power. He seemed unaware that what he'd just revealed was unusual, special. What could I possibly know that *he* would need? The thought made my gut cramp.

The name James Kinsare meant nothing to me, no matter how hard I pushed against the blankness in my brain. I willed myself calm and turned my attention to the food. It seemed that even unsettled; nothing could dent my hunger.

My knife cut easily through the hot steak.

"What have I said?" he asked.

James' dark, intense gaze held me. I made myself smile. Truth was my safest option. If he believed that of me, that I told the truth, then lying later would be easier. That made me pause, the fork halfway to my mouth. It seemed I was practised at deception. Who I really was started to feel ... criminal. "You use a Command Base. You must have friends in high places."

His expression didn't change. "I must."

Our conversation dried, and I continued to eat. The steak melted in my mouth and slid happily down into my stomach. I hadn't eaten this well in a long time. Not questioning that knowledge, I let myself enjoy my food. I glanced up to find James staring at me, an unknown look in his eyes. My chest tightened. I swallowed, jabbed my fork at the half-eaten steak and tried to distract him. "What is this?"

James snagged another slice from the silver platter and dropped it onto his plate. "Grus venison. Great white-coated beast." He grinned at me. "All horns and teeth."

"And you hunted it yourself?"

A smile lurked on his mouth, but he didn't look up as he eased the knife through the

meat. “Do I look like I hunt?”

In his immaculate suit with his perfect grooming, he appeared to be a man whose only sport was chasing down company stock. He looked up, and the glitter in his eyes squeezed my heart. Something in him screamed power, raw energy and strength. An image of him stalking the animal, his bared muscles sinewy and streaked with sweat and muck hit me.

My gaze dropped, and I breathed against the sudden heat in my blood. The idea of him hunting, the chase, the adrenalin rush of the kill, had my body on fire. I pushed away those thoughts. Well, tried to. Nothing seemed to dampen the sudden twist in my heated thoughts, tearing through my brain of *me* with a spear, running James to ground...

All right, my attempt at distracting him had only unsettled *me*. “So ... how did you find me here?”

“Katya...” The slow drawl of his voice did little to ease the fire licking against my skin. I twisted in my seat and decided to refocus my questions again.

“That’s yet another of your secrets. So ... this is a drilling platform. Why was I dumped here?”

James gave me nothing. “Why do you think?”

I sat back in my chair and tried *not* to fill my mind with the image of him tearing through long grass, with the whip of the thin green blades against his bare thighs. My imagination drifted upward—Shit. It felt good to have no memory. I was obviously some sort of pervert to be imagining that I hunted a complete stranger naked with a spear. I let out a slow breath and started to answer my own question. “It’s centuries old and long abandoned.” I closed my eyes and let my other senses guide me, needing them to spark something in my memory.

The rich scents of our meal drifted in the cool air. I picked out the delicate aroma of spiced apple as our dessert. My mouth grew wet, and I willed my body away from thoughts on my stomach. Another taste touched my tongue. The stale air had grown fresh and cut under it was the sweet taste of leaves. Yes, a working biomass filtration unit bursting with vegetation. I drew in more air and something about the scent of the plants slid a physical memory through my flesh.

It tasted of home. *Deimos*. The name James gave the drilling platform. Deimos ... somehow that name connected to my home too.

Under the table, my hands gripped tight to the smooth fabric of my black suit. It *wasn’t* my home. I knew that, but then I butted up against the solid blank wall of my empty memory.

I let the heavy silence of the refectory sink into me, willing it to calm my straining nerves. Only the thudding of my heart and James’ steady, relaxed breathing broke the quiet ... no ... *there*, almost lost under my heartbeat, thrummed the slow turn of generators. I focused. Dull, heavy, they had to be huge ... which meant this wasn’t a minor asteroid platform. It was a big one. Something on a massive industrial scale.

I winced. How could I know all of this and not know my own name? It was infuriating. “This drilling platform,” I said, staring at the silent man opposite. “It has something to do with my home.”

“You lived here?”

He was being deliberately obtuse. I itched to kick him under the table, and the gleam in his eyes said he knew it. “No one’s been here in decades, James. Why did *you* look for

me here?”

“It’s where the trail ended.”

And there was that sinful smile that had my blood surging. I wanted to smack it off his face. “That’s not an answer.”

“Yes, it is. It’s just not the one you want. I sought you out for information, Katya.”

“What information?”

He sat back in his chair and absently smoothed his hand down over his tie. “If I knew what it was, you’d still be in the body-tube.”

I had to ignore the ball of frustrated anger curling tight in my stomach. Heat flushed my cheeks. “This is not funny.”

“This has *never* been funny.”

“Damn it, if you want this information, whatever it is, you’re going to have to help me with my memory.”

James picked up his knife and fork and stabbed at a mushroom. He waved it at me. “You’re an environmental geneticist.”

“I’m a terraformer?” I turned over my hands and the need for calluses and rough skin made sense. I stared at the flight-suit draped over a metal chair. I pulled at it, dragging the suit into my lap. Its metal collar clinked against the leg of the table, and I held my breath against the stink of rank body odour. The cuffs of my flight-suit had started to thin and stretch from the metal rim. It’d seen years of use. I threw it back over the chair. “I’m not a very successful one.”

James’ slow smile irked me. “I have to admit you’re in worse shape than I expected from the myth that surrounds you.”

A growl from my stomach reminded me that I hadn’t finished with my half-full plate. I picked up my cutlery. “I have myths?”

He pushed aside his empty plate and poured a rich amber liquid into a stemmed glass. He relaxed back in the chair, idly swirling the liquid, the overhead lights sparking in it. “The woman who turned Almaak-5 into a paradise? Yes.”

“And that’s what you want?” He didn’t answer. So for a few moments, I let myself eat as James watched me. Occasionally, he sipped from his glass. Another question gnawed at my gut, almost souring the rich food in my mouth. I swallowed. “How long was I in that tube, James?”

His face became solemn and his fingers tightened around the stem of the glass. “I can’t be certain. Twenty years. Maybe thirty.”

Thirty years? The platform had been empty for more time than I’ve been ... stashed ... here. Centuries more. What was so special about *this* place? But thirty years and no one had thought to look for me, only this sharp-suited stranger. My mouth dried, and a dull headache started to thud against my temple. I sipped at cool tea, wetting my parched lips. “So you’re still interested in such *ancient* information?”

“You’d be amazed at what I’m interested in.”

The promise in his voice flushed heat under my skin. Sweat edged my brow. I rubbed my jaw, trying to ease the sudden ache throbbing there. The reaction to James had me unsettled. Was it my overreaction or was he deliberately playing me?

I sat back, let out a slow breath ... but the bead of sweat ran from my temple to course my jaw. It made no sense. I tugged at the tabs securing my suit, letting the fabric drop open at my throat and chest. Shit, it was hot.

James gaze followed the expanse of my bared flesh, and his tongue tip wet his lips. His eyes found mine again, and I couldn't mistake the curl of desire there. "Something I said?"

I snorted. "Thirty years in a tube? Aren't I a little old for you?"

He leaned forward, and the sinful smile lurking on his mouth had my flesh tight. "Katya, you're just right." He lifted his glass to his lips and drained the rest of his drink. When he put it down again, his eyes had a hard intensity that filled me with the sudden need to fight, not fuck him. "Very right."

The sharpness faded and the need in me flipped back. I wanted to lick the amber liquid from his lips, taste him, straddle him and deepen the kiss... Heat pulsed down through my flesh, and I squeezed my thighs together to deny the rising need. It didn't help. Damn it, James Kinsare had me completely thrown.

Was this the usual reaction met when an occupant fell out of a body-tube? The desperate need to jump a very edible stranger?

I held back a sigh, drew in calming air ... and winced. It tasted dry, used. Now discomfort burned instead of lust, which was an improvement of sorts. At least it took my mind off wanting to strip James bare. Drinking what was left of my cooled tea eased my throat but didn't help with the heat flaring across my skin.

I wiped my lips and dropped the knife and fork across my plate. My pulse thudded. I rubbed at my temple and found it hard to concentrate. What the hell had he done to me? Poisoned me with the best food I'd had in years?

Something caught in the corner of my eye. A faded red light pulsed high on the far wall above a sealed doorway. On automatic, I found more of them around the refectory, each one glowing red.

It wasn't James. It was worse than that. Much worse.

Red.

Bad.

My head swirled. I pinched at my eyes and tried to think. I had the symptoms of something. I wasn't a doctor, but I knew this. Knew it.

James dropped his glass. It bounced off the edge of the table to shatter on the metal floor. His head fell forward into his hands.

Dizzy. Cramping. Sweaty. We were on an asteroid, eating in a refectory built into an artificial platform... My pulse spiked and the wave of dizziness rocked me.

Shit. *Shit*. I was an idiot, and we were dead.

"James. Move!" I lurched to my feet and grabbed his arm. "We're venting air!"

Chapter Two

I dug both hands into the solid muscle of his arm and yanked at him. Wasn't the idiot listening? We were losing air. "Your ship. We need to get to your ship."

James scratched at his scalp and focused on me, his eyes losing their glassy look. "Yes. My ship."

His chair scraped back, and he half dragged me to a door. He keyed and opened it. And then we were running, following the curve of the dim corridor. Each breath burned raw down my throat. It made no sense. Every seal was secure. Yet, the air rushed out of the platform. I could almost hear the escaping hiss, see the white venting cloud of our atmosphere through long, narrow portals on the outer ring of the base.

James' fingers hesitated over the next door pad. Mathematical keys were not a good idea when the air was thin. His hesitation was short and fingers flashed, tapping out the sequence of numbers. The door groaned, but nothing happened. He kicked it, and the metal thump echoed. His curses cut the thinning air. He bent to peer through the narrow slit of the thick portal. More curses ripped from him. "It's gone."

"Gone?"

I shoved at his shoulder and stared into the port beyond.

The metal docking arms stretched out, beacons gleaming in two faint lines across the rough terrain. Gouges where a ship had stood marked the red rock. I craned my neck to look up, to see if the ship had detached and somehow, insanely floated off. There was nothing. No sign of his cruiser in the deep blackness of the sky, just the curve of the green and cloud-thick planet high above us.

My head ached, and I pushed myself away from the door. The ship had gone. All right, scrub my first idea. "Time for another plan."

James yanked at his tie and pulled at buttons on his shirt. He rubbed at his neck. "The air is thinning, but it's getting hotter..."

"So not a breach. Puncture the outer skin of a platform like this and we'd freeze as well as suffocate." I had no clue how I could agree with him, but I felt the knowledge in my bones. "We need to get to the command centre."

James shrugged out of his jacket and tied it around his waist. He grabbed my hand. "This way."

Pain pounded against my skull, and I staggered after James. The dim corridors and air locks became a confused blur of brown rust and the burn of hot, thin air in my screaming lungs. I willed down a fresh surge of panic. I was not going to die. I would not die with a patchy memory and no idea who'd stuffed me into a freezer for three decades. An insane smirk pulled at my mouth. And I definitely planned not to die before I got a taste of the man who dragged me along behind him.

James stopped at a solid door. He pushed his fingers against the green-glowing pad and muttered harsh words under his breath. He glanced at me as I slumped against the wall. The metal pressed cool against my hot, pounding temple, and I resisted the very real need to let my eyes close and my body slump to the floor. My breaths came in ragged gasps.

"Take slow, even breaths, don't panic," James said. He turned back to the keypad

and squeezed his eyes shut. His forehead creased in concentration. “Just relax.”

Relax? Was the man insane? My pained gaze darted over him. He looked flushed, and sweat edged his skin, but he seemed to be breathing normally. That had only one explanation.

“You experimented on yourself.” James said the words that burned on the tip of my tongue; the words I meant for him. The buttons of the keypad clicked under his fingers in a slow rhythm. He fell back against the wall and grimaced as he pinched at the bridge of his nose. The door groaned. “You prepared your body for extreme conditions.”

I stared at him in disbelief and in that moment, I forgot my panic. The searing pain in my lungs eased, and my mind cleared. He was right. Suddenly the unnatural, grown quality to my body made sense. But experimenting on myself? Why the hell would I do that? The more time passed, the more confused I became.

However, one thing was glaringly obvious. I’d just found out what James Kinsare wanted from me. “And that’s it, isn’t it? That’s your information. Whatever I’ve done to my body. For all your wealth and power, you’ve realised you’re still human. And you want to change that.” My gaze flicked over his profile and the way he steadily pulled the thinning air into his lungs. “More that you already have.”

Hinges whined, and James kicked the door open. “Maybe.”

He hustled me in, slammed the door and sealed us inside.

So, he wasn’t denying that he’d played with his genome too. Something about James didn’t feel fully human. I almost snorted. For a start, no man could be as wickedly attractive without some serious tweaking.

James found every hatch and clanged it shut. I prowled the narrow, metal decking, hunting for ... I had no clue. I was hoping it hit me when I saw it. The command centre spread out around me in a broad circle, a raised platform in the middle housing the main controls and a battered leather chair. The hot stink of rust thickened the air and burned against my eyes.

But there was more air, growing sweeter as James secured the command.

“It gives us time, but not much. Once our supply is gone from here, we’re dead.” James ran his hand through his damp hair. “Your amnesia seems to be selective. So ... any help you can give...” He waved at the dead equipment circling them. “Would be appreciated.”

“How do we get off this rock?”

“That’s for later. First we have to keep breathing.”

“Nice prioritising.”

James glared at me and pointed to the raised platform. “Sit in that chair. The basic controls are working, see what systems are online.”

I gave him a mock salute, which made him pause and then frown. Hauling myself up the short rail to the platform, I dropped myself into the chair. The leather strained. I pulled the chair forward and stared at the bank of monitors. I knew the language was archaic, dead, and a knot tightened in my stomach. A fingertip traced the scrolling data, sliding through the dust and grime of centuries. I could read it, read every bloody word. I was a terraformer, wasn’t I? Not a linguist ... but James seemed to know that *I* would know how to read the monitor. I held down a curse. I wanted to scream against the solid wall of ... nothingness ... squatting in my mind—

“Katya?”

James' suddenly sharp voice cut into my thoughts. I winced. Yes, I didn't have the time to dwell on trivial things like my personal past. "The estimated measurement of air in the command centre is ten minutes." I rubbed at my jaw and ignored the panic bubbling under my thoughts. The rest of the information made no sense. I kicked the base and the curved monitor flashed and resettled. "But everything else says the life support system is working. Carbon dioxide scrubbers are optimum. Oxygen injectors, biomass filtration, toxic vents, it's all marked here as working within accepted efficiency."

My gaze followed James as he ran from console to console, running quick fingers over grubby screens. "This kick-started the system." He thumped the glowing slab clawing bright, thin tubes into a cracked terminal. It hummed softly. "I don't know ... maybe it scrambled the incoming data."

"Which is of no use." My head fell back against the decaying headrest and I stared up at the transparent bubble directly above me. Black, star-thick space stared back. I blinked. "How did you get onto the platform, James? You had to have a suit."

"One suit. And where would that one person go?"

I tilted my head to look at him and smirked. "Sarcasm, so *nice* to waste air on that."

"Funny."

"Well with," I glanced at the monitor scrolling figures, "eight minutes and fifteen seconds left, I thought I'd try."

James swore and yanked his jacket from around his waist. He threw it over the chair beside him. "This makes no sense. Everything said it was working."

"Your equipment agreed with this?" I tapped the dirty screen.

"Yes."

"Check again." I shrugged. "Maybe the years made it flaky?"

He dragged a black suit from another chair, tugging at the attached panel. The small, thin block came free with a soft hiss, and he threw it to me. Catching it, I slapped the device on the screen.

"It's getting hot again," he said, unpinning his shirt cuffs and rolling his sleeves up his arms.

"Thank you for that reminder," I said, arching my back away from the leather chair and wincing at the slide of damp, hot fabric. Rubbing at my spine, my hand came away wet.

"I have a report," murmured the device.

I stared at the block glowing a soft green-gold on the console screen. "Okay, that's odd." The female voice the device used sounded, well, it sounded like *me*. "Is that my imagination—?"

"Report." James cut across me, his voice stern.

"All systems are frozen. The data reporting on this screen is in error."

"Wonderful," I muttered.

"Can repairs be initiated from this command centre?"

"Yes."

James snapped his fingers and pointed to the monitor. I blinked, taking a second to realise it was an imperious command to hand over his device. "What did your last servant die from?" I snapped the little slab from the monitor and threw it back to him. He caught it easily.

"When one meets the whip, another stands in his place."

His words coursed a shiver down my spine. I knew as little about him as I did about myself, but that *hadn't* sounded like the James Kinsare I was starting to know. Cold, authoritative, not a man who would lay out a meal for me on a pristine white tablecloth. I watched as he clamped the device to his neck. Shit. What was he doing? Tendrils sprouted and buried sharp and swift into his skin, and I winced. "That is nasty."

"Timesaving."

"If you say so." The droning from the device biting into his neck had my teeth on edge. The symbiotic tech didn't resonate with me. Whatever it was, it appeared to be exclusive to James Kinsare. "You design that yourself?"

"How many minutes remaining?"

So that was me ignored. I glanced back at the monitor. "Five minutes and thirteen seconds." I turned back to him. "That thing will tell you what to do?"

"Yes."

James dropped to the metal grating and yanked at the lower panels. He grunted and with a grate of the metal in its frame, the panel came free. His curse echoed as he stuck his head under the console. He tugged himself free. "Damn thing's built for a child." He let out a slow breath and wiped the sweat from his forehead. "Katya." He pointed to the dark, rusted hole. "This is our only chance. A one shot deal. There's a bypass valve tucked away in the most stupid place possible."

I swung down from the platform, squatted down and stared into the gap. There were less than four minutes of air remaining, and my aching lungs felt it, grown flesh or not. "I'm not wearing that thing." I jabbed a finger at the glowing tendrils spiked into his neck.

He pulled it free and the holes in his skin puckered and healed, only a drop of blood staining his skin. He slapped it into my hand, but the device didn't spit spikes into my palm. Instead, it glowed softly. "Follow its instructions. Exactly."

I stopped myself saluting again. "You're very used to giving orders, aren't you?" I muttered as I eased aching shoulders through the narrow opening and curled my body into the tight space.

"I'm more used to having them obeyed."

I snorted. "Tell me about it." The soft glow from the device illuminated the cracked metal and the support struts criss-crossing the underside of console. Dust swirled and choked what little air there was, burning my eyes and nostrils, tasting bitter in my mouth. I spat. It didn't help. "So ... what do I do?"

"Punch through the panel fifty one centimetres to your right. The thin gauze is rusted and quite brittle."

Not my phrasing, but the little machine definitely had my tone of voice. It was disconcerting. "How many minutes till all air is gone?"

"Three minutes and twenty one seconds."

Twisting my body into the cramped curve and ignoring the sharp dig of protruding metal, I stretched out my arm, fingers feeling for a grill of some sort. There, just above my head, I found something into which I could wedge all of my fingers up to the first knuckle. I pushed harder and my bent fingers formed a claw, gripped the panel ... and I found it dissolving around my hand. Heaving my body through the narrow gap stretching beneath the console, I forced my head level with the new hole.

Sweat dripped into my eyes, and I wiped my forearm across my face. My eyes stung.

“What now?” I lifted its light to cast a golden glow over the ten centimetre gap. Something jabbed into the base of my spine and shot pain up my back. I breathed against it and forced myself to concentrate. “There’s no way I can fit in there.”

“Stretch your arm. There is a valve thirty centimetres on the right side.”

“Who the hell designed this base?”

“That is data beyond my knowledge—”

“Beyond anyone’s.” I stretched my arm and grunted as I twisted my wrist to grab and hold a little wheel. “Got it!” I relaxed my muscles, trying to find a position that didn’t feel like I was wrenching my arm out of its socket. “How long?” Why I was asking, I didn’t know; my lungs were on fire.

“One minute fifty seconds.”

I willed strength into my arm, hand, fingers and tried to turn the valve. Metal scraped against metal, the noise vibrating through my teeth. My sweating fingers slipped on the corroding valve, and I cursed. The jagged wheel dug into my palm. Pain lanced, and I bit at my lip. “I got out of a body-tube for this?” Taking another tight grip, I wrenched my wrist and willed back the pain. The scrape and then hiss of an open valve filled the narrow gap.

Air flowed along the vent to me in a sweet rush, and my head flopped back. I closed my eyes.

“You have released the emergency oxygen supply. The command centre now has one hour of air.”

I thought about slamming the bloody machine against the rusted wall. “One hour? All this for one hour?”

“You had twenty nine seconds worth of air remaining.”

I snorted. “Spunky little thing, aren’t you? And this is nothing personal but...” Pulling the device from my palm, I shoved it down the front of my suit and secured the tabs. “I need to use both hands.”

My chest emitted an eerie yellow glow, casting weak light around me. Twisting, I brought my arm out from the valve and gripped the network of struts over my head. My body ached, hot pain jabbing in too many places, but I heaved myself back to the open panel. Curling my legs out, I propelled myself over the lip of the opening and flopped to the smooth metal floor. James’ hands had guided my body, and his hot touch still burned through the thin fabric of my suit.

“Shoot the architect,” I muttered, trying to ignore the imprint of his palms on my thighs and hips. “Or better yet, send them into that bloody crawl space.”

“It’s not meant for humans.”

His voice was close. I opened one eye and met his hot gaze as he stood over my hips. The desire lurking his dark eyes had my heart thudding for a reason other than impending death. Damn him.

“Now you tell me this?” I frowned, and I followed his searing gaze down my body. My breasts glowed and the block stretched the fabric of my suit. Ah, he just wanted his equipment back. Shame. “Right, your machine.”

With an ease that had my throat dry, James straddled my body. His weight sank against my hips and for a brief, brief moment an ancient physical memory shot through me. He felt ... right. More than right. Needed.

Supporting himself on one hand, he leaned over me while his other slid over the tabs

securing my suit. My body grew alive with new memory, and I almost arched up against him. "Let me," he said.

Had the valve failed ... because I suddenly found it impossible to breathe again. "What the hell are you doing?"

Dark eyes held me, shining with promise. A wicked smile pulled at his mouth. I'd been frozen for thirty years but I still knew what he wanted as desire also flared hot under my skin. The first tab eased free and his fingertip glided over the hollow of my throat. "Being twenty nine seconds from death has this strange effect on me."

"We have an hour's worth of air." I cursed myself for having to point out that vital fact. Not when his skin burned against mine, the hint of his touch firing desire deep into my pelvis. I had to carry on pointing it out, though. "This is hardly ..."

Another tab broke free and exposed my breastbone to cooling air. My hands curled into fists against the metal floor, resisting the urge to run them over his jaw, shoulders, arms. James' mouth was only centimetres from mine, his breath warm against my cheek. "Can you resist me?"

Spluttered laughter escaped. "Does that line often work for you?"

His mouth twitched. "Not often, no." His finger slid lower, tracing a slow line between my breasts. "But I have to try." He pulled the little machine from my skin and put it on the floor. Before I could miss the warmth of his touch, his hand slipped under my suit, pushing over the curve of my breast. "So, is that working better?"

"Maybe..." The word came out on a gasp, and I fought the shiver his touch brought. "I think you'll have to try just that bit harder."

Dark eyes narrowed on me and the heat pulsing there had me wet. "Harder?"

The push of his hand down over my ribs loosened more of the suit. Skin tingled at the press of his long fingers and need pooled low in my belly. This wasn't the time to be making out on a metal floor, it really wasn't, but... My fingers uncurled from their tight fist and tugged at his shirt.

James grinned. "Welcome to the party." I rolled my eyes. "What? I'm making a special effort."

I bit at my lip to stop the grin growing on my mouth. "It's obvious it's an effort you're not used to."

He found the curve of my hip, and his fingers dug into my flesh. "Play nice, now." His hand slid across my abdomen, pushed aside my underwear and dipped his fingers low over my mons. My hips arched up to meet his sure touch. I couldn't help it. "Or I won't play at all."

"James..."

Something flickered through his gaze and then the wicked gleam returned. "We were both almost dead. Time to celebrate being alive." His mouth hovered over mine, so close I could almost taste the heat of his lips, his tongue, but the promised touch of his mouth over mine never came. Instead, his lips slid low and caressed the underside of my jaw, kissing my skin until he found a sensitive spot below my ear. Sparks danced behind my eyes, and my flesh clenched around his cleverly slipping, sliding fingers.

"Like that?"

In answer, I ran my fingers down the warm hollow of his spine, pushing past his trousers to the solid muscle of his buttocks. I squeezed, and he groaned. His warm breath wracked a shiver through my body. I wanted to fuck this stranger till we used up all the

air we had. Was I someone who would be that insane? I twisted my hips against his fingers, fire searing through my flesh. Insane? Seemed I was.

His mouth eased down my neck to tease little bites at the curve of my shoulder, his hair clean and cool against my damp skin. I exposed my neck, wanting more of his touch as it surged heat through my body. What the hell was he doing to me? It was as if he knew every pleasure point on my flesh... Did he? "James...?" And was that breathless voice mine? "Do you know—"

His thumb circled, pressed my clitoris, and my question broke. I felt his smug smile against my skin. I shivered, my body barely my own. His weight, his warm scent, the clever play of his fingers and the way his mouth surged fire through my flesh had me lost. In that moment, I didn't care about anything. Not the fading ache of the bruises from crawling under the console, not the discomfort of the metal floor, not even how much air we had left. He had to satisfy the pressure pooling low and hot in my belly. And he had to satisfy it now.

"Fuck me."

The unexpected sharpness of his bite had my spine arching.

"Now."

James pulled his mouth free from my neck, his tongue licking over the curve. I hissed, and he grinned. He sat up, and with one hand still buried in my flesh, he undid his trousers. "Next time, I'll get you properly naked."

"Next time?"

His grin had my heart thumping. No man had the right to look that sinful. His fingers slid further through my flesh, and I groaned. "Are you going to deny it?"

My gaze slid to his hand still freeing his penis. Oh, he was satisfyingly big. "I'm still not convinced."

James' eyes narrowed and the glint there had my throat tight. "A challenge. All right, if that's the way you want it." His hand slid away from the wetness of my flesh, and I ached at its loss. He stood and offered me a hand. "Stand."

"What...?"

He snapped his fingers. "We can stop right there." He glanced at the glowing machine on the floor that had started it all. "How much air have we got?"

"Fifty one minutes and thirteen seconds."

His head tilted. "I really think we should start to think of a way off this platform—" I grabbed his hand, and he hauled me up. His fingers slid over my hip and gripped tight. "Turn around."

I blinked. "Turn around?"

James let out a slow breath. "Seconds are pulsing by, Katya."

I swallowed and slowly turned to face the consoles. My tight flesh mocked me. I wanted this man however I could get him. A shiver coursed me as his warm hands settled on my shoulders and he started to pull the suit from my skin.

"Looks like I'm getting you naked so much earlier than expected." The material slipped down my skin in a smooth rush, cool air caressing my flesh. He pushed it down until my bare feet stood on the skin-heated fabric. "Lean forward."

I planted my hands on either side of a dead monitor as James' hot hands explored my skin. He cupped my breasts, and I couldn't hold back the moan. "Time is ticking," I reminded him as his penis pushed with agonising slowness against my backside.

“Some things are worth savouring.” The words brushed in a hot whisper against the back of my neck and slid deep under my skin. Simply the sound of his voice, his breath touching me had my body aching for more of him. I shouldn’t have been this easy, but—

His fingers found me again, and my body bucked. I could feel his grin against my shoulder, feel it even as he nibbled and bit at my skin. The hand cupping my breast slid back down my body for a brief, tantalising moment. It brushed against the back of my thigh and then came the hot, tantalising push of his cock. On instinct, I arched my spine, demanding him. “Slow, Katya.”

The way he said my name found a thrum in my blood. “Damn it, James.” My voice rose just above a growl. “Now.”

“Been a while?”

Anger and need warred within me and his infuriatingly calm voice only stoked those emotions. “How should I know?”

His soft laughter rushed warm air against my neck. “You’re aching, aren’t you?” He pushed the head of his cock into my willing flesh, so slowly I crushed my eyes shut against the heat scorching my body. My fingers curled into fists, and my arms shook as they supported me. “You want this, want me.”

Something about his words... Like the physical memory of his touch, James’ words resonated through me. And the reply burned on my lips. “Yes. I want you.”

James’ smooth shirt kissed my spine, but I remembered ... I remembered hot bare skin covering mine, the prickle of chest hair tingling, the press of him deeper into my body, skin to skin... I knew this man in *every* way.

I gasped at his sudden thrust. The sweet fullness of him made me bite my lip. I pushed back, wanting him, needing him, deeper, harder, groaning at the rub of cloth against my thighs instead of warm, bare flesh. But the pounding of my blood overrode the regret, filling my senses as his skilful fingers played between my legs. Fire flickered low in my pelvis and jagged gasps escaped me. Sweet pressure built and I clung to it, willing James never to stop, and I met his thrusting hips half way.

His moans burned against my ear, his hot breath mixing with the heat firing through my mind. “I wanted this. From the minute I saw you.”

“Yes.” It was all I could say. I could almost taste the blaze of orgasm aching to tear up through my flesh. “Fuck me.”

He growled, the vibration of sound sinking into my neck. James fucked me, hard, strong, his moans and thrusts ragged ... and there ... oh ... just ... *there*... Sweet release tore through both of us, up my body, flooding my thoughts, my memory. The wave of it surged, blinding, never ending. Only one man had made me come like this, only one.

His name tore itself from my lips. “Paxton!”

Chapter Three

“Paxton?”

James growled the name, and it coursed a shiver over my damp skin. His hands slid to my hips and gripped tight. “Is that who you want?”

The warmth of the orgasm ebbed from my memory, and I dropped my head, suddenly too tired to think. “How the hell should I know? My brain is scrambled.” I let out a slow breath and pried his hands from my body. As I straightened, he moved with me, his heat, his body shrouding me, and I had to push back the need to let him stay. “Let me get dressed, James.”

The rise and fall of his chest pushed against my spine but he didn’t pull away, and the thickness of his cock still filled me. His hands slid back to rub idle thumbs over my waist, his fingers stroking my hips. He marked me, obviously wanting to deny the man I had shouted for. I held back a shiver and ignored the fresh curl of need that urged me to tighten my flesh around him.

“How much air have we got?”

James sounded calm, controlled, and not at all like a man who’d just had hot, sweaty incredible sex. I hated him and tried again to push his hands from my body.

The little device on the floor hummed and then gave its answer in my voice. “*Forty four minutes and ten seconds.*”

James finally stood away, and I closed my eyes. I’d wanted him off me, but now I ached, felt empty at the sudden loss of him. The feel of him over and in my body seemed all too familiar, so I had to ask. “Have we ever done that before?”

He snorted and straightened his clothes. “Fucking? No.”

I shrugged my way back into my suit and reset the tabs from across my stomach up to my neck. I ignored the bitter taste his words brought up. *Fucking*. I’d done that. A lot, when the itch warranted it, I had that flesh memory buried deep. Yet, with James, that word felt sordid and just wrong. Everything about him felt ... off ... somehow. I couldn’t explain it to myself.

I ran a shaking hand through my tangled hair. Time to think properly. I couldn’t dwell on emotions that rose up from the scrambled mess of my brain. We had to make plans. “So, how do we get off this mining platform?”

James had already climbed up to the raised control platform with his invasive tech and spiked the terminal. “If the system screwed itself over, then maybe it released the clamps and pushed my ship into orbit.”

I winced and ran a hand over my face. Gel flaked and drifted onto my chest. I flicked it away. “That’s stretching it.”

“Since the communications are fried and I can’t signal out, I want to try this before I try the more insane option.”

“Which is?”

“Firing the engines on the platform.”

I stared at him. Yes, that was insane. The mining platform was centuries old, had settled into the dust and rock of its asteroid, had been abandoned for more years than I wanted to know. To try to lift it... “That would tear this place apart.”

“We’re running on emergency air.” He stared up to the narrow shell above his head. “This command centre is the escape module.” Dark eyes fixed on me, and cold fire burned there. “Got any other ideas?”

Wiping at my mouth, I pushed at my empty brain. Everything was out of alignment, and I couldn’t think. Sex with James still had my thoughts skewed. I knew him; my body screamed it. Yet... *That* was it. He didn’t smell right. As cracked as it sounded, that was James’ wrongness. His scent was a mix of flawed skin and a light dash of spiced cologne. My memory balked at it.

Oxygen deprivation at work on my mind. I winced and pushed my scattering thoughts to our real problem: not dying.

Staring around the command, I hoped for inspiration. Corroded tags stapled above monitors and consoles caught my attention. *Environmental Control. Service Drones. Sky Rail.* The last jumped out at me, and I almost snorted. If James’ idea was insane, using the Sky Rail to jump down to the local planet was completely whacked. “Have you found your ship? Is it in orbit?”

James sat back in the creaking chair and blew out a hot breath. “No.”

Our easy option wasn’t viable, so that left us with James’ insane one. “How do we do this?” Something flashed to my right, and I caught a sudden scroll over one of the monitors. Then it died again. “Was that you?”

His brow creased. “No.” He swung down from the ladder and slapped his device on the monitor. Spikes melted into the synthetic screen. “Service Drones,” he muttered.

I blinked. He could read the platform’s ancient language too. And I knew that was ... unusual. He stood close and the mix of the scent of his skin, wrong as it was, and the aroma of sex had my heart beating fast. Damn it, it had been a quick fuck—I ignored the twist in my gut—nothing more, and I had screwed it up by shouting out another man’s name. Who the hell was Paxton anyway? The man haunted me.

“What have you found?” he asked.

My voice, clipped and oddly disturbing, jumped out of the little glowing machine. “*The service drones have been activated.*”

A muscle jumped in James’ jaw. “And that means...?”

“*The title ‘service drone’ is a misnomer. They are security replicants who guard the platform from attack.*”

James swore, something long and convoluted in a language I couldn’t quite grasp. He glared at me and my heart beat fast now from fear, not desire. He’d shifted into that man I didn’t know. “What the hell is going on here?”

“What? As if I have a clue? No memory, remember?”

“No memory?” The muscles in his jaw tensed. “How convenient that is. I find you here and suddenly my ship’s gone, we run out of air and drones are activated.”

I stared at him. Had sex addled his brain? “Are you kidding me? I was as close to dying as you were. I still am!”

Anger flared bright in his eyes and his mouth thinned. For several hard heartbeats I knew he tried to control his burst of fury. “*You are a trap.*” He turned away and more curses burned the air. “I should have known. Should have realised.”

“*Service robots are moving toward the command centre.*”

My pulse jumped and my gaze leapt to the door. “Well, you can stand around cursing in whatever language that is, or we can work together to get off this rock.”

James let out a slow breath, and his shoulders dropped. The tense pulse of anger eased off him. "Computer, how many?"

"I have five ... six ... seve—"

An array of sparks burst from the device, the spikes shrivelled to grey stumps and the body of the device dulled and sagged.

It was my turn to curse. "Shit. What did that?"

James shook his head. "It's sitting on the security console. The system retaliated."

"Don't suppose you have any more of those?"

He laughed, the sound bitter. "Yes. On my ship." Cold eyes slid over me and in a blink the true stranger lived in his face again. My chest tightened. The man's mood swings were rapid and scary. "Wherever that may be."

"I have nothing to do with this!"

His expression grew as cold as his eyes. "How would you know?" He caught his hand in my hair, but stopped short at tugging at the roots. "Your brain is scrambled." Pulling his hand free, he wiped the dampness off on his trouser leg. "You're involved in this, Katya." James swung up to the raised platform. "But my revenge will wait until you remember."

"Revenge?"

"You don't know who you've crossed." His smile turned sharp, nasty, and the threat in his voice had the hairs prickling on the back of my neck. "At least not yet." Clicks followed as he depressed keys and flicked toggles on the banks before him. "All right, I have what looks like the emergency systems. They seem to be intact, though without my computer I can't be certain."

The first James had come back as easily as he had flicked the switches on the monitors. James Kinsare was insane. And he was right, I had no idea who he was, the man with the power to park on a Command Base, the one that could flip into a monster and flip back just as easily and who could read dead languages ... as well as I could. I snapped my thoughts back to our problem. "You know how to fire this thing up?"

"Yes."

There'd been no hesitation. "That confident?"

James didn't look up. "Again, yes."

"Right." I pulled at my lip. "Then I'll take care of the drones."

"How?"

I picked up his environmental suit, the black material light and slippery to the touch. "I need a weapon."

James' laughter mocked me. "You're going to disable them?"

"The only other plan I have is jumping down to the planet on the Sky Rail, leaving us stranded with no way to signal to anyone." I gave him a sarcastic smile. "Blasting at some drones while you work out how to fire the engines is the more sensible option ... and I'm sure that's not something I say every day."

"Well, it would be. If I had a weapon."

I wiped a hand over my face. This was getting worse by the second. I pulled in a calming breath so that I didn't shriek my next question at him. "Why haven't you got a weapon?"

"I don't need to be armed." He jabbed his finger at the drone monitor with the melted sludge of his computer dripping from it. "See if you can get that working again."

I moved before what he had first said hit me. "Don't need to be armed?"

"Katya. Focus."

"Fine." I pulled what remained of the device from the console and dropped it with a plop to the floor. "I only woke up about an hour ago, why bother to tell me anything." Staring at the screen, I tried to think. Like everything since I'd woken up, some part of the place, the technology felt familiar. I pulled at side panels to reveal corroded wiring, though thin threads still hummed with life. Letting unconscious memory find my fingers, I twisted the fibres together, watching the monitor to see if my fingers knew what the hell they were doing. Information scrolled over half a screen.

It would have to do. I stuffed the fibres back into the panel and concentrated on the grey-white figures pushing their way up through the dirt smearing the monitor. I swore. "There's a swarm approaching. Since it recognised your device, it's locked most of the information out. It just wants us to know they're here." I couldn't help the laugh. "Obviously a programmer with a mean streak." I arched an eyebrow. "Wasn't you, was it?"

James glanced up. "Me?"

"Well, things couldn't get more bizarre today."

He snorted. "Believe me, they could." He pulled at his shirt sleeves, absently fastening them. My gut kicked and a flare of heat burned in my cheeks. Shame, no more nicely bared forearms, which wasn't a thought I should be having right then. "We probably have about thirty five, forty minutes of air left. Which would be enough to get us into orbit."

"But with no communications—"

The lights trimming the metal walkway and the bulbous ceiling dimmed as one. "They're trying to cut power." James ran his fingers over the terminals. "I've activated emergency procedures. That should isolate the systems."

"...or not." The screens had died and in the grey light, the walls around the entry door shuddered. "They're outside."

"Nothing in this rusted hole works." His fingers caught in his hair, and he glared at the monitors. He blew out a slow breath. "Right." He pointed to a chair bolted to one of the walls. "Strap yourself in. We're going now."

"You're insane." But I ran and pulled the loose straps tight around my body.

"Many people have said that." He grinned at me as he secured himself to his creaking chair. "And you're all probably right."

The floor beneath me began to shake, and I gripped the thin side of my chair. A deep metal groan echoed around the walls. I willed myself to keep my eyes open, watching James as he methodically ran through the final procedures. "Is this going to work?"

"We're about to find out."

Everything shook, including the teeth in my head. We were going to die. I crushed my eyes shut and controlled my breathing. In that exact moment, I wished he'd left me in the damn body-tube.

Loose equipment smashed to the floor. The air thickened with the raw odour of rust. Metal screamed. "This is not going to work!"

"Yes, it is."

The walkway circling the command centre cracked away beneath my feet, dropping into the supporting structure. "James! This is *not* working."

The roar of the engines vibrated through my body, increasing with every second until it pounded against my skull. The force pushed down against my muscles, pushed, but the command centre didn't budge. Only shook and screamed.

James slammed his hands against the terminal. Vibrations eased, and the screaming engines choked and died away. He wiped the sweat from his face. "So, it's not working."

"And we have about thirty minutes of air."

"Yes." He unstrapped from the chair and climbed down. Gripping the ladder, he balanced on the exposed struts of the floor. "Or maybe less. Can you hear hissing?"

I held down a groan. Yes, I could. "How inept are we?"

"I refuse to answer questions that may incriminate me."

My lips pressed down on a grin. The man was crazy ... and some part of me liked that. I was obviously as insane as he was. Humour left me as I realised what we had to do next. "The only option left is the Sky Rail."

"I know." He grabbed his jacket and shrugged into it. "So you get to be the one with the insane idea this time."

"It's not accessible from here, is it?" His wry sideways glance told me everything. I expelled a slow breath. "No, of course it's not." I pulled the straps free and edged across the thin supporting struts. The air grew warm, and the first trickle of sweat ran from my brow. Yes, there was definitely less than thirty minutes of air left. "How the hell did I get myself into his situation? I was happy in my tube, no cares, no worries, no running out of oxygen. Lovely."

James snorted. "I'm sure that's what you want me to believe."

"Can we not have the 'I set you up' moan again, please? Losing oxygen? Drones? *Maybe* a working Sky Rail? We have other priorities." Standing at the sealed door, the shuddering of the surrounding metal ran through my bones. Something battered the outer walls. "They're breaking in."

I could only state the obvious. My brain had tipped into meltdown. In a way, James was right. Too many things were going wrong. It did look deliberate. "There'll be no air once we open this door." A laugh broke from me, strained, edged with panic. "Though that probably won't matter too much, as the drones will cut us down in seconds."

"Relax." James dropped heavy hands on my shoulders, and their warmth bled through the fabric of my suit. "Relax and when I tell you, breathe out as much as you can. This platform is fixed to Deimos' southern pole. The Sky Rail terminal is across the corridor. I'll deal with the drones. You concentrate on getting the door open. It's a DNA entry system."

I stared up at him, not wanting to admit that his touch had calmed me. "There's air in the terminal?"

"Yes."

"And you know this how?"

"Katya..." He leaned in close, and his breath stirred my skin. "We need each other to stay alive." I caught his sinful smile from the corner of my eye, and it had heat pooling low in my belly, my flesh growing tight with fresh need. "And I still have to have my revenge."

Arousal fought with fear, my nipples pushing hard against the soft fabric of my suit. Damn, this man made me crazy.

His hands slid down my arms, his light touch teasing. Yes, his monster had slid back

into the shadows again. “Are you ready?” I nodded. The door shuddered and the lights surged lower. “Just in time. Breathe out.”

“But it’s a vacuum, we’ll only have about—”

“We have a different design. Trust me.”

“About as far as I can throw you.”

“Very sensible. Now breathe out.”

I exhaled until my chest ached. I was trusting him. Something had pumped the air out of the rest of mining platform, but to breathe in as I entered a vacuum—my memory kicked in—would rupture my lungs. I had about fifteen seconds before my lungs started to pull oxygen out of my blood, and I passed out.

James looked at me. I nodded. Then he opened the door.

Chapter Four

What little air there was gushed out ahead of us, blowing grit and dust out into the corridor. For a brief second, the drones stalled, and I leapt away from the door. I hit the opposite wall hard. Ignoring the pain, I scrambled to my feet and found the pad. Seconds ticked over in my brain. Ten left before the saliva on my tongue would start to boil...

My hand slammed against the terminal.

Nothing.

I willed myself not to panic, ignoring the screaming in my lungs for fresh air.

Flicking a glance back to James, the image of him froze in my brain.

He held up his hands. Just that, his arms straight, fingers spread. James' dark eyes held a fierce gleam, his jaw twisted tight and the drones—bronze-skinned humanoids with flat, insectoid faces—the drones had frozen in place, their in-built weapons silent.

I pulled myself back from the bizarre scene and focused on the terminal. Energy hummed under its surface. I felt it, but the door to the Sky Rail remained shut. So, I did the only thing I could. I thumped it. Hard. Light flared over the soft panel, and I shoved my palm against it. The scan slid hot against my skin and with a groan the door swung back—

James' body slammed into mine, and I crashed through the door. He kicked it shut.

I dragged air into my lungs, and it burned hot and raw. Damn, it was thin. James pushed himself onto his feet and secured the door to the small decontamination room. Only emergency lighting flickered in spots over the ceiling. The heavy silence thudded in my ears. "How...?" My voice sounded raw. I swallowed, my throat dry, and I waved a hand at the shut door, still not quite ready to get off the tiled floor. "With the drones. How did you do that?"

He ignored me, pulling at the sleeve of his jacket. A tear had the material flapping. "One of my favourite suits, too." He offered me a hand, and reluctantly I gripped it. He hauled me to my feet. "Time to move. The drones will only stay ... confused ... for another few seconds."

"And I suppose I'll know what you did when I get my memory back?"

James smirked. "Possibly." He pushed me through opening doors to a box lined with two rows of heavily padded chairs. Above each chair, hung a curved metal canopy. "Sit. Strap yourself in."

James punched a panel. It flared bright, and a low whining filled the room. "It's on automatic and the instrumentation *says* everything is working." He snorted and dropped into the seat beside me. "But that tells us nothing." He strapped himself into the body harness and gave me a final smile, one without the touch of the monster. "You're insane."

Laughter bubbled up, and I couldn't help but return his smile. Something sparked between us, something familiar ... probably a madness shared. "Tell me about it."

The creak above my head had me looking up. The canopy dropped, and I let out a yelp as it crashed over the chair. Dust coated me, and I coughed. I gripped the armrests, willing myself calm as the shell shrouded the seat, sealing me in. The whole unit creaked and rocked free, preparing for descent into the atmosphere.

My eyes squeezed shut, fighting the sudden rush of claustrophobia. I tried to pull in

an image of open spaces, but nothing formed in my mind. My nails dug into the cracked leather, knuckles straining white. No, nothing broke through the terrifying press of metal and rank air—

Memory hit me in a hot rush, making my heart pound. I bit at my lip and tasted blood.

The inner shield of the body-tube slid in slow silence over me. I couldn't move. Couldn't hammer my fists against the dulled metal. I could only watch as a man smiled sarcastically at me through the breath-fogged narrow window. Something about him reminded me of James Kinsare ... his colouring, the way his mouth pulled to one side ... but it wasn't him. This man had a harder, sharper face, a face that yanked at my memory. I knew him. I'd known him forever...

Kael Paxton.

He tapped on the glass, the sound echoing hollow in my tube, mixing with the rapid rush of my breathing. "And this is where we part, Katya." The metal dulled his voice but not the smirk that had my blood pounding. I ached to move, but the hibernation cocktail coursing through my veins had me paralysed. It would only be moments before oblivion took me. Already, the edges of my vision darkened.

"It's been fun, really. I can see why he fixated on you. Tell him that when he finds you." My vision dimmed further, everything sliding into an uneven grey. Paxton's final words echoed dull in my ears. "If you can..."

My stomach hit the roof of my mouth, and a scream tore from me.

"Katya?" James' synthesised voice filled the capsule. *"The descent's begun. The unit revolves in preparation for landing. That's all."*

"That's all." I almost growled the words. I didn't need an explanation of why the carriage had to prep—I stopped. Something in the way James spoke reminded me of Paxton. I shivered and breathed in and out in a slow, even rhythm. I hated enclosed spaces. Hated them. Not a good thing to find out at that minute. I flexed my fingers around the arm of the seat, trying to find a scrap of calm. "How long?"

"I don't know. This was your idea." Strain had James' voice brittle. He obviously hated tight spaces as much as I did.

My head fell back against the thick padding of the seat, and I stared up at the bulbous shield. The bronzed inner skin flaked and cracked, not exactly filling me with confidence. Being trapped under the shield had brought me one benefit, and I focused my thoughts on that new piece of information.

I had learned something more about the man who had stuffed me in the body-tube. Had a memory of him *doing* it. And I also had a face—plus a first name—to add to the bastard that was Paxton. I was bait, just as James had said. Though why that was still remained a mystery.

Paxton's final words ran through my mind, laced with the smirking tone that came with them. *I can see why he's fixated on you.* Had I fallen for Paxton's charms? I'd screamed his name, after all but I couldn't imagine why. His appeal hadn't been in evidence in our final moments together.

More words pushed to the surface. *If you can...*

They burned through my brain. It also appeared that he'd caused my amnesia. Or did he know, like James, that time in a body-tube would wipe out my personal past? It was little wonder that I'd burst out of the body-tube cursing him. Why was I bait for James

Kinsare, anyway? Who was he? The name meant nothing, neither did his perfect face, but he had power and not just political. I rotated my neck and forced myself to ignore the shuddering metal box that hurtled down to an unknown planet. While, both of us were captive, it was time for me to throw some more questions at my mystery man.

“What did you do with those drones, James?”

“*My suit,*” he said. But his answer came too quick, and I couldn’t believe him. What he’d done hadn’t been ... technological. That knowledge burned in me. “*I designed it to repel attack. Hence, no need for weapons.*”

“That’s a lie, and we both know it.”

James’ soft laughter, edged with static, filled my capsule and a smile tugged at my mouth. “*You really don’t know who I am, do you?*”

“Why don’t you tell me? Maybe that knowledge will spike my memory.”

“*It’ll be more ... interesting ... when you remember.*”

And something about those words was a lie too, but I couldn’t put my finger on why ... or how I even knew. The more I learned the more confused I became. It drove me crazy. Why couldn’t I wake up and find it had all been some practical joke? Someone would laugh and declare it a stupid prank, reinstate my memory and take me home.

Force threw me back into the seat, and I grunted. More force threw me forward. We were taking a pounding. I gripped the arms of my chair and simply held on.

“*We’re entering the atmosphere, you should—*”

But all communication died, only the static hissing around me as the capsule rattled and bounced. Blood baked in my face, and my heart raced. Insane idea? Yes, I’d won that one.

With a sickening crunch, the capsule hit the floor, and the carriage jerked to a halt.

I let out a slow breath. Had we stopped? There was a gush of air, and the capsule shield lifted up from the floor by about ten centimetres. Metal ground against metal until it jarred my teeth. I cursed, freed my harness loops, and slid forward. My fingers found a grip under the shield edge, and I pushed.

The metal groaned, and slowly, so slowly it eased up. James’ hands slid in between mine, straining white as they gripped the metal edge. My back cramped, jammed up against the solid base of the chair. The shield slid further, leaving a gap that maybe I could squeeze under if I stopped breathing.

“Roll out, I can hold this.”

“I’m trusting you again.” And that had me more unsettled than being squashed in a locked capsule. I twisted around, finding it easier to kneel up and edge under the shield that way. “Trusting you twice in one day. It must be some sort of record.”

“Shocking, isn’t it?”

“Not the time for funnies, James,” I muttered, manoeuvring my legs out through the gap, sliding across the plastic-coated floor and between his legs. My thighs brushed up against James’ knuckles and he snorted.

“Didn’t think I’d be touching you again anytime soon.”

The canopy creaked, and James’ breathing became laboured as he squatted in front of it.

“Try not to be tempted.” I wiggled backwards and his knuckles pressed into my backside. I cursed silently at the heat flooding my body. I was about to be crushed, and his hand on my arse had me flustered. I let out a slow breath and wriggled again. He only

caught my shoulder blades in a sliding caress, before I turned my head and whipped myself free. I pushed myself out between his legs, my face red at the unwanted intimacy.

James let go, and the canopy crashed to the floor. He straightened and rubbed at his spine. He grinned at me as I sat with my back against the carriage wall. "Shame you weren't on your back, Katya."

"I thought I was bait?" I stared at my hands as they hung between my knees and tried not to have a twinge of guilt.

"To be bait you *do* have to be tempting."

I pushed myself to my feet and brushed the grime and dust from my suit. "And I *thought* it was my mind you wanted?"

James smirked. "Amongst other things."

Shaking my head, I laughed. "And these lines really work for you?"

"They worked on you, Katya."

Holding his gaze, I lifted an eyebrow while his expression didn't change. The interest in his eyes had my heart thudding. The need to jump him surged through me ... and the bloody man knew it. I quashed the insanity that belonged with wanting James Kinsare and focused on our immediate problem. "Shouldn't we see if we can get out of here?"

James smoothed down his tie and rebuttoned his jacket. He twisted the torn material of his sleeve between his thumb and forefinger, a frown creasing his forehead. His brow smoothed, and he glanced up. "From what I can tell we're stuck above the base terminal."

"And you know this how?"

"I looked out of the window."

"Do people try to kill you because they've *met* you, James?"

He shrugged. "Mostly."

Straightening my shoulders and trying not to feel the aches that twinged most of my muscle groups, I followed him to the narrow slice of transparency in the main door. I stared out and winced. Thin clouds scurried past, whipped by wild winds. Through twisting gaps in the cloud, the wreck of buildings and a harsh, brown landscape wove in and out of view.

James let out a slow breath. "This is probably the work of the drones. They hack the system and leave us hanging here, waiting for the authorities to pick us up."

"A hundred metres." I blew out a hot breath. Why was nothing ever, *ever* simple? "And the terminal's on top of a mountain, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Thought so."

"Sorry I found you?"

I snorted. "Like you wouldn't believe." We would have to climb down and hope the ancient carriage didn't decide to unlock and plummet, crushing us to a thin pulp. I took a final look to the terminal below us. It appeared that some of the buildings, in their complete state, had been open to the air, which meant that the planet had a breathable atmosphere. I lifted my gaze. The sky had a rusty brown tint that tugged at something in me. My throat became inexplicably tight and tears burned. I willed away the sudden rush of emotion. My brain was a mess. "Is there anything in here we can use?"

James yanked at the thin leather of one of the chairs, ripping the seam. He tore the chair cover into fat strips with ease. "Protection for your hands and face."

“Good.” I wrapped the cool material over my nose and mouth, knotting it at the back. It wasn’t effective protection but it would stop the bite of freezing air. For a short while anyway. My hands followed, the leather restricting their movement.

James tapped my shoulder. “Ready?” he asked, his voice muffled.

I nodded and braced myself against the wall. James still had one hand unbound. He would have to open the door, then wrap up his hand...

His palm pressed into the soft synthetic of the opening pad. Light glowed. He leapt back, crushing into the corner beside me as he hastily bound his hand. The hinge mechanisms groaned, and slowly the door swung out. With a sudden jerk, the wind whipped through the opening gap and smashed its force against the metal. A tearing screech and the door vanished.

The carriage lurched.

Adrenaline surged through my body, and I clung to my precious section of wall. I had to be ready to move; to climb out into the maelstrom and cling to a carriage rusted by the centuries. Yes, I was having an *insane* day.

The winds howled through the carriage, whipping in dust and grit. James pushed past me, gripped the doorframe and stood before the long drop. The wind billowed his jacket, flapping the material hard against his chest. His trousers clung to the length of his legs. He glanced back at me, his hair wild and his eyes bright. The image struck me, lancing an old pain through my chest that made breathing hard, painful. Instead of James Kinsare, I saw a boy no more than eighteen, with the same untamed hair and sparkling eyes.

My breath caught. Paxton. It was Paxton. Had I known the man that long?

James’ gaze narrowed. He jerked his head, and I willed myself away from the protection of my wall.

“Crazy,” I muttered under my breath, the raw taste of ancient leather thick in my mouth. “Absolutely crazy.”

His cheek muscles shifted under his makeshift mask, and I knew James grinned at me. He turned, and gripping one side of the empty doorway, he slid sideways. I peered after him, icy winds ripping at my loose hair. A ladder stood out from the metal body of the carriage.

“All right, I can do this.” The wind whipped away the muffled words. I almost laughed. This was the easy part. With my heart in my throat, I clambered after James onto the ladder. The leather hampered my grip, the thickened soles of my suit slipping on the cold metal.

I glanced down. James swung himself under the carriage and out of sight.

My gut cramped, and I clung to the ladder, my nerves straining tight. Alone. For an insane moment, I felt alone, clinging to a thin strip of metal on a rusted box stalled high above a mountain. Freezing air stung my eyes and bit through the thin fabric of my suit. Pain pushed raw through my chest, and the wind froze the tears to my cheeks. It wasn’t the fear of falling that tore a hole in me but the agony of being left behind. I sucked in a sob. James had abandoned me...

What the hell was the matter with me? I gritted my teeth, denying the stupid emotions swamping my body. My brain had holes, huge, massive ones, and they had me reacting to imagined half-memories. Damn it, I had to move. I slid my foot down another rung and then another. Leather creaked as my fingers tightened round the metal. I moved on, moved down, because I had no other choice.

It felt familiar. Not the action of clinging to a ladder, but the feeling that came with it, the feeling of having to pull myself together and forget ... about the young man with the wild hair and bright eyes. Seemed my whole life Kael Paxton had screwed me over.

My foot hit the last rung. *All right, what happens now?* James had gone somewhere. I risked a glance down. He hadn't fallen. There was no body sprawled and broken in the wreck of the terminal building below. So ... I let my feet slip free and gripped each rung tight as my hands moved downwards.

The winds whipped at my flailing body. On the last rung, holding on with all the strength I had, I craned my neck to look for James. Heat bloomed in my chest as I saw him clinging to the wide rail. I would've been happy to see anyone right then. I told myself that and couldn't quite believe it. The past, unknown, confused, tugged at me. James was tangled up somewhere in it too. I shoved down the random thoughts and focused on what I had to do next.

Bars I could grip crossed the base of the carriage. I pulled in a hot breath, tasting rancid leather. I gagged, but stretched my hand out to the first strut. Then I had to will myself to let go and support my whole body by one thin bar. The winds wrapped around me, half-dragging me to the next bar. I grabbed at it and for a second hung there, relief running thick through my veins ... until I had to do it again.

I swung, hand over hand to the wide rail running up the centre of the Sky Rail carriage. My flailing feet found the wide strut, my hands following. I pressed my face to the ice cold metal and let my thudding heart slow. Now, the climb down.

Above me, the carriage groaned, the vibration running through the rail. I cursed. *That* didn't sound good. That sounded suspiciously like a carriage that could plummet and flatten—

Another stress-filled, metal groan whipped away in the fast winds.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

I propelled myself down the rail, finding a fast even rhythm that had me catching up with James. The rail was wide enough for us to climb side by side. He blinked, surprised to see me and probably wondering at my sudden speed. I jerked my head upwards. His forehead wrinkled, he stared up and realisation dawned.

We became a blur of movement.

I didn't risk a glance down; I couldn't waste that time. With each slice of wind across my half-covered ears, I thought I heard the scrape of loosening metal ... and then the rail shuddered. One hand lost its grip and I smashed into James. He swung free, his hands grappling with mine for the same wide bar. My free hand grabbed his arm and hauled him back against the rail.

For a moment, we clung on and simply breathed, then as one, we looked up.

"Oh, shit," I muttered.

With a final ripping scream, the brakes on the carriage gave way, showering us with splinters of metal.

Then the carriage started to fall.

Chapter Five

James ripped his leather mask from his mouth. “Jump!”

“What?”

“Jump!”

He hooked one arm around me and threw himself backwards. I think I screamed ... but all that I could focus on was the carriage hurtling down the rail straight for us.

We hit the ground. All air whooshed from my lungs, and pain shot hot along my spine. James was already moving, his arm still tight around me as he scrambled across the cracked ground. Close. So close. The carriage’s heavy shadow blocked out the pale light, the scream of the metal filling the air. Sparks showered us, and still James propelled us back, my feet scrabbling against the concrete.

The carriage smashed against the crumbling platform.

It missed us, but I didn’t stop moving. The metal sides groaned, yawning away in sheets from the carcass of the carriage. Vaguely, I heard James curse, and he half hauled me to my feet. “Run!”

I stumbled away and the sheet of metal crashed to the concrete. Sent off balance by the force of the crash, my knees buckled, and I went down. Half rolling, I protected myself from serious injury ... but I really didn’t want to get up. I let my body sag, and my eyes slid shut, the bowl of the mountain and wrecked buildings protected us from the worst of the winds. I pushed the leather mask from my face with numb fingers and breathed in thin air. Silence hung around me, only broken by James’ harsh breathing. The air tasted cold, fresh, laced with the surrounding rock and the foul odour of leather that still burned against my tongue. I didn’t let it bother me. After a few moments of letting my adrenalin-ravaged body slow into something like a normal rhythm, I tugged at the strips with my teeth and unbound my hands. “We’re alive. How the hell are we alive?”

James pulled his protecting mask free from his neck and wrapped hands. He laughed and sank down next to me, his hip brushing up against mine. He rested his arms on his bent knees and let his head fall forward. “No clue.”

I resisted the urge to run my fingers through the tangled strands of his hair. He looked tired, worn and something about that tugged at my heart. But I didn’t touch him, instead I stared up at the pale sky. That odd sense of familiarity surged over me again. Yes, I knew this place too.

Fucking amnesia. I winced at the sudden surge of anger firing through my veins and knew part of it was a reaction to how James twisted my emotions. Everything in my head—and my heart—was screwed and I had to accept that. So I pulled in a calming breath and did the only thing I could: tried to yank answers out of James. “What’s this planet called?”

He didn’t look up. “Again, no clue.”

“James...” It was a blatant lie. He knew the name of the mining platform. He had to know the name of its planet. “Can we stop the bullshit?” I rolled on my side and propped my head up, enjoying the tight pull of his jacket across his broad shoulders. Bad Katya ... but James was a joy to look at from any angle.

My side ached, and I shifted my hips to ease the pain. For a man who wanted me to

remember, he had a strange way of going about it. It was almost as if he didn't want me to know who I was ... or was it just this place? "You came to find me, knew the name Deimos. What's the name of this planet?" He still hadn't looked up, but his hands had squeezed into fists. "I'll find it inside the terminal building. Don't make me waste energy."

James lifted his head, his expression cold. "Mars," he said.

Mars. I repeated the word silently in my head and a tightness gripped my chest. Another word popped into my brain. *Home.* But I thought my home had been burnt to a cinder. I pushed away the incongruity and sat up. The terminal building was a wreck and had been as abandoned as long as the mining platform. That meant centuries. It made no sense. Had I struggled along on the desolate, thin-aired planet with Paxton until he left me? I ran a hand through my hair, freeing dust and grit. Did I want to remember the horror that must have been my early life?

I blew out a slow breath and willed some of the tension out of my muscles. "Let's get moving, James."

He stood and held out his hand. "Before something else goes wrong?"

I put my hand in his and let him pull me up. "Conspiracy or bad luck, I don't know." My body ached all over, but nothing was broken, which was fairly miraculous. More of those modifications James kept hinting at, probably helped by a lighter gravity than I was used to? I rubbed at the back of my skull, wincing at tender spots. It was a nasty way to find out I could bend and not break.

James dropped my hand and cold air washed away the warmth. My fingers curled into my palm, and I tried not to feel the loss of his touch. I had to believe that it was simply my amnesia that had me clinging to him. To believe anything else was too dangerous.

"I'm sure you'll realise which it is, bad luck and conspiracy, when your memory comes back, Katya." And there was the other man James could be. I held back a groan.

"I've been as conned in this as you have."

He gave me a thin smile. "Of *course* you have."

Attracted and repulsed by two aspects of one man. I wondered if my luck with men always ran that way. I'd been involved with Paxton. So the answer was: very probably. I did stop myself from punching him; the muscles in my arms ached enough already. Instead, I strode ahead. The area around the platform formed into a broken circle, the remains of a metal doorframe leading into the main building. A dome arched over it, casting speckled shadows on the white tiled floor and my thickened soles padded dull over them.

Rows of chairs lined the immediate area and steps led up to a short concourse. Dust choked doorways, piling deep in the corners. I padded up the steps. A sign lay across the top stair. *Webb-Pavonis Sky Terminal—Gate 2.* Pavonis Mons was the mountain on which we stood ... and in that moment, I knew I could name every mountain on Mars.

I wiped a hand over my suddenly damp face, my knees gave way, and I slumped down next to the sign. Leaning forward, I tried to breathe away the hollow roaring in my head, the grey mist closing in on my vision.

"You've remembered."

James didn't sound pleased about it. I focused on his now dust-thick shoes, keeping my eyes open and stopping the irritating need to pass out. "I lived here."

“Here?”

“No, I don’t think I’ve ever been up here ... there was never a need ... but this planet, Mars, is... was my home.”

“Well, do you know if there’s any way off planet?”

“Oh there’s no way off...”

Cold shot through me. I knew that cultured, gloating voice echoing all around us... “Paxton!” Adrenalin washed away the need to pass out. I was on my feet before I realised and stalked up the length of the concourse. “Paxton. Where are you? Get out here now! You put me in that tube, you bastard!”

“So feisty, isn’t she, James? But I’m sure you already knew that.”

I gritted my teeth. “Yes, can you do the smug insinuations later? What the hell do you want?” His voice had boomed around the concourse, offering nothing to track down the man so that I could wring his bloody neck.

“Katya...” The soft roll to Paxton’s voice made my skin crawl. *“Have you forgotten everything we meant to each other?”* His laughter ripped through me. *“Oh wait, yes you have!”*

“What do you want, Paxton?”

The weariness in James’ voice stopped my stride down the concourse, breaking through the burn of anger firing my gut. Damn it, he’d lied. He knew Paxton too.

“I have what I want. You passed my tests to prove you worthy and now you’re where I want you: on Mars. Time to find out if the myths are true... And, of course, then you’ll both die here.”

What the...? The man was insane. “Paxton!”

But there was only silence now. Was the man watching us? Waiting to see us die? It seemed James was right. All that had happened wasn’t down to bad luck. Kael Paxton had planned it all. And I had no idea why. Not yet.

I turned to James. “You know him. Who is he?”

James cold expression had my stomach in a knot. That ‘other James’ again occupied his body, the one that had the fight-reflex straining through my muscles. “My knowing Kael Paxton is of no importance to you.”

I stared at him, watched as he strode away down the concourse. Finally, I found my voice. “Are you fucking kidding me?” He ignored me. Completely. I cursed, and ran a hand through my hair, finding more tender spots of pain. We had to get off planet and soon. I doubted there was any food or fresh, clean water anywhere in the mountain. James disappeared down more steps. “Where are you going?”

“There has to be a command centre. I can rig up a beacon to call in the Command Base.”

I didn’t hold my breath for that plan. Paxton had driven us down to the planet. I doubted he would overlook anything as obvious as letting us get a signal out. “You know that won’t work. He’s already thought of it.”

“Doesn’t mean I shouldn’t try.”

I followed him—what else could I do?—every step feeling familiar. “Why does he want us here?”

James turned through the remains of a doorway, still ignoring me.

“Fine.” I huffed out a hot breath. “You go do something fruitless. I’ll see if Paxton missed anything.” Which wasn’t exactly true. The terminal, its architecture, even the

cold, thin air seemed a part of who I was, and I had to find out what I could. I needed the time alone, time to process the rush of information that streamed with every passing second. Something existed between James and Paxton, and I'd become stuck in the middle of their battle. Not a good place for me to be. Especially as I had no clue what drove either man.

I stopped. A half-hanging sign pointed to the way out ... so I followed it into a wide curve with rows of booths and information terminals. Most had cracked screens, their innards fused and rusted. I moved through them, my hand trailing over the smooth, dust-thick plastic. In a corner, half-hidden by a billow of torn fabric, sat an intact terminal.

My senses screamed at me. Had Paxton really missed this terminal or was it a trap?

I searched around the terminal, seeing nothing obvious, nothing that said the terminal would blow up in my face. Paxton had promised that we'd die on Mars, after all.

Drawing in an uneasy breath, I pushed the sheet to the floor and raised a cloud of choking brown dust. I bent closer, searching for anything that looked out of place. Again nothing. The black screen reflected dull light and appeared intact. It was worth a try, as James wouldn't be glaring over my shoulder.

I sat myself down in front of the slim terminal, the cracked plastic seat creaking under my weight. Pressing my palm to the panel bonded beneath screen, I waited to see if any residual energy flowed through the device. Heat surged under my hand, sliding down over my fingers, and I winced. Damn thing burned.

The black screen flared, a fuzzy icon of intersecting red curves flashing before the image bled into the shape of a dark haired woman. Her mouth moved, but only crackling white noise burst out of the arch of perforated metal surrounding the screen. I thumped the side of the monitor—my tried and true method.

"—please ask your question."

Yes, percussive maintenance. Worked every time. "What year is it?"

"2567 CE."

"And how is that calculated?"

The woman on the screen rolled into a drawn out explanation that made a calculation possible. As the machine's voice droned on, the smooth accent seeped down into my unconscious. Something about it seemed familiar ... as if I'd once formed the words that way myself. I blinked. I understood her softly monotonous voice; understood it without any hesitation or any effort to translate. In fact, I asked my questions in her ancient language...

I pinched at the bridge of my nose as a spike of pain stabbed behind my eyes. I couldn't push too hard against my stupid brain because panic bubbled under my skin. Nothing made sense. Pulling in a calming breath, I focused on the calculation, instead. It was safer. "Six hundred years. You've been off-line for six hundred years?"

"I do not—"

I waved my hand. "Not a question." I'd grown up on Mars ... somewhere ... were there others still remaining? Was that something to do with the myth Paxton had mentioned? However, this machine wouldn't hold that information. The image on the screen twitched and faded back. Shit, I still had so many more questions to ask it and the power drain was palpable. "Describe the transportation structure of the terminal."

"The Webb Sky Rail connects across the surface of Mars. This installation—Webb-Pavonis—links up to the Deimos mining platform for transit of material and staff—"

“You haven’t got enough power to be long winded,” I muttered. “Are there any transport vehicles here?”

“*The Sky Rail network—*”

“Yes or no?”

“Yes.”

“Type and where? Anything space worthy?”

“*Sky Rail carriages are located at the Hub. There are no space craft independent of the Sky Rail Network.*”

“Where are the independent craft?”

“*The Solis Planum Laboratory.*”

Solis Planum. I pressed the back of my hand to my mouth as nausea burst over me. My head fell forward, and that desperate need to pass out gripped me again. My other arm steadied me against the terminal. It wasn’t enough.

I staggered away from the seat, my knees buckled and I fell onto my back. I rolled onto my side, and let my head flop against the cold floor. The nausea faded. Gradually the thick grey mist eased back, and I breathed easily again. “*Solis Planum.* What exactly went on...?” The rest of my question faded away. The screen had darkened to a dull black again.

I swore and sat up. *Solis Planum.* My home. The place where I grew up ... with Paxton? A laboratory, probably abandoned for six hundred years before I lived in it. What were we doing there? I wiped at my face.

“Having fun?”

I climbed to my feet. “Yes, James. Have you set up the beacon?”

He rubbed at the back of his neck and wouldn’t meet my gaze. “Paxton obliterated the command centre.”

He wouldn’t admit that I’d been right. The thought of smirking eased the rest of the panic from my body. Now was the time to make him a little more uncomfortable, as he and Paxton were so close. He had to know about his, *my*, early life. “That machine worked for a short time. It said there were ships in *Solis Planum.*”

James’ eyes narrowed and a muscle jumped in his jaw. “One of these things actually worked?”

“Yes.”

“And you wasted time asking it *questions?*” He snatched a hand through his untidy hair, his expression hardening. “Shit, Katya. I could have rigged it to send a signal.” He let out a slow breath. “So what’s at *Solis Planum?*”

“Six hundred years ago there were ships.”

“And that was the useful nugget you learned? Wonderful.”

“Whatever happened here, they abandoned tonnes of tech and transport. Who’s to say what’s in this laboratory?”

“Leave here?”

I studied his face. A muscle jumped under his cheek again and his teeth were gritting. But the monster didn’t lurk. He was just the usual, irritated James. “What’s there to stay here for, James?” I smiled at him and waited, my arms crossed over my chest.

“Well?”

He lifted his hand. “Don’t.”

“You know what’s there.”

“Katya...”

“No.” My arms dropped and I edged towards him, moving into his personal space. “You’ve lied to me from the beginning. You know who I am, who Paxton is. I’m just a pawn between you both.” I stabbed a finger into his chest. “So why don’t you want to go to this laboratory?”

He grabbed my wrist and leaned in. I remembered to breathe, while my heart thudded. His mouth edged so close to mine I could almost taste him. “I can’t give you answers, Katya. I have no clue what you and Paxton did together.”

There was that jumping muscle, and I couldn’t help myself, the words simply leaked out as a soft, taunting whisper. “But you can imagine?” Colour slashed across his cheeks and his dark eyes narrowed. “I see you can. Why does it bother you?”

“It doesn’t.”

But the grip on my wrist had tightened, and tension pulsed off him. He shoved me back, my spine hitting the smooth wall. Shadow fell heavy across James’ face, but I felt his anger and it had my blood fizzing. His scent wrapped around me and the need to have him spiked. “No, you’re completely indifferent. I can tell.”

He pressed his hard body close to mine, and the aches dragging at my muscles fell away. Damn it, I didn’t want to get into this. I wanted answers, not sex. I told myself that as his breath stirred my skin and he muttered, “You called *his* name.”

I was lying. I wanted James any way I could have him. “So?” Lifting my chin, I found my mouth only centimetres from his. My lips ached, burned for him to close the distance, mirroring the tug of need sliding hot between my thighs. More taunting words escaped me. “My brain is like scrambled cheese ... and since you two are so alike...”

James stiffened. “Alike?” A heartbeat later, his expression shifted, his lush lips forming a wicked smile. “Is that what turns you on, Katya?” His fingers slid down my arms, clasping my hands and pinning me to the wall above my head. My chest lifted, pressed hard into his. “The idea that you’ve had us both?”

Something about that soured my passion and I pushed back against him, wanting to get free. “James, I don’t think this—”

“Sex at an inappropriate time?”

His lips brushed mine, the contact electric, and I sucked in a quick breath. What the hell was that charge? My heartbeat ramped. Whatever it was, I wanted more.

James grinned. “It seems to be a specialty of mine.”

We had no way to get off the planet and a madman seemed intent on killing us, but there was something about James Kinsare I couldn’t deny. Didn’t want to deny, especially when a simple kiss could feel like that. “Yes, it does.” I opened my mouth under his, my heart pounding, eager for our first real kiss ... which felt quite strange after what we’d already done.

James laced his fingers through mine, and I must’ve been imagining their hesitancy, the tremble as they tightened. His tongue-tip traced my bottom lip before curling around my mine. He tasted hot, sweet, and I almost groaned as he deepened the slow, *slow* kiss.

Heat fused my thoughts, and I pushed by body hard against his, luxuriating in the press of his hard body. His erection teased me, taunted my flesh. I wanted him. Now. I didn’t want to think about anything else. Having James Kinsare had become my priority.

His leg nudged between mine, his thigh pressing hard against my pubic bone. Sensation surged, and he swallowed my moan. I tried to pull my hands free. I wanted to

slide my fingers over his hot, smooth skin, but James grinned, not even breaking the kiss. He held my hands firm, and my spine arched. The ache in my flesh tightened.

The stroke of his tongue imitated the action I wanted, needed, and my head grew light. The rub of his leg followed the quickened beat of blood, building the pressure, the burning need to have him inside me. I pushed against his leg, flaring the heat between my thighs.

I pressed harder, riding his leg, taking his mouth.

Orgasm teetered at the edge of my flesh, so close it burned as hot and sweet as James' wicked tongue. So close, so close... And then a flare of white-hot fire shot up from my pelvis, rolling through my body, overwhelming my mind. For endless time, I lost myself, until the soft slowness of James' kiss brought me back, and I let a relieved sigh escape. His hands released mine, and mine fell to his shoulders. "You're insane."

"Yes, I am."

I laughed, and my head fell back against the wall. James nuzzled my neck, making me shiver. His hands shaped my hips in slow, gentle strokes, and I let the final flickers of pleasure ease from my body. My mouth brushed his neck, the hot taste of his skin wrong ... but still intoxicating. "Your turn."

He nipped at an earlobe, and I yelped. "Time to move out, Katya."

James pulled away and cold air washed over me. I twitched. Wrapping my arms around my body, I tried to rub warmth through the fabric of my suit and into my skin. My gaze flicked to the obvious bulge in his trousers. How could he simply walk away from that moment as if nothing had happened, as if he'd felt nothing? He'd wanted me as much I as needed him. From that bulge he still did. My gaze narrowed on him. "Move out where?"

"Solis Planum." He straightened his jacket, once again in control—or giving the appearance of it, anyway—and he presented me with a brief smile. "If there were reports of interplanetary craft there, then the laboratory will have supporting infrastructure."

"A beacon."

He nodded. "A beacon."

"Worth a try." I tilted my head. "What changed your mind?"

"It's our only choice, Katya." He pointed towards a collapsed doorway, only thick shadow beyond. Above it, the Webb's curved icon gleamed in a shaft of pale light. "Sky Rail goes everywhere."

"So it appears. How did you know that?"

"Maps in the control centre." He padded up the slight incline to the exit. "From what I can gather, they appear to still have power."

"Paxton?"

His stride didn't falter, but something in his body shifted, and I wondered whether he thought I'd forgotten our argument. I ran a hand through my hair, glancing back at the shadowed wall. My gut cramped. Had that little ... display ... been his attempt to make me forget?

"Who knows," he muttered. "The man's a law unto himself."

"And you're not?"

I caught his grin and had to ignore the rapid thump to my heart. He really didn't have the right to be so beautiful. I held down a wince. Had I always been so shallow, riveted by a pretty face?

James turned his attention back to striding up the incline to the exit. "I'm much more powerful than one man."

"You're also more bloody cryptic."

James shrugged. "It's part of my charm."

I snorted and followed him through the archway into grey shadow. "I think you're overestimating yourself there."

Genuine laughter broke free from him, echoing over the metal lined walls. For a moment, I thought I caught something in his gaze, something I recognised, but then it was gone. He turned away. Letting out a slow breath, he stared around the corridor. Most of it was lost to thick shadow, but metal double doors, or their remains, ran in a row along it. "I think this is our way down."

He stepped forward, and doors slid back on a soft whoosh of air. They revealed a wide, shadow-thick box. There was sharp *tink*, and spots of light flickered on across its ceiling. "This is a trap," I said, approaching more doors and finding no movement. I gripped the frame of an open shaft that had lost its doors, peering into the gloom. From the thinness of the atmosphere, the mountain was *big*. It was a bloody long way down. "Do you think there are stairs?"

"Since nothing here works ... and Paxton wants us to leave, we should oblige him."

I stood at the edge of the lift, staring at James standing so calm on its ragged-tiled floor. "This is insane." Taking a hold of the frame, I risked a foot on the lift floor. It didn't plummet away from me, so I risked the other foot. So far, so good—

James grabbed my hand and yanked me inside. The doors slid shut behind me, and the lift began to drop. I pulled my hand free, glared at him and gripped the bar edging the lift at waist height. The box rattled, the whining of the machinery pushing sharp against my ears. I fixed my gaze on the oblong screen above the doors, picking out every dent in the synthetic material. Damn thing wasn't working, though. The wink of numbers would have helped to ease the panic bubbling under my skin.

Instead, I willed myself to find controlled breathing. I hated enclosed spaces ... but I kept finding myself in little boxes.

"You too?"

"What?"

James stared at his feet and the muscles in his jaw tightened. "Small spaces."

"I was putting mine down to thirty years in a body-tube. What's yours?" Dark eyes held me, and I thought I could read something of his past there. It almost existed on the edge of my brain, the taste of it there in my mouth. "It's the same." How could I know his history? "Someone froze you."

"Yes."

"Paxton?"

James laughed and relaxed back against the rail. "No. Paxton had nothing to do with it."

More words burned within him, pushing like ghosts of words against my brain. It was the strangest sensation, and my sudden connection to the man had me unnerved. I straightened by spine against the rail. "So who did?"

"My father."

I blinked. "Why?"

"He believed it was for my own good." A smile lurked on his mouth. "I'm older than

I look, Katya.”

“Aren’t we all?”

He snorted. “True.” James stared up at the ceiling, closed his eyes and silence followed. The whine and chug of the lift’s machinery beat dull against the metal walls, vibrated through the thickened soles of my suit and the rail at my back.

I couldn’t leave it there. James was almost sharing information about himself. “Did it turn out to be for your own good? Being frozen?”

“When the only other option was death? Yes.”

“Death?”

James rubbed at his jaw. He glanced at me, his face cut by heavy shadow from the sharp spots of light. I almost expected the rise of the monster in him, but it never came. “My past has nothing to do with you.”

The taste of truth didn’t come, only a heavy sourness coating my tongue. “Should that change to *everything* to do with me?”

His mouth thinned, and he turned his face back to the blank synthetic board above the doors. Muscles shifted in his jaw, and I knew his teeth grated together. I couldn’t help the smile pushing at my mouth. If I wore him down enough, he would tell me everything—

Metal screeched and I grabbed in reflex at the rail. The lift juddered to a stop and the doors opened. So much for my chance to wear him down. The damn metal box had dropped faster than I thought.

Warm, damp air washed into the little box, bringing with it wild chirrup and the whoops of unknown animals. Beyond the lift, a long corridor stretched away, to break into a huge arch of stone. Pale sunlight cut in a wide swathe across the ground, its sharp rays highlighting the ruin of booths smothered in broad-leaved creepers. Sapling trees broke through black cracks in the concrete and rustled in the fast breeze. Unexplained shadows shifted against the cavern wall. Breathing in, the scent of wet fur and animal dung filled my senses.

The base of the mountain surged with unknown animal life, and it was possible they hadn’t cohabited with humans for centuries. They wouldn’t be scared. We’d be lunch. “Is this more of the test to stay alive?” I murmured. I glanced at his jacket, working with his lie. “Will you be able to do your zap suit thing?”

James gave me a condescending glare and tugged at his dirty sleeves. “Possibly.”

It was fun to bait him, and I grinned at him. “Good.”

We edged out of the lift and into the moist air. I pulled it deep into my lungs. It tasted like home too, a rich blend of thick wet vegetation, soil and hint of damp, furry predator. The conflicting images of what I thought my home fired through my brain. It made no sense. They couldn’t all be true.

I padded along the corridor, away from the stone arch and its wash of bright light. James hung close at my back. Instinct had me in its grip, and I didn’t fight it. I knew this place, but knew it before the vegetation took hold, when the curved corridor gleamed with smooth clean walls and tiled floors. The memory of cleaning fluid itched my nose. I winced. Damn it, something felt ... off. I was taller, old ... fuck... I was a *man*. That wasn’t my memory rattling about in my head. What had Paxton mixed in my blood to screw with my brain to such an extent?

“Katya. Stay focused.”

“Easier said than done.” I pinched at the bridge of my nose, willing the rush of false memory out of my head. “The carriages should be in a central hub up here on the left.”

James stopped and I stared back at him. His eyes had narrowed. “Your memory—”

“Don’t ask, I have no clue—” I bit off more words. A harsh scent filled me and fired adrenalin through my body. The image of stringy beast, all legs, sleek body and fangs burst through my thoughts. The time for talking had ended. I grabbed James’ hand.

“Run!”

“What the hell are you doing?” But still he ran with me, tearing down the dim corridor, the lighter gravity giving speed to our feet. Darkness thickened the further we ran from the high cavern entrance and the fast pace on the uneven tiles became dangerous. “Katya!”

“Something’s tracking us.” The quick, soft pad of paws followed my words. I cursed. “More than one something.”

Pulling at the strange memory and praying it wasn’t a hallucination, I calculated the distance to the hub. Maybe another thirty metres. Not far. But now all light had gone and I was running blind. Behind me, a beast snarled ... and then another.

“Paxton must be laughing himself crazy.” I snorted and caught myself as I stumbled, James hauling me over the broken slab. “Course, he hasn’t got far to go.”

“Less talk, more running,” James grated.

Jaws snapped shut so close to my heel that hot breath penetrated the thin fabric of my suit. I yelped. A low frustrated growl echoed over the enclosed walls. Adrenalin shot through me, mixing with a warped exhilaration at being hunted. I crushed it. What the hell was wrong with me? I caught the gleam of bright green eyes flashing through the thick shadow ... five, no six beasts. Damn. The animals had to be huge, easily shoulder height.

Shit. We were *so* dead.

Chapter Six

The memory of the lower level connecting door burned sharp in my mind. Almost there. I dragged James over to the left, my spine impacting a box on the wall. My hand scrabbled over its smooth surface and I willed heat to flare. Nothing. I bit back a curse. “Your suit would be a good idea.”

“Doesn’t work on flesh.”

“Now you tell me.”

The beasts surrounded us, green eyes bright and unblinking. The rancid stink of their fur and rough panting filled the corridor. They inched forward, one animal ahead of the others. We were a new scent and they were wary.

I thumped the screen, and it whirred, sharp, fast. The beasts’ eyes narrowed, and a slow growl rumbled from the alpha animal. Heat spread beneath my hand. After a too-slow moment, a series of clicks cut the air. “To your right,” I murmured, nudging James with my elbow.

Eyes followed our movement, the animals still unsure what we were. The lead beast sniffed the air again.

“I have a door. It’s open, a crack.” The slow scrape of the door panels over the rough tiles had the beasts growling and edging closer. “It’s wide enough for you to get through, Katya.”

“James...”

“I’m not being heroic. Now move.”

I slid behind him, found the narrow slice of opened panels and squeezed my body through. Growls grew as they saw their prey escaping. James jammed his body through the gap. He pulled free as the animal smashed into the doors. The metal buckled.

“These won’t hold them.”

“I know.” James pressed his hands against the left panel, straining back from the claw swiping at him, the slavering muzzle and large head snarling through the gap between the panels. The other panel dented, the distortion of metal echoing.

James closed his eyes, and the air changed.

Sparks danced over his sleeves, his hands. I broke my stare and searched the room for something with which to defend ourselves. Steps led down into a thick blackness, edged by a rusted railing. I yanked at a bar, pulling it free, and beat it at the snapping head. It yelped, darting back, but only for a moment. It rammed the door again, its head and now its haunches pushing through the splintering gap.

“Can your suit hurry up?”

“This isn’t easy,” James said from between gritted teeth. Sparks spidered over the metal and with it, the sharp, fresh odour of the sea masked the thick scent of the attacking beasts.

I smacked the beast’s nose and got a roar of rage for my efforts. Hinges creaked as the other members of the pack took on the doors. “I think I’m making it worse.”

“Yes.”

The sudden surge of electricity prickled my skin, had my hair almost on end. The beast in the doorway yelped and shot back. The stink of singed fur thickened as the other

animals still threw themselves at the door ... and found the electrified metal. Yelps, yips and dull thumps followed. And for a few seconds, there was silence.

James pushed at the panels, but they were beyond closing. "I can't hold this much longer."

"We'll have a few minutes before they try again, at least."

He pulled his hands again, curling and stretching his fingers. "I hope. I need time to recharge. I've drained the cells."

We both knew he was lying. Whatever powered James' ability to produce that electrical surge, it came from him, came from his body. But I had no time to argue with him about it. However much I wanted to. I padded down the stairs into the darkness, waving the rusted bar in front of me. The beasts were snarling, growling from the corridor ... but as yet, they hadn't tested the doors again.

My bar hit something non-metallic. I pressed my hand against another screen, and it whirred and whined too loud in the black silence. The hollow crash of the upper doors made me jump. The noise, the knowledge that we'd moved and their prey planned to escape had spurred them into action; the beasts had broken through the doors.

James pounded down the steps, helped me yank at the doors and we scrambled through. A razor-clawed paw slashed at us, a muzzle baring long, gleaming teeth. I shoved at one side, James the other and metal whined. The beast yelped and with a final snap, scrambled back into the darkness of the stairwell.

"Not enough," I muttered, my hands slipping, sliding over the smooth, unmoving metal. The tips of claws snagged through the gap, and I winced. "They'll get through it."

"It will have to do." James grabbed my arm and pulled me away from the doors.

I stumbled over the edge of the paved ring edging the vast space. Cracks in the ceiling splintered light across a huge turning circle, bronze carriages in the same style and shape as the destroyed Sky Rail box squatting on rails. I stared up again following the bright rectangle of sunlight hanging over the first carriage. I stopped gawping and broke into a run. "James, come on!"

My breath ragged, my heart pounding, I raced over along the line of the tracks. Behind us, the beasts beat at the doors. They were persistent; I'd give them that. Maybe they were pissed off too.

Leaping up the low run of steps to the front carriage, I palmed the doors. It whooshed open, and James slammed it shut.

I followed James as he strode down the narrow corridor to the control cabin at the far end of the carriage. He sank into a heavily padded chair and pressed his hands to the dusty instrumentation. Monitors flared into life and the carriage rumbled.

I closed my eyes and relief sat heavy on my shoulders ... until a dull thump ... and another ... came from the roof. Silent curses ran through my brain. Had the damn beasts not been fed recently?

James snorted and ran quick fingers over more screens, making clean trails in the thick dust. "They don't give up, do they?"

"Doesn't look like it." I strapped myself into the chair beside his and held on as the carriage started to shake. Engines rumbled vibrations through my body, and I gritted my teeth against them. Without warning, we shot upwards, and my stomach dropped. I craned forward to peer through the wide curve of glass to the roof of the hangar. "The ceiling isn't retracting, James."

“Short ride, then.”

I rolled my eyes at him and clung to the padded arms of the seat. A proximity alarm sounded, a soft, female voice warning us of the distance to the retracting roof. With a slow groan, the ceiling pulled back, and the carriage pushed through to the cavern above. James pushed levers, and the carriage rolled onto the fixed tracks. Dull thuds on the roof said we hadn't quite lost our friends. “Is food so scarce they want to eat metal?”

James didn't answer, just pushed more power into the engines and surged us forward. I thought I heard a yowl ... before long legs and a white-furred belly slid down the bulbous side window. No more thuds followed, and the cabin filled with the rhythmic chug of the wheels on the track.

We burst out of the cavern into a canopy of broad-leaved trees, the branches thwacking against the metal skin of the carriage. Filtered air rushed through the cabin, smelling sweet and damp. I pulled in a deep breath and relaxed back into the padded seat. The adrenaline rush eased and faded away. Everything about that chase, the racing through the tunnels, the snap of a beast at my heels, tasted familiar. I ran my hands over my sweat-damp hair. Nice to know I was far too used to being hunted ... and in perverted way, I enjoyed it. How screwed up was I?

I flicked a glance at James. “You know how to get to Solis Planum?”

He tapped the monitor. “It has a direct link to Pavonis.”

“So now all that we have to worry about is food and water.” James glared at me and I twitched a smile. “Well, it would be our spectacular luck to die of thirst or starve after all we've been through, wouldn't it?”

“Check the main cabin for supplies.”

“*Six hundred years old* supplies.” But I unhooked the holding straps on my seat and pushed myself up. The carriage rocked and steadying myself in the doorframe behind James, I waited for the door to roll away. The obscured door slid back with a creaking mechanism to reveal the narrow corridor running the length of the carriage. A glass wall stretched off to my right. Tiny spots of white light hit tables and curving chairs. I stepped inside, mottled sunlight streaking through the thick foliage brushing the carriage.

The air, as in the emergency cabin, smelled fresh now. I patted the stuffed back of a bronze-gold chair and a thin haze of dust rose up from the thick fabric. The stale odour of centuries cut through the air, and I winced. It surprised me that most of the furnishings appeared intact. Nothing had broken the seals since the inhabitants had abandoned the network.

“And it's quality workmanship. Now do you have any food here?”

My gaze swept the room and caught on a little black box built into the wall. A stripe of blue light curved around its front, proof that it had power. The shelf jutting out suggested it served ... something. No obvious buttons presented themselves. “What do you do?”

“*I am the service unit for Webb Sky Rail Carriage One. What do you require?*”

There was that ancient, dead language again ... and I didn't have to think about the needed word. “Water.”

The machine burred and a dry scraping sound followed that didn't sound good at all. “*I am without my basic store. Please refill me.*”

I sighed. “Of course you are. What do I fill you with?”

“*Please refill me with my basic store.*”

I didn't thump the machine, though my fingers curled into fists. "Fine." I knelt, sunlight dappling over the floor, the walls as branches still thwacked the carriage in a constant rhythm. Nothing in the cupboards below appeared as if it fitted into the machine. Most were plastic cartons filled with plates, cups, cutlery, napkins and bottles. I cursed, the words lost in the hiss of leaves brushing the wall, the tinted windows in a fast rush. Leaves... "Would anything organic work?"

"In an emergency, raw material is acceptable."

I rubbed at my face. "This is going to be fun." I stood. I'd explore before I tackled how I could drag all that greenery in through the sealed windows.

Further down the corridor I peered into three compartments, each with six seats and folded bunks scaling the wall. The door at the end of the corridor slid open. Cool damp air rushed at me, and the chug of the engines hit. Another door opened, revealing a toilet and washbasin. Tepid air brushed my fingers as I held my hand under the tap. No water. I was an idiot to expect any.

The weak ceiling light cast a soft glow over my face and I stared at my reflection. Grime and dust coated my skin. I held my own pale gaze, but I was still a stranger. Tracing my cheek, jaw with my finger, nothing felt familiar. Sighing, I turned away. My memories were bursting back in bright fragments but not enough to help me work out what the hell was going on.

Narrow spiral stairs led up to another corridor. I palmed the access door. A brief pause and the screen scanned my hand, analysing my DNA. The door opened onto another passage. Beyond it, I found three rooms with a variety of furniture and convertible chairs acting as beds. I stopped in the open doorway of the last room. A large couch squatted against a wood panelled wall and through a small door ... I groaned and padded into the small tiled room. "Torment me, why don't you," I muttered, running my fingers along the cold enamel of a curved bath. Holding my hand under the large chrome tap, I waited. Air hissed over my palm, and I let out a slow sigh. "Six hundred years too late for a decent bath."

I padded back down to the emergency cabin. Flopping into the seat, I let my body relax back into the padding. I ached, my skin lay thick with grime, and I wanted a drink, but just to sit and not be dead was nice. "We need to pull in vegetation and stuff it into the food unit."

James didn't look up, his attention fixed on the monitors. "We're moving so the doors are sealed."

I let out a tired laugh. "Of course they are." The nose of the carriage broke through the dense forest of leaves and branches. Sunlight pierced the canopy in patches, casting a pale light over the clear, rust-free rails. Whoever had designed the Sky Rail system had been prepared for the encroaching trees. "How long until we get to the laboratory?"

"Twenty hours, maybe more." James tapped screens and fresh information flared, scrolled and faded. "The skins of these vessels synthesise light. I'm not sure how efficient it is, so..."

"...we're going to roll to a stop when it gets dark."

James stretched his shoulders and flexed his hands around the levers. "Get some sleep, Katya."

"I've slept for thirty years, I'm fine."

"You've been *frozen* for thirty years." He made a deliberate sweep of my body and

my skin flared, the hot pulse of desire dropping low into my pelvis. I fought the need to squirm ... and damn, he knew it. His smile had that wicked turn to it. "Your muscles are tight, unused."

"Lovely bit of innuendo there, James."

The smile turned to a grin. "I thought so." His expression sobered. "Sleep, Katya."

I didn't want to admit that he was right. Every part of me ached, and some of it was his fault. I tried not to dwell on sex with James. With the promise of an almost comfortable bed in the room upstairs, that was hard to do. "What happened to your need for revenge?"

He turned back to his monitors, presenting me with his hard profile. "I said. I'm waiting for your memory to come back. I'll have my revenge on that woman."

So cold and matter-of-fact, yes, he'd switched again, slipping into that 'other' man. It ran an icy shiver through my flesh, killing the warmth of desire. Whoever he was, James Kinsare was powerful and had influence. Men like him often hid a monster behind their pretty faces. It seemed to be an easy fact to forget, and I needed the reminder.

Pushing myself out of the chair, I headed down the corridor and up the stairs to the room with the large couch. It was easy to arrange the thickly padded seats into a double bed. A trunk on the opposite wall held pillows and bedding. They smelt fusty, but no mould stained them and since grime and dust coated me, it didn't matter. I stretched a sheet over the mattress, tossed pillows onto it then the blankets, and I sank into its softness. I stretched out and let the cushioning support my body. Closing my eyes, the swipe of the trees worked with the slowing rhythm of my heart.

The previous few hours pressed on me. My breathing eased and I turned, finding a more comfortable position. Natural sleep, for the first time in thirty years, and the relief of it warmed down through me. A smile pulled at my mouth as I drifted off.

"Katya Ortaega."

A chill ran through my blood. The bottle I held hit the table with a dull thunk. My wrist flipped, and the thin sliver of a blade shot ready into my palm. I kept my breathing slow, my spine straight and focused on the battered bar counter. Stupid to sit with my back to the door ... but no one knew me on this wreck of a service station. And hell, I was tired of constantly being on my guard. Now I was paying for that lapse.

"I know it's you Katya."

The grin in his voice had old memory finding me. He sounded like... "Kael?" The pain in my voice forced a wince. That man had run from me, abandoned me years before. I ignored the cramp in my gut and the ancient pain threatened to swamp me. I wasn't that trusting little Katya anymore. Hadn't been for a long time.

"Glad to see you recognise your old friend."

"Friend?" I swung around on my seat, pain crushed by anger. The bite of the blade handle into my palm gave me focus. "You were never..." Words dried as I stared at the man standing too close to me. Kael Paxton. Older, no longer the fresh-faced, beautiful eighteen-year-old who had broken me so long ago. Wild hair that had always defied taming, a harder adult face than the boy I'd known, but he still had my stupid heart pounding. My eyes narrowed. He wasn't as old as he should be and something about that tugged at me. He was decades younger... "It's really you?"

He spread his arms and the grin he gave me was pure Kael. "It's me."

The blade hilt dug into my palm. I had to remember who I was now. The teenager

who'd mooned over Kael had long since gone. "What do you want?" I leant back against the edge of counter and waved a hand at the gloomy, stinking hole in which I hid. Somewhere in the damp darkness barflies muttered and knocked back the swill the bar had the cheek to call beer. "You've not come for the atmosphere."

"And you have?" He planted himself on the stool next to mine. Waving to the barman, he pointed to my bottle and indicated two. "I came looking for you."

"That much is obvious."

He slapped a hand to his chest and mocked injury. "Still as cutting as ever, Katya." I didn't want to smile. I didn't. "What do you want, Paxton?"

"Paxton now, is it?" The barman put the two bottles on the counter. Paxton lifted his arm and slapped his IDent down, connecting it with the pad the barmen held up. The little machine flared green and burbled the accepted credit. "All right. I'm sure I'll be Kael sometime tonight. Wait." He stared up at the wide, scarred dome of the bar's roof. Deep space and the swirling gases of the nearby Ghost of Jupiter nebula filled it. "It already is night." He lifted a suggestive eyebrow as he retrieved his beer. He twisted the sterilising seal, air hissed, and he took a gulp. "Well...?"

I grabbed my own beer. "Unlikely." I drank, grimaced and put the bottle back on the counter. The foulness of the beer hadn't faded and anyway I needed to keep a clear head around... Paxton. Yes, I had to think of him as Paxton. Kael was the boy who'd broken my heart. "I'll ask again, what do you want?" He wore a black freighter's uniform, all bulging pockets and grime. "You don't seem to be doing that well."

"Another stab of pain." He necked the bottle and tossed it back on the counter. It rolled and the barman caught it with a curse. "And you, Katya, hiding in this shit hole. Of course, you have a good reason."

Had he always made me this angry, giving me a cramp in my gut and a desperate need to punch him? The rosy view of the wild, adrenalin-fuelled boy I'd adored had belonged to a teenager. I couldn't hold onto it now. "I presume you've found me for a reason."

He smirked and picked up the second unopened bottle. He waved it at me. "I know who ordered the hit on you."

My expression stayed blank, but my heart jumped. For a year, I'd run, hid, survived five attempts on my life. I'd had to abandon my old—and lucrative—profession as an environmental geneticist. And I'd been a bloody good terraformer for more years than I really wanted to remember. To know who had ordered me dead would be half the problem solved. The other half would be knowing why I'd been targeted in the first place. "Who is it?"

"Oh no." He twisted the seal and the hiss of air let out the bitter stink of the sour hops. "I do something for you; you do something for me." He smirked and my stomach dropped. "And before your mind drops to the gutter—but I see it already has—I'm not bargaining for sex." His dark blue gaze slid down my body and my skin prickled, heat pooling low in my belly. We'd both been young, but I'd never found anyone like him since. I'd always thought we were made for each other. "Well, as I say, not yet."

"Paxton..."

"Let's get out of here." He grinned and the wild boy shone in his face. "What? Afraid you can't resist me?"

I let out a slow breath and pushed myself off the stool. The blade slid back into its

wrist mechanism with a soft click and I flexed my fingers. "It's been a long time. Your charm has worn thin."

Paxton's palm, cooled by contact with the beer, pressed against my cheek. His touch shot sparks under my skin, and I swallowed. His smile grew. "No, I can see I have no effect on you whatsoever." His palm caressed my jaw, my neck until his fingers tapered away and his touch left me. "You have a room?"

"Nothing's going to happen." I willed myself to believe that, but my skin still tingled, and an ache pulsed low in my pelvis. He'd left me, left me on Mars, abandoned me. He had lost all power over my feelings. He had. Paxton's gaze speared me and the bastard knew conflict gripped me. "Nothing."

"Believe that if it keeps you safe and warm." Paxton's mouth tugged into a smile. "Lead the way, Katya."

My shoulder blades itched as I headed for the door. It had been too long since I'd seen him. Time could change a man—and something about Kael Paxton felt off. What, I couldn't say. The doors opened before me and the gritty winds whipped at my face. Belatedly, I pulled up my mask to protect my face and huddled into my long coat.

I'd hid out on the wreck of a service station for months ... but if Kael had found me, it was time to move on. I stared around the bleak blocks of rusted and battered metal, offering everything from warm flesh to cold—well, almost cold—beer. Thick heaps of dust piled against doorways, swirled through the air in a grey cloud and clogged my breathing apparatus. Security lights pierced the murky blackness and I trudged a route to my service room. Never the same route twice. Even in the back-of-beyond, I still had to be careful—I glanced back to Paxton, masked against the bitter wind—more careful.

I tapped the short distance communicator on the front of my molded mask. "How did you find me?" My voice synthesised into a tinny whine and I winced. "Well?"

"Who knows you better?"

"Paxton..."

"Call me Kael." I knew he smirked behind that mask, knew it. "What? I just want to hear what it sounds like through this unit."

I ignored him, tramping through the twists and turns leading to my room. Metal buildings towered over us, the winds scouring my mask and making my teeth ache. Music thumped out of one bar, its orange fluorescent sign cutting through the blackness. I turned past it, cut through an alley and palmed the service entrance to my block.

The door groaned and scraped back on unoiled hinges. Grabbing Paxton's arm, I pushed him inside. Grit and dust swirled in with us. I secured the door and pointed to a narrow set of stairs leading upwards. "After you."

Paxton padded up the stairs. I pulled the mask from my face and wiped at the black grit staining my forehead. "Bad idea, Katya," I muttered under my breath and pinched the bridge of my nose to try to ease the building pressure. But there was no choice. Kael Paxton had found me. I had to deal with it. Letting out a slow breath, I followed him.

He stood outside the door, arms folded and the beginning of a smirk creasing his face. "Nice place you've got."

I ignored him, batting the dust from the panel with my glove. The device shot heat over my bare palm. With a groan, the door slid back. I stepped forward and focused my mind, disabling the thought-ware woven into walls. "Come in," I said, closing and locking the door behind him.

Lights flickered on, only holding enough strength to do little more than weaken the shadows and thankfully hiding most of the grime-thick room. A bed, a food unit and a screened off shower and waste facility comprised the three metre square space.

"And it gets better and better." Paxton bounced on the narrow bunk, disturbing a fine layer of dust.

"Funny." I shrugged out of my coat and hung it on a peg. Dust dropped in a mist to the floor. No matter how hard I tried, the bloody stuff got everywhere. I hung the mask over the top of the long coat. "So, what do you have to tell me?" I straightened my shoulders, and my gaze deliberately flicked around the grimy hole I'd lived in for two months. "Who has me living like this?"

"Time to bargain."

Anger curled in my stomach. "I have no time for games."

Paxton's usual smirk had a hard edge to it. "That's not exactly true, is it?"

I let out a slow breath and willed the knot of tension to ease. "Bargain?"

Paxton stood, and I flexed my fingers, priming the blade at my wrist. I didn't know the man; hadn't for years ... and he was the one who'd taught me not to trust.

"I want to taste you."

My heart thumped and a more pleasurable tension tightened my muscles, spiking an old and familiar ache through me. I'd sworn off men, well since the last one tried to skin me for the bounty. Paxton's sharp, blue gaze slid down my body, and his tongue wet his lips. My breath caught. Damn him. "Taste me?"

He moved closer and heat flooded my face. "Been a while, Katya?"

I swallowed but made a sarcastic smile pull at my mouth. "I'm not into entertaining much, as you can see."

"Then you'll appreciate my offer all the more."

I rolled my eyes, ignoring his fingers as they found the securing tabs to be my shirt. "We're not inexperienced anymore, Paxton. I hardly think—"

His hot palm pressed against my belly, his fingers slipping inside the loosened band of my trousers. I lost the ability to speak. Paxton's fingers pushed further, brushing over my mons and teasing so close to my clitoris that my hips bucked.

"No, no interest in me touching you at all."

And then he knelt before me and pulled my trousers and underwear down to my knees. I swallowed in a tight throat, and my head fell back against the metal wall. A liquid ache pulsed through my body, tightening as cool air brushed my exposed skin. Rough palms explored my thighs, running over my flesh. His lips brushed me, and I couldn't help it, my hand fisted his hair at the unexpected rush of sensation.

The tip of his tongue darted out, and the first lick had me gasping. I tried not to think about whose delicious and clever mouth lapped me. A mouth was a mouth ... but the fist of silky hair, the hands gripping my buttocks, and the sound of him licking and sucking burned through my memory. Kael. It was my Kael...

The first tendrils of orgasm swirled through my flesh, and I crushed my eyes against it. I didn't want to come. Not so fast. I wanted more of his mouth, more of his fingers that teased and played. I ached, and the pressure had me groaning.

He grinned. I felt it and his teeth grazed my clitoris.

My hips bucked against his face, and the need to have him burned through me. He licked and nibbled, and I pushed hard against his mouth, wanting more, needing him

and...

Orgasm flared over me in a rush of intense, blazing heat. I cried out, and all strength rolled out of my body. Paxton's hard hands held me up. His chuckle brushed warm over my wet flesh.

"You taste wonderful."

I let out a tired laugh, my body hardly my own. "You'd forgotten?"

"It's been a while." He pushed himself up, and old habit had me searching for a kiss, but Paxton buried his face in my neck. "You smell nice too."

I patted his tangled hair. "I kept my side of the bargain."

"So you did."

He pulled away and gave me room to pull my clothes on. My fingers still shook, and my face muscles ached from the grin. I rubbed at my cheeks. "So? Who do I blame?" Wobbling legs took me to my bed, and I flopped onto it. For once, I didn't care about the persistent layer of grey-black dust as my head hit the pillow.

Paxton held up his IDent and a rendering grew from the device, glowing in the dimness of the room. The representation of a sun broiled at the centre of a six planet system. "Recognise it?"

"Tocularis-4," I murmured as the rendering zoomed into the fourth planet, a cloud thick, blue-green world. "The administrative centre of the Tirion Collective." Images chased down to a vast coastal plain and a beautifully organic city, all curved glass and grown structures. "But that's the home of His Royal Highness, the Almighty and Very Reverend Emperor of Tirion." I used his full title. Who didn't? The man was a merciless tyrant, so powerful all the known-worlds ran in terror of him. Unseen and ageless, he'd governed his realm for thousands of years. "Are you saying he set up this hit?" The image of the white palace swept into view, flowing over the curves and spindle-thin towers. "How did I become his enemy?"

"Something you did on Alrai-7?"

I shook my head. I had an eidetic memory; I forgot nothing. "I've never even been to Alrai-7." I ran a hand over my face and willed my pumping heart to calm down. All semblance of ease had left me. The Tirion Emperor. Shit. "How do you know this?"

Paxton tapped the side of his nose. "Ways and means, Katya. I also have his image and a plan."

One thing I'd learned from a year of strangers ... and friends ... trying to kill me was not to take any shit. Kael Paxton would be no exception. Even after that orgasm. I rolled onto my side and glared at him. "You're a freighter pilot. How can you have an image of the emperor? A being that even his own courtiers haven't seen."

Paxton smirked at me and tugged at the collar of his uniform. "Freighter pilot? It's a disguise."

"It's a very good disguise."

He rolled his eyes, pushed my legs over and flopped onto the bed beside me. "Now you're being cruel." He pressed his IDent screen and the rendering of Tocularis-4 faded. "Don't you want to see the face of the most elusive man in the known-worlds?"

A flat image flashed over the plate, and I stared at a tall, smartly dressed man walking across a white marbled courtyard. The focus zoomed in. Smooth black hair, dark eyes and a face that held the hard perfection of a classical statue...

Panic hit me, blood firing through my body, dragging me out of the dream. My arms

flailed as I fought. I had to wake up. Not a dream. A memory. Shit.

The image of the emperor burned behind my eyes. I pinched at the bridge of my nose, sweat cooling on my face. I was seriously fucked.

Paxton had shown me the face of James Kinsare.

Chapter Seven

“You’re awake. Good.” James stood in the doorway to the room, shafts of splintered light cutting across his body. He stepped forward. “You all right, Katya?”

“Fine, fine,” I said, scrambling off the damp mattress, sheets twisting around my legs. Focusing became hard and I grabbed at the sill of the windows to steady myself. What the hell was James’ game? He wanted me dead, had wanted me dead for years... That brought me up short. The memory had burst up from before I was frozen. Either he was lying about how long I’d been in the body-tube, or the image of him had come from over thirty years before.

“Katya?”

I jumped at the hand on my shoulder, but I couldn’t look at him. The image Paxton had shown me reflected exactly the man who now stood behind me. He didn’t look any older. I pulled myself together, straightening my spine. I met his gaze in the darkened window. James couldn’t know that I remembered who he was. Time to hide a lie within the truth. “I remembered meeting up with Paxton again.”

The hand on my shoulder tightened. “And?”

I focused beyond him to the darkening landscape. It hit me. “We’ve stopped.” We’d gone beyond the dense forest onto a grass-thick plain only peppered with trees. “Grass. They must’ve genetically forced that cultivation. This should be forest too.”

“Are you avoiding my question?”

“Your...?” I shrugged off his touch. “Oh, Paxton.” I pushed tangled hair from my face. The door to the bathroom stood open, the white curve of the bath taunting me again. What I wouldn’t give to sink up to my chin in scalding hot water. I sucked in a deep breath and forced a wry smile to twist my lips. “I didn’t think you’d want a blow-by-blow account.”

James frowned. “*That* sort of meeting.”

I laughed, and it had the right touch of strain. Not that I needed to push the act. I’d exposed myself to Paxton within minutes of meeting up with him again. It unnerved me. “Now you can see why I woke in a panic. Not something I want to experience with a man who obviously wants me dead.” Was that something in his eyes, a flicker? Damn lights were too dim to tell. “So ... have you collected organic material for the food unit?”

“I’ve only just stopped. The power cells held out till early dusk. I banked the reserves.” James stepped back. “I’ll keep guard, you collect.”

I lifted an eyebrow and smirked. “Your *suit’s* power has recharged?”

James ignored me and disappeared down the spiral of stairs to the carriage entrance. A faint hiss and fresh cold air blew through the carriage. “Come on, Katya.”

I moved forward. I began to doubt the dream as fact. It made no sense. What could I have done to anger an emperor? And how could that emperor be James? Even if that was a lie, and I was not about to believe anything Paxton said, how could he have an image of James? He’d be over seventy years old without aging a day ... and the known-worlds had outlawed that sort of genetic tampering *long* ago. Though Paxton, too, hadn’t aged as much as the dream-me thought he should.

I blinked. That knowledge burned tight within me. I’d been illegally modified. And

even if my screwed-up brain had planted James' image and created a false memory, the power he could expel from his body was all too real. James wanted information. Was it to do with his and my very illegal genes?

Still, the dream served as a reminder. Whether I believed James Kinsare was the emperor or not, he was a powerful man with a monster lurking at his heart.

I stopped in the narrow corridor that had exits doors at either end, watching as he opened the door. The light caught on his profile and had me wondering whether he'd modified his looks too. Beauty like his had to be grown, not born.

The door whined and with a slow clunk, slid back against the body of the carriage. A swift breeze twisted through the little corridor, bringing with it the fresh scent of grass and soil. My nose wrinkled against another, sharper odour and I held down a groan. "Our beast friends are out there."

"Yes." He padded down the steps to the open door and jumped down to the track. "I've caught glimpses of them as the train slowed. So try to be quick."

"Thank you for stating the obvious." I jumped, landing with a slight bounce as the lighter gravity kicked in. The grass beyond the synthetic edge of the track stretched up to mid-thigh. I ran my fingers down, gripped a handful of the cool, slippery stuff and tugged. Nothing came free. I tried with both hands and tugged hard. I staggered as the tough root system pulled free. "You could help, you know."

He took the grass from me and threw it into the carriage.

"Hey—"

"Hundred metres out. Four of our beasts." He bent and pulled up a swathe of grass, his focus out across the plain. "They're edging closer."

Yanking up more grass and throwing it back, I stared out into the growing gloom. The wind whipped through the grasses, creating hissing waves in the silence. The beasts' fur-thick odour cut through the softer, gentle scent of the grasses. I couldn't see them. "You've got sharp eyes."

"I have a number of hidden talents."

Without looking, I knew he was smirking, so I played along. "Please, James, not another one of your lines. You seem to have," I tugged up another clump of grass and threw it into the carriage, "an endless supply."

"Fifty metres and closing," he said. "They're getting confident." More grass joined the pile littering the narrow corridor and its steps. "And I may start to feel insulted."

"Can't have that, can we?"

He paused, but whatever he was going to say went unsaid. "Get inside!" He shoved me and my handful of grass up the short flight of steps. I landed in a heap on the third stair. "They're right—"

Four grey-furred animals burst out of the grass.

James leapt in after me and grabbed the door, yanking it back. One of the beasts jammed its muzzle into the gap. He slammed a boot in its face, dislodging the animal. Its yowl of pain cut off as he yanked the door closed and sealed it. Dull thuds echoed. "Wary but ultimately mindless," he muttered, falling to sit on one of the steps. He pulled up a few stalks of grass, a startling green in the single spotlight of the corridor. "Is this going to be enough?"

I ran my nail along a thin blade of grass, juice bubbling up under my finger, focusing on it to ease the rush of adrenaline. "I don't know. Let's find out."

I pushed myself up and grabbed an armful of grass. The carriage rocked from the pounding of the animals throwing themselves at the outer skin of the carriage. Ignoring them, I ran along the corridor until I stood in front of the food unit. A startled yelp escaped me as one of the beasts hurled itself at the window, leaving a smear of paw prints and saliva. "All right, I have organic material, what do I do?"

"Please place the organic material in the loader."

"Loader?"

"The loader is located to the rear of my unit."

"Who programmed this bloody thing?" I muttered, stretching my arm to prod around the back of the machine. I found a rectangular hole. Changing arms, I stuffed all that I could into it. And waited.

Another beast, all grey speckled fur and gleaming fangs impacted the window. The whole carriage shook. With a faint pop, the lights vanished. "What the—?"

"That was me," James said, standing in the doorway. "An experiment to see if it's the light making them crazy."

Only the faint light from the food unit glowed a soft blue through the thick darkness. The soft thrum of its internal workings became the single sound as the beasts gave up attacking the carriage. "Seems you were right."

"I am about most things."

A wry chuckle escaped me and I leaned against the thick-padded back of a chair. "Only most? I thought you'd expect everything."

He moved through the darkness, the thin light carving out his face, his body. Breathing came hard to me. Knowing who he might be and the threat he posed seemed to have no relevance to how my body reacted. It wanted him, and I wasn't far behind. He stood close, the mix of his skin, cologne and sweet-scented grass filling my senses.

His finger stroked my cheek, a slow, easy caress that flushed heat down to my toes. "You know me too well."

"Probably." Every part of me wanted to throw itself at James Kinsare. And he knew it. Not quite believing what I planned to do with the man who wanted to kill me, I snaked a hand around his neck and pulled his head down. His lips hovered over mine, so close I could almost taste him. "I think we've passed flirting."

I felt rather than saw the curve of his smile. "Now that's a shame. I like a good flirt." James' hands slid over my waist to my buttocks. He squeezed, and his soft chuckle brushed my skin. He held me, his arms looping in familiar warmth about my waist.

Closing my eyes, I fought down the inviting urge to like him. He presented a front, a false personality. I had to remember the fact that I trusted no one. "Who are you, James?"

"Who do you want me to be?"

My chest ached, tension gripping me. Going with the moment, losing myself in the pleasure I knew he offered; that had to be my best plan. But my mind ticked over. I couldn't leave the question of who he was alone. "A hint." I gave a playful tug on his bottom lip. Heat shot through my blood. Damn, the man had an addictive taste. "Go on, a tiny one."

"I—"

"I have synthesised the organic material. What sustenance do you require?"

Pulling his chin back to me, I held his dark gaze. Blue light from the food unit sparked there. I pushed down a sudden memory of Paxton's bright blue eyes. "What do

you want? Me or food?"

"Oh, I'd be happy to eat you, Katya." James grinned his wicked smile and my insides tightened. Paxton's memory died. "Very happy."

"Then give me a hint of who you are."

"Do you really want to play that game?" His tongue-tip teased my lips, and my body swayed into his on instinct. "When you know who I am all this..." His mouth covered mine in the lightest kiss, my head dizzy at the sensation. He pulled back and my lips burned. "...will be over."

"Why?"

"Can't we just enjoy your ignorance?"

Sincerity edged his words. I felt the truth of them deep in my gut. He didn't want me to remember. The question burst out before I could stop it. "But it makes no sense. Don't you want something from me?"

James closed his eyes, and his hands slid up my back, crushing me tight to his chest. My ear pressed against his throat, and the solid beat of his heart pulsed through me. He didn't speak, just let out a slow breath. His lips touched my forehead. He loosened his tight grip and slid more kisses over my eyelids, cheeks, until he found my mouth. "I run a very large cartel," he murmured over my lips. "I'm not exactly ... legal."

The truth of it sank through me. I didn't want to question how I knew he wasn't lying, I just did. So Paxton had lied ... why? "A smuggler?"

He smiled against my skin and heat bloomed in my chest. "Amongst other things."

"So, you're an undesirable?"

"I wouldn't say that. Would you?"

Laughter bubbled up. "You're—"

James' mouth covered mine, and words didn't matter. He tasted... I groaned and pushed hard against his body. Sliding my hand over his ribs, I brushed past his shirt and flicked at the buttons on his trousers. He murmured something, but it wasn't important as my hand closed around the thickness of his cock. I teased the sensitive head with my thumb, and his moan vibrated through me.

"Katya..." He buried his face against my neck. His fingers tightened around my buttocks, lifting me, pushing by up against the back of the seat. "Time to get naked."

I grinned and slid my fingers down and up his cock. "Any more information you'd like to share while I have your ... attention?"

"Damn it, Katya." I squeezed and he bit out a curse. "One question. Just one."

"All right." Setting a slow rhythm, I rubbed over the warm, hard smoothness of his cock. James freed a hand and pulled at the tabs on my suit. His mouth found the oh-so-sensitive spot where my neck curled into my shoulder. He nibbled and then bit my flesh. A pulse of pleasure shot through me, and I almost cried out. "How do you know to do that?"

He laved the bruised skin with his tongue. "Is that your question?"

Biting again had me able to think of nothing else. "Yes."

"I studied you." He pushed the suit down over both shoulders. Cool air brushed my skin. "Studied *everything* about you."

I swallowed. "Really?"

He looked up, and in the blue-tinted gloom his grin sparked. My chest tightened. He was beautiful, completely, utterly. And I knew I shouldn't be reacting to him, wanting

him, but I couldn't help myself. Yes, I would take advantage of what he thought of as my ignorance.

James pulled my hand from him with a sigh. More tabs from my suit came free, and he pushed the fabric from my skin. "Would you like me to demonstrate?"

"Only a demonstration?"

His mouth thinned. "Hilarious, Katya." But a gleam lurked in his eye as his hot palms edged around my bare waist. I sighed, and the warmth of his touch sparked fire in my veins. "Of course, if you don't want..."

James started to pull away. I grabbed his hands and held them tight to my skin. "I'm not denying my need to have you stripped bare."

"Good." His mouth found mine again and working his hands free, he let his fingers push lower. The kiss deepened, and I forgot about playing games. While I could, while he allowed it, I wanted him. James lifted me, and I wrapped my legs tight around his hips. My arms linked his neck, and I lost myself in the stroke of his hot tongue.

James stopped at the bottom of the spiral stairs. He broke the kiss, but I buried my face in his shoulder, unwilling to deny myself his scent, his heat. "Clothes, Katya," he murmured, half pulling at what remained of my clinging suit. "All this will be so much simpler..."

"What, you can't carry me up the stairs?"

"Katya..."

"Spoil sport." I eased the tight grip of my legs and slid from him. It was a simple matter of stamping my way out of the rest of the suit. I picked it up, and ran up the twist of steps heading for the room I'd already slept in. James was a heartbeat behind me. The surge of the hunt grabbed me again, had my blood hot, a wild grin splitting my mouth.

I palmed open the door and dragged James through by his lapels. Dragging off his jacket, my fingers already ran fast over the buttons of his shirt and pushed it from his back. I tasted his skin, biting at his nipple, running my hands around the solid muscle of his buttocks as he undid his trousers. He tasted—my fingers tightened their grip and he groaned—he tasted wrong, but something burned on my tongue, an addictive hint of his raw power.

"Katya..."

The desire in his gaze melted heat through my limbs, and I dropped to the soft mattress. A smile tugged at my mouth as I drew level with his thick erection. I teased a forefinger down its smooth length. James hand fisted in my hair, and a tremor shook his arm.

My tongue replaced my finger, licking its way up to the sensitive head. I teased him with my tongue-tip, circling, flicking—

James pushed me back, and I flopped into the cool sheets. Pale light played across his smooth muscles. His beauty had my flesh tight ... but what the hell was keeping him? I propped myself up on my elbows. "Well?"

"You're beautiful."

I blinked and something contracted in my chest. Not the reply I was expecting. "I..."

"Surprised?"

That broke the spell. "I'm out of the body-tube, James. I'm not getting any younger. So ... in your own time."

He chuckled and rubbed at his jaw. "You have a point—"

“You cheeky...”

Laughing, he crawled along my body, his heat warming my cool skin.

His arms supported him, but his weight still pushed me into the soft bed. The full press of his bare skin against mine pulsed an electric surge through my body. He could complete his hit and I’d die a happy woman. “It’s so easy to get a rise from you.”

I slid my hand between us and gripped his cock. “Could say the same about you.”

James let out a slow breath, the warm air brushing against my cheek. “Keep doing that and this will be over before either of us wants it to be.”

“What? This?”

I rubbed his cock over my slick flesh, pushing the head against my clitoris. Little sparks of fire danced behind my eyes. I arched my spine, the tight heat building as I increased the pressure, the rhythm.

“Damn it, Katya...”

I held his dark gaze, feeling the involuntary push of his hips meeting the slide of my hand. “Going to stop me?”

His mouth stopped more words and I lost myself in the kiss that robbed me of breath, of thought. Still my hand pushed, pushed until my body shook and ached for release.

James had other plans. He took his cock from my slippery, trembling fingers and eased it down, down until he began the slow push inside my body.

The bite of orgasm eased ... but the pulse started in my aching flesh flared again, different, more full. Wrapping my legs around him, I met his thrusts. His tongue fought with mine. Our ragged, hoarse breathing filled the room, and I wanted him to fuck me, fuck me forever.

I grabbed his buttocks, urging him harder, faster. Orgasm burned at the edges of my mind, tightened my whole body. I ached. He just had to... Had to—

Release tore through my body, my spine arching, my mouth ripping from his as I cried out my release. Waves burst over me, and in the haze of bliss I heard James find his own relief, biting into my shoulder with a sharpness that surged raw pleasure and sent me over again.

An endless time later, I sank back into the soft mattress. James’s damp weight comforted me, and I squeezed him tight, a low, tired laugh escaping. “What’s with the biting?”

James rolled and pulled me with him, and I settled against his chest. “It’s something that satisfies us both.”

That I couldn’t deny. “How did you know?”

“Ways and means.”

My stomach flipped, and the lingering liquid joy of satisfaction died. Paxton’s words. James sounded exactly like Paxton. It had to be a coincidence. Even with my face turned away from him, I knew he was smirking. I forced the unease out of my voice and kept my body lax. “That’s no answer.”

He rubbed his hand over my shoulder, easing warmth into my cooling skin. “It’s all you’re going to get.”

I shivered, the cold air in the room wiping the flush of heat from my body. Struggling free from his hold, I searched the floor for my suit and shrugged back into it. It warmed, cleaned and dried my skin, and I sank boneless back to the bed. “Wish this had a hood too.” My fingers stuck in the dusty tangle that was my hair.

James sat around me, his chest heavy against my back. He nuzzled my neck. "I like you dirty."

I snorted and tried to ignore his hands as they slid over my hips and dropped over my thighs. His thumbs traced intricate circles, the simple touch burning through my blood. "So I noticed."

He smiled against my skin and my heart flip-flopped. It could become dangerous to like—to trust—this man ... but in the past few hours we'd survived too much not to draw us together. And when that 'other' James didn't surface, the one that looked at me with a cold, reptile gaze then I *did* like him. Maybe more than just like.

I closed my eyes and let my head rest against his shoulder. Compartmentalising him. Probably a crazy way to convince myself that James Kinsare wasn't a total monster ... but something about it felt right. And what did I know, anyway? My brain was sautéed.

James' slow sigh blew warm air over my neck, and I shivered. "I want to tell you more. But to be safe, I can only say everything is not as it seems, Katya."

His soft voice eased through me. My body slid boneless against him as his hands slipped up and over my hips, pulling me into the warmth of his strong arms. I ran my fingers over his hand as it pressed just below my breasts and tried not to read anything into the hug. "When is anything what it seems?"

He chuckled, the vibration thrumming against my spine. "True. But I have *this* moment. In the future..." He paused. "Do you trust me?"

The urgency in his voice had me pulling free of his tight hold. Drawing in a quick breath, I told myself I wasn't panicked. I sat next to him on the end of the bed, my hands curled into fists on my thighs. I held his dark gaze and wanted to believe in the warmth I found there. Who *was* James Kinsare? "You have more faces than a ... thing with a *lot* of faces."

A grin broke out across his mouth. "And *you* speak your mind." His hand framed my hot cheek. "Do you trust me?"

Time for more of the truth. James had me completely confused. "I don't know. Maybe?"

"Better than nothing."

And he kissed me, a slow, gentle, exploring kiss that flared heat down to my toes. I moaned, my hand running through his hair, torn between wanting more and not wanting to end his unexpected sweetness, his tenderness.

My stomach ended it for me. It growled, the spasm almost painful. I pulled back. My gaze fixed on his lips, a shyness making it hard to meet his eyes. I flicked a glance up. "Food, James."

With a teasing smile, he threw my own words back at me. "Spoilsport." He traced a fingertip over the swollen wetness of my mouth. "Your trust is growing. Thank you." He leaned in and pulled another soft kiss from my lips. My chest tightened, damn it, I would not fall for this man. My stomach rumbled again, saving me from pushing the kiss further. James smiled against my mouth. "Certain needs cannot be denied."

I watched him dress, enjoying the smooth, muscled perfection of his body. No, I couldn't deny certain other needs. And one of them was to throw the man currently buttoning his shirt back onto the bed and rip all his clothes off again.

James was right. Against every sense, I'd started to let him get to me. Even when I knew, thought I knew, who he was. I had to begin to wonder which of us was the crazy

one.

“Ready.” He offered his hand and pulled me to my feet. His lips brushed my knuckles, before he dropped my hand, and I sucked in a quick breath. I was far too sensitive to his touch.

I willed myself to walk from the room, keeping my pace controlled and steady. James walked behind me, the heat of his fingertips pressing against my spine. I should have said no to his offer, not grabbed him, stripped him. Flesh-memory of his touch, of him buried within had my skin tingling. I would do it again in a heartbeat ... have sex with the man who in all likelihood wanted me dead.

Yes, James Kinsare was a *very* dangerous man.

The walk to the little dining area exhausted me—I held down a snort—or was that James? A single light flicked on, spreading a thin wash over the dark table, and I flopped into a curve-backed sofa. Pain pulsed in too many places, from the climb, the fall, the beasts... Still, some had a more pleasant throb to them. “So what do we have on offer?”

“Unit?”

My heart jumped. James had caught me by surprise, when really it shouldn’t have. He could read the dead language of this planet. It wasn’t a huge leap for him to be able to speak it too. Still, it rubbed raw against my already stretched nerves. For two people to speak a long dead language had to mean we shared some sort of history ... didn’t it?

The unit rumbled into life. “*I can offer the basic menu for two. That comprises—*”

“Thank you, that will be fine.” I cut the machine off before it lost itself in a laborious explanation. “What do we do to get food?” It ordered various plates to be set inside its dome and the lid shut with a soft hiss. “Think this is going to work?”

The odour of damp soil drifted out from the food unit on a thick, white mist. James winced. “Maybe water would’ve been a better option.”

I laughed. “Too late. Well, if it’s inedible, we can throw it back in and try again.” I sank down next to him on the couch again, my thigh brushing up against his. The contact unnerved me more than when we were naked. “Have you turned your suit off?” That earned me a hard glare, and I couldn’t help the grin. “Go on.” I bumped him but met only unmoving muscle. “Tell me what that is. You’ve opened up your DNA and implanted, what?”

“It’s a side effect.”

“Of what?”

James stared at the floor, his shoulders tense. Truth seemed to be an involuntary reflex. Anger pulsed off him, aimed at himself, or at me, I couldn’t be certain. Then I felt the subtle change in him, the shift to the monster always lurking just under his skin. It manifested in the sudden tightness of his jaw, the way his hands clenched, and the way he shifted away from any close contact with me. There sat the *other* James.

I let out a slow sigh. Seemed the truce was over. At least he’d told me one truth. It’d only been a moment of affection, of *sanity* with him.

“Who I am, *what* I am, it’s none of your business, Katya.”

“You said I’m a geneticist—”

“I don’t need you to fix me.”

He pushed himself up and absently tucked his shirt into his trousers. He stood at the wide window, his back to me, and his hands shoved into his pockets. In the silence, the machine burred. The odour had thickened, holding something sharper than soil. I still

couldn't label it as the aroma of food though.

I jumped at the sudden vibration through the floor and cursed. "They're still out there."

"Two are in the grass." His matter-of-fact tone set my teeth on edge. It was as if he'd stolen time as he'd held me, offering me a glimpse of another man. A sane, caring one. *Everything is not as it seems.* He wasn't kidding. "I imagine they're not giving up any time soon."

"Wonderful."

"The first course is ready. Please remove the dishes."

James lifted the lid and steam escaped into the cool air. The plates he dumped on the table's dark surface gave the *impression* of being food. I winced and picked up a squishy cube of something that may have been green. "Suddenly I'm very happy it's dark."

Two glasses clinked onto the table. I sniffed the contents and it smelled like water. Taking a cautious sip, the ice-cold liquid sat tasteless on my tongue until I found the nerve to swallow. "Water," I said. "Well at least we know it can do that."

James sat opposite and stabbed a fork into a dark cube that appeared to have the texture of meat. He chewed and a grimace pulled at this face. "Unit, recycle the rest of the basic menu."

"Recycling."

"Good move," I said, forcing one of the green cubes down my throat. It held the unpleasant taste of over-pulped grass. Another thud had the plates bouncing, and I grabbed my glass before it smashed to the floor. Cold water sloshed over my wrist. The bloody creatures were not giving up on trying to open the can and devour the contents. "How long before we get to Solis Planum?"

"An hour. At a push, two."

I blinked. "Then why did we stop?"

James stabbed four of the orange cubes onto his fork and chewed. He swallowed and took a large gulp of water. "I had to maintain a reserve. Otherwise this delicious meal would be beyond us. As would security, light, heating." He looked up, his eyes sparking, and the James I liked had returned. "Though we seem to have found another way to stay warm."

I groaned. "You really can't help yourself, can you?"

He bit back a grin and dug his fork into several more cubes. "No."

I quickly cleared my plate, wanting to end the torture as soon as possible. Gargling with the water before I swallowed, I set the cup down and sank back into the chair. I'd slept, but tiredness still sat on me. Possibly the strain of the dream about Kael Paxton or more likely yet more sex with James. I ignored the flare of remembering heat in my flesh and jabbed a thumb up. "I need to sleep."

Blue light glinted in James' eyes. "Sleep?"

Wagging a finger at him, I stood. "Tired, aching, thinking about throwing up."

He pushed his empty plate away and downed the rest of his water. "So you're turning me down?"

Tinted shadows defined the hard planes of his face, and I refused to let his beauty sway me. I could lose myself in him for hours ... but even if my dream was just that, I couldn't tie myself too closely to James Kinsare. It unnerved me that I was beginning to rely on him. I didn't know what he wanted from me. And if my dream *was* a memory,

then the man whose eyes currently stripped me naked wanted me dead. Why did that reminder never work? Probably because I didn't want it to.

I backed away and forced a smile to pull at my mouth. "Something new for you, James?"

"Perhaps." A thoughtful expression settled on his face, and I had the unsettling feeling that he had a tap straight through to my brain, that he saw my real memory of Paxton. "Good night, Katya. And I hope your dreams of Paxton are less ... revealing."

I ignored the shiver prickling my skin and kept the smile on my face. "Who says I'll dream of him?"

He sat back, and the shadows around his face thickened. "I know you. I know everything about you."

Standing, I lifted my leg and rubbed at the soles formed in the suit. It kept my gaze from his sharp face. The soles thinned and I stretched my toes. The tiled floor warmed my feet. "So you say."

"It's impossible to keep a secret from me, Katya."

"I'm sure. Night, James." I padded back to the room, willing my muscles loose. I had to maintain the idea of my ignorance. He didn't know what I knew. He didn't. And the charade of not knowing had to stay that way. For now.

Chapter Eight

"Let me welcome you to Alrai-7."

I stepped down onto the southern-ocean platform, stared up into the blushed-pink sky and drew salt-scented air deep into my lungs. Shaking the hand of the platform director, I fixed a smile on my face. Professor Anton Yates stood the height of my shoulder, a tiny, pink little man in a flapping ornate tabard. After the cramped and stinking interiors of standard space transport, the fresh air washed new life into me, and my smile eased into a real one. "So we finally meet, Professor." I let go of the old man's hand, dropped my bag on the deck and stretched till my joints popped.

The director blinked. "Doctor Ortaega?"

"Standard transport," I said. "I've been strapped into too many cargo holds." I grinned at him, and the little man blinked several times more. "You don't travel standard do you, Professor Yates?"

"The emperor gave me an imperial transport." No pride or gloating stained his voice. It was just something he expected, and it surprised him that others didn't travel in equally obvious luxury. "Are you sufficiently stretched?"

I bit back my grin. "Yes. Thank you." I stepped down onto the southern-ocean platform, and the stiff breeze whipped at my hair. One of the crew pulled me back beyond the radius of the pilot ship, and it gunned up its engines and shot back to the orbiting base. "Thank you for inviting me, Professor."

Yates snapped fingers at a hovering aide and pointed to my bag. The young man scrambled forward and took my battered leather case. "You were at the top of our list. Your reputation precedes you, Doctor Ortaega."

"Katya."

"I don't believe we should fall into such familiarity."

"Ah, right." I tried to modify my smile and didn't succeed. I followed the little man down into the bowels of the platform, artificial lighting harsh after the soft warmth of the morning sun. Alrai-7 was an environmental geneticist's dream. The major landmass had fractured, creating a multitude of island states and on each island the flora and fauna had taken wild jumps in a blink of evolutionary time. I wanted to harness the rapid diversity. That was my business. Something I'd carved out for myself after I found my way off Mars. The title was an affectation... but Yates didn't know that. "Which laboratory will be mine?"

"There is only one where your skills will be put to best use, Doctor Ortaega." Yates scuttled ahead of me along the narrow, curved corridor. I glanced behind, finding the young man with my bag pulling a face, his mouth aping the Professor's words. Caught, he flushed red. I grinned at him and winked. The blush deepened. "You will of course," Yates stopped and I almost trod on his tabard. He stared up at me, his smooth little face holding the curve of smile, "be working under me."

I pressed my tongue against my teeth, fighting back the urge to laugh. I'd forgotten more than this little imperial pet could ever hope to know. But I'd hit dirtside on one of the most genetically interesting planets yet discovered, so I was willing to put up with the Professor's silliness. "It's an honour, Professor. Your reputation also precedes you."

The smile grew and created alien creases on his smooth face. He resumed his scuttling walk down the corridor. "The emperor has placed his faith in me. I'm honoured to serve him."

"You've met him?" The emperor of the Tirion was beyond elusive. Only the select few were ushered into his august presence. I had no wish to meet the being—it had never been conclusively proven that the emperor was humanoid—who owned Alrai-7. I wanted DNA, not imperial favours.

"I have." Yates' voice thrummed with pride. "And you are to have that honour too."

My stride faltered, but I hurried to catch up with the spry old man. What did the emperor want to see me for? He didn't, he couldn't know—"Me? But I'm hardly important—"

"He acknowledges that, however he is on the platform and has ordered you brought before him."

A knot tightened in my gut. This was not good. So not good. "Yes, it's an incredible honour." I ran a hand through my hair, straightening wind-blown strands. The legends of the nameless emperor spoke of his mercurial temper. A strand out of place could have me thrown off the planet. I tried not to dwell on the other legends I'd heard and what I had witnessed first hand. "When..."

"...will you meet him?" Yates waved a brisk hand at guards who stood to attention outside a set of double doors. The two men in burnished gold helmets and embroidered topcoats saluted, their gazes fixed in the middle distance. "Straight away."

I held down a curse. "Shouldn't I change first?"

The Professor flicked a gaze over my creased flight suit. I'd made the effort to change on the orbiting base, but the only clean clothes I had after four days of constant travel was a bright orange bulky environmental suit. "I'm sure the emperor has little concern for how you look."

"Yes, I'm sure," I said, but the little man missed my sarcasm. Tailors had sewn enough gold and silver thread into Yates' tabard that, if melted down, it would make a small statue. And that didn't include the gaudy padded finery of the two impassive guards. The emperor liked his ornate pomp, the spectacle of his rule over so many planets. "All right." I let out a slow breath. "I'm ready."

Yates nodded to the guards and as one, they pushed the doors inward.

Two rows of braziers lined the straight path to the dais. Golden flames crackled in their wide, bronze dishes, pale smoke drifting up to be expelled by the air filters. The air hung heavy with the aroma of expensive spices. I resisted the need to cough.

Yates' hand pressed against the base of my spine, urging me forward. The doors closed with a dull thunk behind me.

I focused my attention on the throne, a huge glittering monstrosity carved from a single diamond. The firelight danced over its facets. On the throne, with smooth fur robes slinking down the dais steps, sat the emperor. His liquid-gold mask covered his face, shoulders and chest.

Had anyone ever explained the idea of overkill to the emperor? Well, explained it and lived?

The mask blinked, and my heart jumped. That was just ... freakish. Drawing in a steadying breath, I strode forward. If he meant to kill me, so be it. I wasn't going to creep and cower. That wasn't a part of my design.

The emperor's gold-gloved hand tapped the arm of his throne, a soft patter of sound through the spit and pop of the fires. My gut tightened. Damn, it was a long walk.

"Stop." The amplified voice boomed around the throne room and I did just that, rocking on my feet at the suddenness. He lifted his hand, and a forefinger pointed to the floor. "Kneel."

Now he took it too far. Gritting my teeth, I dropped to one knee and my head bowed, briefly. He would get no more. "Your Imperial Majesty."

"Katya Ortaega." Golden hands gripped the armrests, and the mask contorted, the brows drawing together. I shivered. Whatever technology worked the emperor's mask was just wrong. Perhaps that had become part of his dread reputation, why the emperor was so feared. That and being a psychopathic butcher. "Why have you requested a place in my empire?"

Had I? News to me. "Alrai-7 has a rare quality. Professor Yates invited—"

"Yes." The emperor sank back against his throne, and his creased brow cleared. "He did not discuss that invite with me."

I wondered, did the little Professor know he was so close to falling out of favour?

"Stand."

I pushed myself up. The room had only one viable exit, the closed doors behind me. Shit. I walked into this thinking that Yates had the consent of his emperor ... and I wouldn't have set foot on the planet if I'd known the emperor would demand an audience. My heart thudded, pounding when the being on the throne also stood. He took slow steps down from the dais. His robe swished over the stone, and the golden mask narrowed its eyes on me.

I straightened my shoulders. The stories of torture zipped through my mind, but I pushed them aside. My body would succumb quickly. I'd see to it. "Something about me upset you, Majesty?"

The emperor stopped. Golden lips thinned, and a crease pressed between his eyebrows. "You take a great risk with your life."

I shrugged. "You will do what you will."

He glided across the tiled floor towards me. The emperor's mask glistened, firelight sliding over the smooth run of liquid gold. "Yes. I will." He lifted his hand, and a golden finger stroked my cheek. Goosebumps ran across my skin, and I held down a shiver. His touch felt warm, real, not the slide of molten metal. "Katya..."

Something about his tone had my insides clenching. But adrenalin had my nerves stretched, and I couldn't focus on subtleties. Especially as the masked man's mouth neared mine. "Majesty?"

His lips pulled into a smile. I blinked. Even his teeth, his tongue shone gold. In an insane second, I wondered what he would taste like.

"I'm on Alrai-7 for a reason, Katya," he said, breaking into my bizarre thoughts. "A reason I would rather you not know." He stood close, the scent of warm fur and gold mixing with the heady spices in the air. I breathed him in and tried not to sigh. What the hell was wrong with me? "So now I have to ensure that you don't."

The emperor's mouth covered mine, this hot tongue sliding too easily into my mouth. I didn't resist him, not even as his hands slid over my shoulder to caress my spine. He pulled me close, and I groaned, tangling my tongue with his.

He tasted... Light sparked at the edges of my mind, burning over my thoughts. I sank

into the light. Sank and revelled in the drugging kiss, pushing hard against him. The light. I was losing ... something. But his kiss, I couldn't stop, couldn't. Heat fired through my body. He tasted ... he tasted so like—

“James!” I jumped awake, my heart thumping, arousal and disbelief fighting within me. I let out a slow breath and let my head sink back to the soft mattress. I was warm, too warm ... and then I realised why. James pressed up close against my back, his bare leg thrust between mine, his hand tight on my breast. He murmured something and nuzzled my neck. Flexing his fingers, his thumb rubbed idly across my nipple. My legs tightened around his thigh at the sudden rush of heat ... and that just flared the sensation. Damn man.

His lips slid over on the sensitive skin behind my ear, and I swallowed.

I had to focus. Two dreams that were probably memories, both of them saying that James Kinsare was the Tirion Emperor. And that Alrai-7 somehow connected me to him. He'd taken something from me as he kissed me in the throne room. He'd taken ... the memory of the kiss, of ever landing on that lush planet. What the fuck? What did he think I'd found out? Had I found anything? Was that another memory tangled and lost in my wreck of a brain?

I dug the heels of my hands into my eyes. Everything about my life was insane.

“Not a morning person?” James' whisper tickled my ear. He grinned as his hand dropped away from my breast and started the slow slide down.

My mouth dried at the heat of his hand burning through the thin fabric of my suit. In a brief, insane moment, I cursed the fact that I'd left it on, that I wasn't naked to his touch. No. I pushed back the haze of lust. James had my mind in turmoil. “It's morning?” The thick blackness of the night had eased, grey light slanting through the room. “Then we should get moving.”

His fingers tapped in a slow, soft rhythm against my mons. “I thought I was.”

“You should gather your lines into a volume.” His fingers stopped, and he squeezed my hips before his hand pulled away. I missed his touch. “Maybe two.”

“What was your dream about?”

I fixed my gaze on the long line of the window and the promise of a cloud free morning. “You,” I said.

James propped himself up behind me, and his hand returned to my hip. I knew he grinned. “That sounds promising.”

I didn't want to like him. Unless it turned out to be an elaborate deception on the part of Kael Paxton, the man I craved was the Tirion emperor, one of the most feared men in the known-worlds. Events connected me to him in a way I didn't yet understand. He'd wormed his way through my defences and I wanted his touch—my gut tightened—and the sound of a smile in his voice. “It was only a kiss, James.” I let out a soft chuckle. “Nothing too stimulating.”

“Don't you know, Katya? Kisses can be *very* stimulating.”

I closed my eyes. The promise in his voice pushed a slow heat through my body. He didn't know that I'd realised just who he was ... and if I held that secret, I could be greedy. Against my better judgement, I turned to face him. Running my fingertips along the edge of his jaw, I let myself enjoy the warmth of his smooth skin. “You don't have stubble.”

A smile lurked at the edge of his mouth, the muscles creasing under my touch.

Feeling him smile? Almost as wanted as hearing, seeing it form. Damn, what was happening to me?

“I’ve been naughty.”

I matched his grin. “You have?”

“Shaving is monotonous and inconvenient. I,” he wagged his fingers in front of my face, “changed my DNA.”

“That’s illegal.” I had to say it. James had done more to his genome than screw about with some extra facial hair. The power surge available to his fingertips proved it. And as emperor he had been investigating Alrai-7; a geneticist’s wet dream. Was there more? “Even changing your eye colour will get you imprisoned and forcibly cleansed.”

A crease formed between his brows, and I itched to smooth it clear. “So you remember that much?”

I played with the slight cleft in his chin, an imperfection in his skull that humanised his beauty. “My memory has holes, great whopping ones, but in between the holes there’s useless ... stuff.”

James took my hand and pressed his lips to my fingertips in dizzying little kisses. “Useless stuff?”

“I’ll keep you informed.”

“Ah, so you need stimulation to bring these memories to the surface.” He made a playful bite at my finger. “Any particular kind?”

Telling myself that I needed to pump him for information only went so far. I should be scared, angered at his manipulation, at the secrets he kept from me. But being this close to him, with his breath on my skin and his hand stroking the line of my hip? I wanted him. Denial—and desire—had a strong hold on me. “I think we should experiment.”

“Spoken like a true scientist.”

“Thank you.” I slipped my hand from his grip and pushed him flat into the soft padding. I straddled him, the light gravity almost toppling me. James grabbed at my hips, laughing. I sat back and pressed myself against the solid length of his erection, and his laughter faded.

“Remember anything yet?” His hands stroked my thighs in a slow caress, and my skin tingled. His thumbs pressed against my inner thigh, circling closer until he brushed over my mons and dipped lower. “How about now?”

My flesh tightened. The ease in which he fired need through my body was startling. I bit at my lip before I squeaked out, “No, still a blank.”

His grin forced my heart to flip. “Shame.” Sliding his hands upwards over my ribs, my breasts, he loosened and then pulled free the tabs on my suit. He sat up and pushed the thin fabric from my skin, his fingers running in a deliberate caress over my shoulders, arms. “Why did you sleep in your clothes, Katya?”

Because the slightest touch of you against my skin burns me ... but the thought went unsaid. “It was cold.”

The shine to his dark eyes had my heart thudding. His mouth teased me, so close I could almost taste him. “Oh, now you’re not telling the whole truth.” The fabric of my suit slid down my skin to sit low on my hips. James chased it, a hot palm stroking down my spine to the curve of my buttock. “I think I unnerve you.”

“I have great gaping holes where my past should be. *That* unnerves me.”

James smiled his wicked smile, and my flesh tightened. My reaction reflected in his amused gaze. "You want this, us." He shifted his hips, and his erection rubbed hard. Sensation surged and I swore sparks danced across my vision. The humour faded from his face, and his expression caught my breath. "I would cocoon us in this moment if I could. Keep us in this room, together, bind so tight in each other's bodies nothing, *nothing* could separate us—"

My mouth covered his, stopping his words. I wanted him. Wanted to lose myself in his flesh and fantasise about this being all we were, just two people making love, with no worries about who we were, our pasts, our futures.

We sank down into the mattress, James' hands easing the material back from the curve of my backside. I wiggled, trying to help, and he moaned into my mouth. The sound vibrated down through my body flaring heat to my core. I kicked the suit off, and it dropped to the floor.

James rolled, pressing me into the softness of the mattress. "How's that memory?"

I grinned up at him, shifting my hips so that he settled between my thighs. I slid my hands over the smooth skin of his back. Tracing the hollow of his spine, I sighed. "I think it needs more stimulation."

He wet his lips before he smiled. Sunlight slanted over his features, and his beauty caught my breath. "More?"

"I have something you need, after all, James."

He paused, his mouth only inches from mine. The slow push of his breathing pressed his chest against my breasts. His touch was intoxicating. "You're waiting for one of my lines, aren't you?"

A burst of laughter escaped me and I realised that I was. Yes, we were getting far too familiar. "Something like a lascivious... 'No, *I* have something *you* need.'"

"Ooh, smooth. Mind if I steal it?" His hips lifted, and the hard press of his cock against my wet flesh had me groaning. "Though really, I think it could do with a little more work."

"It's my first attempt." I shifted beneath him, desperate to stop the sly teasing of his cock as he held himself *just* at the entrance to my body. "I obviously need lessons from a master."

"Should I be insulted?" He pulled back and pushed himself in a little further. I arched my spine, wanting to pull him in, but the man had a will of iron. His dark eyes sparked. "Or are you willing to be my apprentice?"

"And he's back on form..."

James bit down a grin, and I could see he was annoyed, but it was a nice, kiss-me-into-the-middle-of-next-week, annoyed. His arms, placed on either side of me, lifted him from the bed, muscles bunching in a way that made me want to lick and bite them. He pushed, his cock stretching me in one delicious slide.

I groaned and clutched at the arch of his back. Muscles tensed under my touch.

"I want to make you scream," he murmured, his voice easing over me, thick with need. His dark gaze gripped me. "Cry out *my* name."

Heat bled across my face as his first thrust slid deep and he ground against my pubic bone. Sensation flared. "Deal."

He shifted back and drove deep again. "Good."

I met each slow stroke, my hands on his buttocks urging him harder, deeper. Coiling

tension thickened in my belly. I gripped harder and found his nipple, licking, tugging at it with my teeth. James moaned. The soft sound rippled satisfaction through me and I wanted more. I wanted him to be a part of the deal I'd made.

My fingers slid over the hard muscle of his buttock and slid deep between them. A sudden thrust of his hips made me cry out, James' ragged breaths matching my own. I toyed with his puckered hole, teasing my fingertip over it.

"Damn it, Katya." His low, growling voice had me pushing hard against him. Flickers of orgasm swirled into tightening knots. "Stop teasing."

I pushed. My fingertip darted in and eased out in a rhythm that matched the thrust of him into my body. James shuddered, his breath hot over my ear. Desire had me arching into him. Not even Paxton had had me so hot, so wet as James whispered raw in my ear, of how many ways he would make me come, how he would nibble, suck, lick as he explored me with his mouth, his tongue, his fingers, his cock. The words burned through me, liquid fire chasing through my veins.

I wanted it. I wanted all of him.

With a cry, my spine arched and orgasm surged over me, his name torn from my lips. I became lost in the hot joy sweeping in fast waves up through my body. Vaguely, I heard James' own release as he groaned my name.

Slowly I came to my senses, my body sinking damp and sated into the mattress. James pulled me into his arms and held me tight. He pressed soft, dazed kisses against my mouth. "You're an evil, *evil* woman," he murmured.

I ran my hand over his slick skin, tracing over his spine. "And you didn't seem to mind."

His laughter was soft and tightened my heart. Brushing the damp tangle of hair from my eyes, his large hand framed my face. There it was again, lying deep within his dark eyes, the emotion I wanted to label affection because the *other* word scared the hell out of me. "Katya. We're in another brief moment of clarity—"

A dull thud shook the carriage. In that moment, I adored the rangy, stinking animals stalking us. "The beasts are back."

James blinked, and the cool authority had returned to his gaze. He kissed my mouth, brief, hurried and unsatisfying. "Time to move."

He pulled back, and cool air washed over me. I shivered. I pulled my crumpled suit from the floor and shrugged into the tight fabric as James stood, grabbed his clothes and headed for the emergency cabin. Running a hand through my hair, I followed him.

I really had to rein in my need to jump James Kinsare every time I looked at him. The humour didn't help. I should be glad that something had interrupted us. What I'd seen in his eyes... I hoped it *hadn't* reflected in my own. The thought had my gut cramping. I didn't want to put a name to that emotion. Because if I did, then I was in more trouble than I could possibly imagine. James Kinsare was playing me every minute, every second. He wanted something from me and the ... the ... whatever it was ... that I'd witnessed in his eyes was simply another aspect to his game.

I had to remember that if I wanted to stay alive.

Chapter Nine

I flopped into the other seat as James played about with the controls. Grey light etched his profile against the curve of the window, and I ignored the twist in my gut. One question pushed to the front of my mind. *What does he want with me?*

Dull thumps broke into my thoughts, followed by a teeth-jarring scrape. “What was that? Don’t they *have* food out here?”

“They have us.”

The carriage rumbled slowly into life, the chug of the engine vibrating through the floor. Wheels whined against the rails, and we shunted forward. The straps of the chair caught me. “Smooth, James.”

He threw me a dirty look and increased the speed of the carriage. The familiar rock of the carriage had my body swaying. I craned my neck to stare out of the bulbous window. Nothing sat on the line. Only the rapid movement of the long grasses suggested that our friends had sought cover again.

“So we should be at the laboratory in an hour?”

James frowned at the bank of monitors. “I think it may take a little longer than that.”

“Don’t tell me...”

“The solar skin’s corroded. We’ll get to within fifty kilometres of the rail terminal before the power runs out.” He ran his hands over the screens, drawing out information. “Then we’re stuck, no power for food and we’ll have to walk.” He stared out to the lush grass, winds stirring it in great waves. “And of course there are the beasts.”

I growled at him. “I told you not to tell me.” Pulling the harness free, I turned back to the interior. “I need to see if breakfast is more palatable.”

“Prepare supplies.”

“I was going to.”

“And see if you can find anything with which we can defend ourselves.”

“Yes, I was going to do that too. I have been on an expedition before, y’know—” I stopped, the name ‘Kael’ unsaid. All right, that was odd.

“Some more useless stuff?” James asked, glancing back at me.

“Looks that way. Couldn’t tell you where I went on whatever expedition it was.” I was crazy. *This* was crazy. Nervous energy ate through me, and I had to focus. I leaned on a chair and stared at the food unit. “What’s the minimum breakfast options? Using the least power.” I winced. “Tell you what, convert everything to bread and water.”

The unit burbled and lights spread in a slow blur arc across its dome. “*Bread and water.*”

I headed away from the little machine. Poles ran along the corridor, fixed above the windows. Flexing my hands around the thick wood, I yanked and let my weight pull them free. Two poles fell, the third sliding free a few seconds later. I grabbed a knife from the cupboard, made myself comfortable on the couch and set about sharpening the ends to a vicious point.

I looked up and fixed my gaze on the man working the controls of the carriage. The knife dug into the soft wood and the first few flakes dropped to the soft-tiled floor, a point quickly forming. Whether the pikes were to protect myself from the beasts roaming

the grasslands or the man sitting only a few feet away, at that moment, I didn't know. Better for me to consider both of them dangerous creatures. Ones I had to defend myself against with everything I had.

James ran his fingers through his untidy hair, smoothing it back and the action, unconscious, human, had the knife handle biting into my palm. It brought with it the memory of his smile against my skin and the tight hold of his strong arms. He'd worked his way under my defences and made me vulnerable like no man before him. That feeling bubbled through me, irritating as hell as it came with no related memories.

I focused on the pike and the swift, sure strokes of the blade, let the repetitive action sooth me.

Yes, James Kinsare was the most dangerous animal I faced right then.

* * * *

The carriage slowed, the low rumblings juddering through my body.

I glanced up from slicing the final point to the last of my short pikes. Not the most hi-tech of weapons, but it was better than taking on the beasts with our bare hands.

"Ready?" James slid one of the packs I'd prepared onto his back. It held half of the bread and water the recycle unit had churned out. I'd tasted both. The water was bearable. The bread? A doughy, uncomfortably green series of blocks ... but it would have to do. "Katya?"

"Probably not," I said, handing him a couple of pikes. Probably not a good idea to arm my enemy, but we were in this shitty mess together. I had to trust that he would watch my back. I held down a grim smile. He was probably thinking the exact same thing. "With this gravity, it'll take us what, at least three hours to get to the terminal?"

"If we're lucky."

I had to laugh at that. "Us? Lucky?"

James let out a slow breath, but humour lit his eyes. "Don't jinx us before the carriage has even stopped, Katya."

I smirked at him. The smirk faded as the carriage rolled to a stop. Shrugging the bag on over my shoulders, I picked up my pike. "I'm a realist. Has anything gone right?" James lifted an eyebrow ... and I found I could still blush. So much for not being embarrassed by anything. "I'm not talking about sex."

The back of his finger ran over the heat of my cheek, and then James dipped his head to brush a soft kiss across my lips. "You're blushing."

I pushed my way out to the corridor. Damn, I felt stupid. I'd had sex before ... I was certain ... even if I couldn't remember bodies, faces, names. And that's all it was between the two of us—sex. Really great sex, but nothing that should make my face burn.

"It's sweet."

That stopped me, and I turned to stare at him. This from the man who planned to kill me? "*Sweet?*"

"Ah..." James stepped back, and his hands tightened around the pikes he held, using them to protect his body. His face grew still, hard. Yes, there stood the other James. "You know who I am."

"Who you are?"

"And there's the lie." He took another step back, the pikes aggressive. "What have you remembered?"

“Do we have time for this?” I risked a glance to the thick swathes of grass shifting in the quick winds. I didn’t have James’ eyesight. We could already have beasts stalking us as the scent of them cut through the breezes. “You’re wrong. I don’t trust you. You’ve lied to me from the minute I fell out of that body-tube ... but right now, we need each other to get off this planet.”

“How do you know I won’t take my revenge?”

I snorted. “Because the one thing you’re not is stupid.” I backed down the corridor towards the exit, the inner door sliding open on whining mechanisms. The back of my arm hit the frame and stopped me. “Paxton wants us both dead. Are you going to give him satisfaction by killing me?”

“Paxton.” He almost growled the man’s name as he stalked towards me. “And killing *me*? Isn’t that what you want, Katya?”

A bitter laugh escaped. “Honestly? I don’t know. Now that I’ve met you? Quite probably.”

His mouth twitched, his fight to stop the smile had the corners turning down. And just like that, he’d changed again. “All right then, after you.” He jabbed a pike towards the exit.

I edged my way out of the doorway. The outer door slid back with a soft whoosh and cool grass-sweet air washed over me. I jumped down to the synthetic track and scrambled around to the front of the carriage. James thudded into the edge of the grass. He’d realised that I knew who he was and that knowledge had me stumbling down the track. I’d been stupid to think he wouldn’t suspect I knew. My bloody body language must have screamed it.

I ran a hand through my hair and strained to listen through the rustle of the grasses. Nothing else stirred the air. I breathed in, my panic making me forget my sharp sense of smell. No, no thick-furred scent stained the breeze. Had I lost their scent? “I think we’re clear.”

“Seems that way.” James scanned the flat plateau. “Let’s move.”

We ran down the wide track, the light gravity giving speed to our feet. I tried not to think about the man running at my side. I failed. He hadn’t denied wanting me dead. Hadn’t denied it at all. And well, did he have to run like that? All long, loping strides, displaying the ease of a natural athlete. He was beautiful to watch.

I shook my head. Those thoughts had no place in my brain, and I shoved them out. “Do you know why Paxton wants us dead?”

“Save your breath for running.”

“Damn it, James, you’re the *Tirion Emperor*. I don’t remember much, but I remember your reputation. How could Paxton threaten you?”

“Katya...” He spared me a dark glare, before focusing on the flat horizon.

“And me? Why did you put a hit out on me?”

“This is not the place—” His words broke off. “Run faster. Now!”

We tore down the tracks, the warming air hot and harsh in my lungs. I could taste them, taste the bitter rush of fur and stinking beast. I risked a look behind me. Four silver backed predators, long limbed and heavily fanged, sprinted down the tracks, every stretch of their long spines closing the distance between us and them. “We ... can’t outrun ... these things.”

“How are you at throwing a pike?” He jerked the sharpened pole in his right hand.

“No clue.”

“Katya, this is no time to be funny!”

“I’m not! No memory, remember?”

“A *selective* memory.” I couldn’t miss his sarcasm. “When I say, jump from the tracks. Jump!”

“James—”

“Now!”

I hit the dirt, staggering into the thick grass before I righted myself and turned back to face the beasts. James stood on the tracks and the fierce wash of the ocean flooded over me as his ability to surge electricity poured from him. Sparks singed the air. His skill. He’d electrified the tracks. The beasts howled.

Time for me to act. Shrugging off my bag, I stretched my shoulders and the pike flew.

The sharp point sank into the muscled flank of the alpha animal. It roared, its hind leg collapsing beneath it as it crashed into the live rail. Singed fur scorched the air, its scream of pain tearing through my gut.

“Run!”

James grabbed my hand and dragged me along with him, back up the bank to the long line of the tracks. “My bag.” I stretched out to the black bag half-buried in the grass.

“Leave it.”

“But we need—”

“Not as much as we need to get away. And you don’t disturb animals when they’re feeding.”

I stopped myself from looking back, but the stench of blood cutting the air told me all I needed to know. “You bargained on them eating anything. Even each other.”

“Remind you of anyone?”

I yanked my hand free. “You’re comparing me to them? Paxton has more in common.”

“Paxton is nothing compared to you, Katya.”

The words hit me, and my stride faltered. I willed myself to keep up. That’s what he thought? What he had always known? Nausea rose. Had he thought that while we...? I didn’t want to think the words. I tamped down on the ache in my chest and willed it into fury. “And what am I?”

“Not now.”

“Yes, now. Paxton is insane. Are you saying that I’m...?”

“Run, Katya.”

He accelerated, his long stride eating up the track. After a pause, I followed him. Had everything he’d done and said been an act? But for what reason? To lull me? So that I wouldn’t push at my memories? But he wanted something from me...

I focused on the fast pounding of my feet across the railway sleepers. For a short time, the rhythmic beat blocked out the thoughts bursting at the edge of my thoughts. I couldn’t shove them down for long, though. It burned, and cursing, I had to acknowledge it.

What if he was right?

What if I was as crazy insane as Paxton? I only had two memories of myself and they’d been lensed through the distortion of dreams. I could lie; lie with ease. The Tirion

Emperor thought me a threat ... and what did that say about my level of ability?

My chest tightened with nervous fear, and I forced myself to breathe through it. In a clear second, I saw James' reasoning for wanting to keep me ignorant. Maybe it was safer for everyone.

The rising sun slanted across the plateau and slid hot over my body. I ignored it and pushed my fear into running, pounding it down into the wide tracks, letting it escape through the sweat coating my face. I didn't want to know who I was. Not any more.

"Katya." James broke into my mechanical thoughts, snapping me out of my trance. "Time to rest."

"But..." I blinked. The sun sat high in the sky. I slowed, feeling the hot ache in my muscles. The lighter gravity had vanished, and weights dragged at my thighs. Tiredness ate into me. I flopped down beyond the edge of the rail. Muscles twitched, and I rubbed at the tightness in my calves. I swallowed. My mouth and throat burned. It was a relief to accept the bottle of water, and I pressed its coolness against my flushed face. "How far have we got to go?"

James squinted down the straight run of the track. "Not long now." He dug into the bag and handed me a hunk of bread.

"A meal fit for an emperor."

"Katya..."

I bit into the solid green-tinted lump and chewed ... and chewed. "Well it's a meal and you are an emperor..." I looked up at him, shading my eyes with the bread. He didn't even look hot. Bastard. "How's that working for you? Your *cartel*."

His mouth flattened. "It's none of your business."

I shrugged and denied the cramping in my gut at his closing me down. Not wanting to know who I was still didn't put a stop to my curiosity, it seemed. "Well you have the autocratic arrogance in place, that's certain. No doubt you're used to minions obeying your every whim."

"Yes."

"Why do you wear a golden mask?" Or the other mask. The James who brushed me with the lightest kisses, held me, brought out unwanted emotions... I winced. "Well?"

He took the bottle from my hand, resealed it and stashed it back into the bag. Shrugging it onto his back, he straightened the straps over his chest. "We have to keep moving."

"It doesn't do you justice, you know. The liquid gold thing."

A muscle jumped in his jaw. Something about the emperor mask had him nervous. Encouraging a man like James Kinsare into being nervous probably wasn't a good idea ... but it appeared to be the only resource I had. "Why does the emperor have to hide?"

"It's ceremonial ... just a custom," he said, starting to walk away from me down the track.

I blinked. That tasted sour, burning through my skin like a big fat lie. Was that his fear of me? I knew when he lied? And how had I come across this unusual trait? Time to test it. "No, it isn't. You're lying." His shoulders tensed. "So defensive, James."

He stopped and turned back to me. "I have all the food, water and these." He lifted the two pikes and sunlight gleamed over the dark polished wood. "So obey me and be quiet."

"Or?"

James lifted an eyebrow, and his flat expression chilled me. That other mask had dropped again. “You don’t want to know ‘or’.”

“Or?” I repeated, heat and fury building in my chest, burning through the cold fear.

He moved closer, and I stood my ground. Towering over me, he blocked the sun, and his face fell into thick shadow. “We wear the mask so that our victims don’t feel the full terror of our wrath. It is the only compassion the Tirion Emperor ever shows.” He leaned in, his lips brushing my ear, and I shivered. “Am I lying now?”

His whisper scorched me. I swallowed. “No, no you’re not.”

“You’re bait, Katya. I fell for the lure you and Paxton devised, because you still do have information I need. But never make the mistake of underestimating what I will do.”

My stomach tightened. “You’d be wise to think the same of me.”

James pulled back. He stroked a hand over my flushed cheek, the coolness of the pike brushing against my hair. I didn’t flinch. “I have never underestimated you, Katya.” A bitter smile pulled at his mouth. “How do you think I’ve stayed alive so long?”

He turned away, and my skin throbbed at the loss of his touch. My feet moved on automatic. *I kept trying to kill him?* What the hell had he done to me to warrant that? My lost memories tugged. I didn’t want to know who I was. I didn’t. I could be a maniac to rival Kael Paxton. But the holes in my past sucked me down, and the war within me raged. To know who I was and live with possible horror. Or to start new and ignorant, but have the gnawing doubt of who I really was, what I was capable of eating away at me.

I pinched at the bridge of my nose. “I should have stayed in the body-tube.”

“That’s turning out to be the best solution, isn’t it?” James’ sarcastic voice cut back to me.

“I wasn’t talking to you.” I could match his sarcasm. “Your Imperial Majesty.”

He ignored me and broke out into a run. “Keep up, Katya. Remember I have all the supplies.”

I rolled my eyes. Yes, I definitely wanted to kill him ... because I’d met him. My hand curled into fists, nails digging hard into my palms. I didn’t feel like a killer. But then I didn’t know what that felt like. I bit at my lip. I’d had no qualms about killing that beast, burying the pike deep into his hide.

I broke into a jog and willed my mind blank again. It was safer.

Chapter Ten

Solis Planum terminal consisted of a large, boxy building with no roof. Stringy trees with thick, bright green leaves stretched over the crumbling walls. The track came to a dead stop in the centre of the terminal. Crumbling remains of kiosks and perhaps a shop piled up against the remaining walls.

The hot mid morning sun and damp heat of the air had my muscles tight. My shoulders dropped as I stepped into the thick shadow of the walls. I worked the back of my neck, rolling it to free the kinks. Pulling in a deep breath, I unconsciously scented the air ... and found it damp, heaving with vegetation and without threat. Well, without the threat of beasts, anyway.

"There has to be more than this," James said, poking at the 'Welcome to Webb-Solis Planum' sign splayed over the buffers at the end of the track.

I rubbed my thumbs over my fingertips and refused to let my nerves eat into me further. More of the site existed... I could feel it like a constricting heat in my chest. "There is." Almost at the edge of my hearing, an irritating buzz pushed at my brain. For a brief second, the walls flashed shining white, the welcome sign hanging from a glass dome. People chatted around a stall, the aroma of hot, grilled meat mixing with warm bread and vegetables in a way that had my mouth watering. But there, off to my right. Doors opened, revealing the silver interior of a lift—

"Katya?"

James planted a heavy hand on my shoulder and broke the waking dream. "What's over there?" I broke free of his touch, rubbing absent fingers over the imprint he'd left through my suit. I picked my way through the debris to a section of wall half-obsured by the roof frame. "It looks like there's something here."

James dropped his pikes and, with unnerving ease, he lifted the metal frame away from the wall. It clattered over the buffers. "A lift." He palmed the screen. Silence followed. "Not quite so lucky with the power systems here." He pushed his fingers into the thin black seam cutting down the lift doors. His shoulders hunched. Slowly, the doors scraped back to reveal the black drop of a lift shaft.

He kicked a lump of rock over the edge. I counted the seconds ... and carried on counting. If the rock hit the bottom of the shaft, I didn't hear it. "That's a hell of a long way down."

"Isn't it?" He put his hand around the side of the door, searching the interior.

With a sour, sinking feeling in my stomach, I realised what he hunted for. A ladder. A bloody ladder. "You can't be serious."

He flashed me a smile, and my stomach rioted for a different reason. Even with the patches of history clogging up my brain about this man, I still found him ridiculously attractive. More than just attractive ... but I shoved those feelings as far down as the lift shaft into which I was about to climb. "Oh yes." He shifted his body onto the ladder and without another word disappeared down into the darkness.

"This is insane." The clank of James' shoes echoed, and I risked a look. Nothing but darkness. I let out a slow breath. He had all of the supplies and there was nothing else in the terminal. "Yes, I definitely have a met-him, kill-him thing going on." Cautious, I let

the thin rails take my weight. Rust flaked off under my fingers, and I winced. "This is such a bad idea." I held back a laugh. "Number ninety seven of the day."

I descended into the darkness.

The air swirled around me, warm but oddly fresh. I focused on my feet finding the next rung and on the slide of my fingers over the rust-thick metal. James clanked his way down ... and then he went quiet. The silence fired heat through my body. "James?" His name bounced off the metal walls. Nothing? "James!"

I slid faster down the ladder, my feet hitting dull against a soft pile of debris. Where was he? Stretching my hand out into the blackness, I searched empty air. My heart pounded, breath rasping hoarse. "I swear, James Kinsare, if this is the start of your so-called revenge, I'm going to kick your hide black and blue—"

A hand grabbed mine and I shrieked.

"Missing me already, Katya?"

I smelled him then, the warm spice of his skin. Breathing him in relaxed me, and I hated it. His voice whispered over my skin, and my eyes strained through the blackness. But I didn't have his superior eyesight. "What the hell are you playing at?"

"We're on top of the lift." He stamped his foot and metal rang hollow, dulled by the thick rubbish. "I was searching for the access hatch when you started to *miss* me."

I wrenched my hand free of him. "You could have answered."

A smile lurked in his voice. "Yes, I could have, couldn't I?"

I bit back more curses and ran a hand through my hair. The shrouding blackness was impenetrable. "Did you find it?"

"The hatch?" Scraping metal echoed, and with a groan, the hatch gave way. It crashed into the lift and a shaft of pale light shot up through the square hole. James looked up, the light cutting across his face. "Shall we?"

"After you," I said, waving at the open hatch.

"Don't you trust me?"

I rolled my eyes. "Shouldn't that be obvious?"

James jumped down. Dropping my legs over the hatch, I braced myself against the metal and then followed him. The lighter gravity gave my impact bounce and stirred up a heavy cloud of dust and grit. Coughing, I stumbled out of the open lift doors.

The corridor beyond formed a curve of solid, brown rock, a wide window running its length. I pressed my hand against the glass and closed my eyes. The cold worked through my palm and sensation rioted in its wake. I *knew* this corridor.

A great crevasse stretched on for miles, and its name burned on the edge of my tongue. Damn it, I had *lived* in this place. Knew it by the broken tiles under my feet, the slight crack hairlining the glass just above my head, the sharp scent of rock and metal.

"Katya? Time to move."

I pulled my thoughts back. "Which way?"

"Pick a direction."

I didn't want to admit it, but something tugged me off to the left. "That way," I said and started walking. James padded behind me, silent. Had I grown up here? The question sank deep and for a few forced-slow heartbeats I let it mull ... and waited.

"So you know this place?"

I ignored him and followed the curve of the corridor. I'd walked this path before, each outcrop of hewn rock curving into my memory. The air tasted fresh undercut with

dust and something that dug at my hindbrain, forcing up a lump of memory. Fluid. Something thick and viscous, the warm rush of it shrouding my skin, tasting sour on my tongue. I rubbed a hand over my face. Damn, the wet feel of it surrounded me.

“You can’t hide anything from me, Katya. I can feel memory burning through you.”

I stopped, glaring up at him and drawing in the taste of that fluid with every breath. It had me unnerved. Getting angry at him could be my only response. “What is this place? What research did they do in this laboratory?”

“How should I know?”

“Because, James Kinsare, you’re as wrapped up in this as Paxton.” My skull throbbed and I pressed my fingers against it, trying to ease the sudden pain. “You know who I am, who I *really* am.” I stepped into his personal space, and his mouth thinned.

“And something about that scares you.”

“Scares me?”

His soft growl ran delicious under my skin and I cursed my body’s reaction to him. “Admit it.”

“I’m not scared of you, Katya.” His knuckles brushed my jaw, and the truth of those words bled through my skin. But a sour undercurrent came with them. James wasn’t sharing the *whole* truth. A softer smile pulled at his lips. “How could I be?”

Every breath I pulled in sank his scent deep into my body. My pulse jumped. James being in Solis Planum ... everything about that felt right. So right that heat, need bloomed within me. “You’re lying... Your Imperial Majesty.”

His smile deepened, and its edge of sharpness formed a hitch in my chest. “I love it when you use my title.” James’ mouth burned so close to mine I could almost taste him. “Say it again.”

I swallowed. The words ached on the tip of my tongue. “No,” I said.

“Katya...” His lips touched mine in the briefest caress. “Say it.”

“Majesty.”

His mouth brushed my lips, his tongue flicking against my teeth. “*Imperial Majesty.*”

I fought a grin. Damn it, I shouldn’t think he was funny. The man had a contract out on me ... but even that thought dimmed as his hands slid around my waist. My mouth opened, allowing him to deepen the kiss. James pressed me hard to his body, and I groaned.

It wasn’t just his touch, electrifying as it was. No. Something had shifted, maybe in both of us, and the thought terrified me. No more memory surged but through the air of Solis Planum, his touch, *something*, deep inside had changed. Obviously, the compartmentalising of him had worked too well and I couldn’t deny it any longer. Didn’t want to. I ran my fingers through his hair, urging his mouth harder against mine. I felt his smile and mirrored it with one of my own. This James, the one who made me laugh, held me in strong arms, the man who made me feel alive, *him* I’d fallen in love with—

“*Are you two in heat?*”

I shot back, thumping into the rough stone of the wall. “Paxton?”

His voice rebounded over the curve corridor. “*You’re mortal enemies. That used to mean something to some people. But you?*” He tutted, the amplified sound vibrating painfully in my ears. “*I just don’t know anymore. I turn away for a second—*”

“What the hell do you want now?” I broke into his craziness. Damn, I was glad of it. I couldn’t be in love with James Kinsare. That would make me more insane than the man

whose bodiless laughter echoed over the stone around us.

"I want to play some more." He paused. *"You made it this far ... but then I shouldn't be surprised. You are who you are, after all."*

"You have a point, Paxton?" James said, running a hand over his dirt-smeared tie. I recognised his calming habit. He looked up, and I saw the edge of fury in his eyes. His ritual wasn't working for him.

"Yes... Majesty... I have a point." He paused and his last words faded into silence. *"Have you remembered anything more, Katya? Remembered who you are exactly?"*

"I've had enough of this," I muttered, striding down the corridor. "You play your games. Me? I'm getting off this fucking planet." Again. Paxton had made me angry to escape Mars before, but I'd failed to find him. Then I turned to the only safe occupation I could: terraforming. I stared up to the curve of rock stretching out above my head. I wouldn't fail to hunt him down this time. "Then I'm going to find you. And I plan to play some games of my own"

"Oh, Katya, do you promise?" More laughter rippled long and hollow around the walls. *"James may find you terrifying but I'd happily play with you again."*

I held down the need to curse at him long and hard. A door pulled my thoughts from him. Pressing, my palm to the screen, it ran a light heat over my palm. A panel flashed above the door in quick sequence.

"Entry permitted: Katya Ortaega. Welcome back, Doctor Ortaega." The rush of an electronic voice jolted me, and my stomach flipped. It knew me. Shit.

"See, someone's happy to see you home."

"Oh shut up."

With a groan, the door slid back into the wall. Beyond it, the room reminded me of the refectory on the Deimos drilling platform, with a mass of tables piled into one corner and a metal fronted kitchen set back into the wall. So the Solis Planum laboratory had a large staff, and I seemed to be, somehow, a part of it. Maybe I was a doctor, after all.

Long windows covered the wall to my right, giving a disturbing view of the great crevasse stretching away into the distance. Pale light striped the floor, reaching out to glint over the metal kitchen counters.

My thickened soles thumped against tiles and I focused on that rhythm. I didn't want a rush of memory to swamp me. Not there—and with Paxton listening—not yet.

More doors cut a uniform pattern into the rock. I stopped and palmed one of the exit screens. "Who am I?"

"Doctor Katya Ortaega. Welcome—"

"What is my role here?"

"No position has been assigned to you."

"You're talking to a door."

James stood behind me, close enough to prickle my skin with awareness. I pushed down all thoughts on him. It was safer to stay angry. "It's told me more than you have."

"Snippy, isn't she?" Paxton's voice boomed around the empty open space.

I grimaced, and the need to punch someone swelled within me. "Is there any way to shut him off?"

"So you don't want me to warn you about—"

"Laboratory intercom disconnected. Authority Ortaega-K-beta."

I curled my fingers from the panel. Bastard was playing with my head. I'd be

damned if I turned the intercom back on. “All right, that was freaky.” Letting out a slow breath, I glanced up at James. “Want to tell me anything more about what you know?” His grim silence faced me. “Fine. Well, if Paxton wants me to find out about myself, I’m more than happy to do that.”

And wasn’t *that* a lie. But something drove me on. Whether I liked it or not, who I was echoed over every wall and door. A doctor, a killer? I couldn’t deny my past. However much I might want to.

I opened the door, and a spot-lit corridor stretched away. The mixed scent of rock dust and decay wafted through on a sharp breeze. “Home, sweet home.”

Something dragged me along the corridor, a heart-pounding mix of excitement and terror. The name of Solis Planum had jumped out at me and there’d been the unconscious hope that I’d learn more about myself. Rubbing my thumbs against my fingertips, I wasn’t so sure I was ready to know who I was.

The space between my shoulder blades itched. “Thinking about that revenge thing, James?”

“Always.”

I had to smile. The men in my life were designed to drive me crazy. That sparked the thought—had I ever had a normal relationship with a man who wasn’t a power-hungry maniac? My luck? Probably not.

The corridor ended in a door. I ran my fingers over the smooth surface, a stain marking out where a plate had once been fixed. My toe scuffed about in the dust lying thick at my feet until it hit a long sliver of metal. Picking it up, I let the dust fall away. I rubbed my thumb over the list of numbers, each digit sparking a familiar path in my brain. My fingertip traced over an ornate symbol for Mercury and a tremor shook me. “My room,” I murmured.

Before my nerve failed me, I pressed my hand to the pad and waited. The door mechanism chugged, and a slow whine had my teeth vibrating. It pulled back and exposed a room I wasn’t expecting.

The scent of the fluid hit me, and I grabbed the doorjamb. Sweat broke out on my forehead, and buzzing filled my head. The shape of memories pushed against the blankness in my brain, half-recognised moments of time—

James’ hand squeezed my shoulder, offering comfort, but I shook him off. I moved forward. I couldn’t break focus.

The room stretched away from me, a long, narrow window spilling pale light to the tiled floor. Slate-topped benches curved around a fat, opaque tube that reached up to the rock ceiling.

Images hit me.

Fluid drained away in a swift gurgle, my lungs heaved, and I took my first breath.

The door opened, and chill air washed over me. I shivered and wrapped my arms around my nakedness, desperate to stay warm.

Faces, too many faces, most of them grinning, some whooping, burst over me. White lab coats clustered around. All that I could see through clogged eyelashes was the twisting red symbol of the Webb corporation logo.

I forced strength into my legs and willed my breath even, fighting the buzzing in my head that wanted to drag me under. The images settled and one face filled my vision.

“Welcome to Mars, Katya Ortega.” A blonde woman grinned at me, elation shining

in her pale blue eyes.

“Project Mercury is a success ... finally.”

The man received a smack to the back of his head from the blonde woman. “She’s called Katya Ortaega, Dick.”

Dick grimaced and rubbed at his skull. “Will you stop calling me that? It’s not even my name.”

The woman grinned. “But you wear it so well...”

He growled something foul under his breath. “And trust you to stamp your name all over it. The money will never agree.”

“Oh shut up... Dick.”

I fell against the nearest bench, gripping the slate edge. I knew something had screwed with my genome. But I thought it’d been me, that I’d been a real person. I pressed a hand to my mouth to stop the nausea. I wasn’t real. I was corporate product. “What the fuck am I? They *grew* me.” I glared at James, his dark gaze holding mine. Nothing shone there. No sympathy. No horror.

I flicked a hand at the tube. “Is this the information you wanted? How to grow your own woman?”

“We should find the beacon. This isn’t helping.”

“You *knew*.” I stared at the tube, the crack running down the open door. I blinked. “I grew up with Paxton. *Thought* I did. He...” My hand covered my throat. “He’s a part of this project. He’s product too.”

James gripped my shoulders, his fingers biting into the muscle. He turned me and pulled me into his arms. His hold, warm, secure dulled the edge of panic bubbling under my thoughts. He pressed a kiss into my tangled hair. My hands fisted in his shirt. I didn’t want his comfort, I didn’t, but the bloody man had broken his way into my heart.

“This is not important.”

“Easy for you to say. You’re not reanimated meat.”

A smile tugged at his mouth. “Reanimated meat? Really?”

His stupid attempt at humour fell flat. I pulled free of him, needing to know who I was. His ... fear ... couldn’t hold me back. My head spun and I fought to yank my thoughts together. Nothing in the bloody place made sense. Nothing. I stumbled to a screen and slapped my palm against it. Light flared hot under my fingers. “How long has this laboratory been abandoned? When did Project Mercury close down?”

“Katya—”

“Shut up!” I took a deep breath, but it didn’t help to calm me. “Get out. Go look for a way off this rock. It’s what you do best!” The bite of those last words sank through me. A furious and ancient pain burned in my gut. Paxton, I’d snapped those words at Paxton. No. I winced. I’d *wanted* to. He’d already left, left me in the laboratory, abandoned me and I’d had to find my own bloody way off the planet.

I wiped a hand over my face before slapping it back down on the screen. “Answer me!”

“Project Mercury has no official termination date.”

“What?” I stopped myself from putting my fist through the screen. My fingers curled into a tight knot, and slowly I lifted my hand away. “The place is knee-deep in crap. There’s no way anyone’s growing people in here.”

The soft, irritating computerised voice repeated its previous sentence, and the urge to

thump it deepened.

“How long has the laboratory been shut, then?”

“Webb’s Solis Planum facility is not shut.”

I groaned and the anger within me died. I was being stupid. “What year is it?”

“2567 CE.”

“The year that machine gave me in the terminal.” Stretching my shoulders, I eased out the tension that had my brain blocked. All right, I’d try a different tack. “When did Katya Ortaega, the other one, not me, start work here?”

“Doctor Katya Ortaega joined the staff at the Solis Planum facility 26 February 2556 CE.”

I stared at the softly glowing machine. “But that’s over six hundred years ago.” I pressed my hand over my eyes and tried to push away the need to scream at the stupid machine. “Give me an image of Doctor Katya Ortaega.”

Slowly an image coalesced on the small screen. My stomach flipped. I knew her face. That same grin stared up at me, the one that had greeted me as I half fell out of a fluid filled tube. “This can’t be real.”

“Yes, it is.”

Heat bloomed in my chest. I’d forgotten James hadn’t left the room. I turned, my gaze settling on his stern and beautiful face. “It’s real? The woman who made me is over six hundred years old? I have her name and title?” I flipped a hand around the empty, crumbling lab. “And she’s still tottering around here? Somewhere.”

“No.” The solemn turn to his expression had my gut tight. “*She’s* not six hundred years old...”

My jaw dropped. All right, now he was insane. “You’re saying that *I* am? That I’m that old?” A wild burst of laughter escaped me, and I wagged a finger at him. “Is this your revenge? You want to drive me insane?”

Nothing I said changed the hardness of his face. He just waited, silent, stern.

“James?” It couldn’t be true. It was impossible. Nobody lived for over six hundred years. Except... “Were you grown in one of these things?”

“No.”

“Hello to the big fat lie.” I poked a finger into his chest. “I can taste that lie, James. You know I can.” My head tilted. “But the Tirion Emperor is supposedly thousands of years old. Are you a clone?”

His mouth thinned. “Getting off this planet is my priority. Not this.”

“Touched a nerve, clone-boy?”

“Funny.” He stood back, and his jaw tensed. He let out a slow breath. “You play here if you want. You’re the legacy from an ancient experiment. That’s all. And that’s all you’ll find in this room.”

“Why don’t you want me to know my past?”

James stopped at the open door. His hand gripped the frame. “Because when you do, Katya, what we have now ends and then it all starts up again.”

“What does?”

He glanced back, and I couldn’t read his expression. “That habit you have. It’s called your desperate need to kill me.”

Chapter Eleven

“Habit?” But James walked away from me, disappearing down the dim, dust-thick corridor. “Why habit?”

I muttered a curse under my breath and turned back to searching the laboratory. I put thoughts of him—and my chaotic feelings—out of my brain. Time to deal with something else I couldn’t deny—who I was. I’d been born in the room, drew in my first breath there. And it tasted ... bitter, undercut with stone and the imagined scent of amniotic fluid. I shuddered.

“This is too strange.” I rubbed at my neck to ease the sudden tension tightening the muscles. My fingers stopped, and I pulled at the skin on my cheek. It snapped back. “Not the skin of a six hundred year old woman.” A snort escaped me. That supposed fact was too stupid to believe. “All right, what was the aim of Project Mercury?”

“The creation of diplomats.”

I couldn’t stop the laughter that erupted. “Me? A diplomat?” I pressed my hand against my chest to ease the sudden pain as the laughter continued. “They got that horribly, *horribly* wrong, didn’t they?”

“The aspect of Doctor Katya Ortaega became dominant within the first successful Amalgam’s personality. In subsequent Amalgams, she was not a factor.”

“Subsequent Amalgams?”

“There is no information.”

“Of course there isn’t.” There could be others like me, un-aging ... creations ... living out their bizarre lives who knew where. “I need to sit down.” I dragged a plastic stool towards me and sank onto it. My elbow rested on the cool bench, and I dropped my face into my palms. The little machine had revealed a tonne in those few sentences. My gut twisted into a tight, aching knot. An Amalgam. The name stirred my memory ... probably because I was one.

The definition sat heavy in my empty mind. “A flesh construct of a diverse group of individuals or data.” I whispered the words, hardly able to believe them.

“Incorrect. Amalgams are both.”

“How are these Amalgams used? I mean *I* am not a diplomat.”

“First contact came in 2555 CE. It was deemed necessary to present the finest aspects of Terran humanity to the known-worlds. No single human fitted. Project Mercury was commissioned.”

“Wonderful.” It had to be how I had differing memories of my home. Shit, it was probably why I thought I was a *man* back at the Pavonis terminal. I had a host of other people’s memories and personality sloshing about in my specially constructed brain. And data about who knew what. Possibly a dead planet’s history, culture, technology lay hidden in my broken mind. “I thought I’d only lost my life. Seems I’ve lost dozens.

“So ... you said others? Is James Kinsare an Amalgam?”

“That name is not recognised.”

“Kael Paxton?”

“Files on Kael Paxton are sealed.”

“You are kidding me!” I dug the heels of my hands into my eyes. “What’s so special

about Paxton?”

“Files on Kael Paxton are sealed.”

“Yes, thank you, you said that already.” I paused. “Who are the other Amalgams?”

“That information is sealed.”

“You can only tell me about myself?”

“Correct.”

“Then who and what did you stuff into my head?”

“The Amalgam designated ‘Katya Ortaega’ has the Webb Archives and the memories and personality aspects of: Doctor Katya Ortaega, Colonel Andrea Smith, Doctor Iain Howard—”

“Wait.” I lifted my hand. Something about the tone of the impersonal voice told me the list would be *long*. “Just tell me, how many people.”

“Thirteen.”

I swore. Something long and foul. I’m sure my namesake would’ve been proud.

“And we, *I*, was designed to be a diplomat?”

“‘Our face in the universe.’”

I shivered at the sound of that recorded voice. It could’ve been me—hell, I repeated the line—it *was* me. But it wasn’t. It was *her*, the real Katya Ortaega, the woman with an ego the size of Pavonis Mons. “But it didn’t work.”

“You were the first successful Amalgam. From your template, all others would form.”

“Mama Katya,” I murmured. I dragged my fingers over my eyelids and denied the burn I felt beneath. Well, almost. Tears leaked and slid down my cheeks. I’d underestimated how bad knowing who I was would be ... and I was only just born. I still had six hundred years to fill in.

I dropped down from the stool. Time to find James. He’d no doubt headed for the command centre, and that hub would have the computer core. I’d break into those secured files. I couldn’t be so close to Paxton’s past and not dig deeper.

I pulled in a breath, breaking down James’ heart-skittering scent as it wove strong though the odour of stone and slate. “Diplomats, my arse,” I muttered. “They implanted me with superhuman skills. What did these Martians want the known-worlds to think they were?”

I followed James’ odour out down the corridor and into the refectory. Doors stood open to the side of the kitchen area, and my trail led that way. I winced. Everything about the place seemed eerily familiar ... though it felt strange to be walking the corridors alone. My shoulders itched. I needed a gaggle of young and adoring doctoral students hanging on my every word, scuttling after me through the warren of tunnels cut into the rock. “I was wrong, Katya. Your ego is planet-sized.” I ran a hand through my dirty hair. “And if you implanted that aspect then that’s my personality too. Nice. Can’t wait.”

The corridor curved and then widened and dropped into a short run of steps. The room they led into was a large, natural hollow. Great sheets of sunlight striped the floor, gleaming over the concentric circles of utility stations. My heart thudded, knees buckled, and I dropped to the smooth curve of the steps. Memory rushed over me.

“What the hell is that thing?” I squinted at a long panel set into the wall, watching the monitored approach of a small craft. “One of ours?”

“No, Doctor Ortaega.”

The young technician glanced up, but his gaze flittered over mine. A flush ran across his cheeks. He was a pretty little thing, new blood drafted in from Earth. I forced my attention back to the screen. Pretty boy would have to wait.

"Europa Station reports Tocularis design."

"Shit, shit, shit." I stabbed a finger into the screen, highlighting the ship and magnifying. The blade-shaped craft burned a brief shadow over the swirling orange of Jupiter's mass. "It's a probe."

"A probe?" The boy's voice trembled. "But we signed treaties—"

"As if the Tirion Emperor is going to hold to them." I rubbed at my jaw, wanting to ease tight muscles. "We're minnows, Justin. And we have something he wants."

"Our DNA."

"Our DNA," I repeated. My smile reflected in the smooth surface of the panel, growing as the probe shot past Jupiter, and blackness swallowed the screen. "And right there the all-powerful emperor may get his biggest shock."

"Katya?"

James hand on my shoulder jumped me out of the too-real memory. I blinked. "You signed treaties with these people, and broke them."

"A treaty barring me from something I want will not be honoured."

A shiver ran over my skin. There it was again. The voice: the cold authoritarian man that pressed hard lines into James' face and faded his beauty. "So you destroyed their civilisation." Unease sank through me. "My civilisation."

James lifted his hand and stepped back from me. He turned away. "Yes."

"Do I detect some guilt there?"

A harsh curse cut the air and he didn't answer my question. "It would be useful if you could, with your obvious knowledge of this facility, help me look for the communication network."

The time for being cautious had past. I wanted to know the truth and James Kinsare was in the prime position to give me that. And if I hated him, maybe the love I felt would be a hastily-forgotten aberration. "So did you get what you wanted? Did you get our DNA?"

"Yes."

The single word chilled me. I watched him walk to a bank of terminals with smooth, easy grace and run an elegant brown hand through his messed hair. His beauty was a construction. "Were you human ... before?"

James laughed. "Mostly."

I swallowed bile. "What does that mean?"

He flashed me a grin, and my stomach dropped. Something predatory, animalistic gleamed there ... but then the grin dimmed, and his gaze dropped. "The Tirion Emperor survives in whatever form necessary."

I waved a hand over his body. "So how long have you looked like this?"

"Five hundred years."

"And I thought your answers couldn't get any crazier." I pushed myself to my feet, willing strength into my legs as I padded down the remaining steps. Light cut over his perfect profile, and his beauty tugged at me. Damn it, I didn't want to be as shallow as I suspected my maker to be. "Though that does officially make me older than you."

"I like experience."

How had we flipped into flirting again? I rolled my eyes. I couldn't pin James down—my gaze delayed on the tight curve of his arse—however much I'd like to. It would obviously take more for me to kill the way I felt about him ... I wiped my hand over my face and turned my attention back to the terminals set in shadow along the far wall. Centuries before, the pretty Justin had sat there and I—I winced. Not me, the original Katya—had lusted after him. Seemed I couldn't escape my creator's appetites.

I stared at the original panel and the after-image of the Tirion probe glowed there. Running my fingers over the tablet set into the console, I tested the circuitry for power. With a low hum and a flicker of light, the centre powered up. "Isn't this just that bit suspicious, James?" I nodded towards the screen running its start up sequence. "Why has Paxton not sabotaged this too?"

James stood behind me. I didn't want to feel the heat of his body, but it imprinted me even as I drew in his distinctive scent. "The workings of Paxton's mind are a mystery."

"Yes, aren't they?" Paxton's voice, thin and tinny, pulsed through a nearby speaker.

"So, you're back with us," I muttered. "What do you want, Paxton? Really?"

"I want you both dead. That's not so difficult to understand, is it?"

"Why?"

"How much of your memory is back, Katya?"

I ignored him. The panel flashed with the intricate design of the Webb logo and then settled into a pulsing schematic of the Solis Planum laboratory. "Broadcast a distress signal."

"Done," murmured a synthetic voice.

And that was too easy. My skin itched. Nothing went easy for me, nothing.

"Are you ignoring me, Katya?"

The soft tones of a repeating message beat through the air. I sighed. Old tech. *Very* old tech. Yes, Paxton had left us with the equivalent of a can and a length of string, no doubt on purpose. "How long's that going to take to get to the Command Base? Ten hours?"

Paxton's laughter crackled. *"Ten hours. What could happen in ten hours?"*

I rolled my eyes. "Were you always such an annoying arsehole, Kael?"

"Katya. I'm wounded. How can you say that when we shared so many pleasurable hours together?"

"Is there *any* way to shut you up?"

"Play my game."

All pretence at humour had fallen away from his voice and the new undercurrent, cold, authoritative, chilled me. It pricked my senses, and everything sharpened. James' faster breathing, the heat of anger peeling off him surrounded me, mixing with the taste of dry air and the soft, repeating beat of the distress signal. I swallowed. "Game?"

"Kael Paxton is an Amalgam ... but this version of him is dying. And if I die, then it all dies. All of it. It should never have started." He paused and the angry edge to his voice vanished. *"Time for a last wish."*

"What?" Heat bloomed through my chest. The word 'dying' had burst out at me from all the others. But wasn't that impossible? Did Amalgams have an end date? I'd never thought to ask. A loud crash broke through my scattering thoughts. "What the hell was that?"

"My last wish."

Time slowed, and I turned. The air tasted rank, and I forced down the need to gag. The metal panelling beneath my feet started to vibrate. I grabbed at James' arm to keep my balance. Pounding became rhythmic, and the boom of it drew closer. The corridor outside of the command centre darkened, and the sour scent of something ... obscene ... filled my mouth. "What has he done now?"

James began to back away, his hand covering mine and gripping it tight. "Whatever it is, we have to get out."

"But the signal?"

"Enough has broadcast, trust me."

I rolled my eyes at him. "I don't do trust, James. I'm certainly not going to start now." Slow heavy breathing filled the room. "Is that you?"

James glared at me. "Be funny. I'm sure whatever's lumbering down that corridor will appreciate it."

We edged backward on instinct. My gaze remained fixed on the open entrance of the corridor. Shadows flickered, and I tried not to imagine some monstrous and deformed creation... Then it stepped into the light.

It looked like a man. It did. Around the edges.

Tall, stretching to almost two metres, it bunched thick with muscles and wore little more than a sack to cover its genitals. Its skin had a soft, silver stain. It stared around the command centre, its eyes flitting over everything, taking in the smoothly hewn walls, the consoles, the thin-stretched windows.

Something about the shape of the monster felt familiar, and had my skin itching and blood fired. It rubbed a clawed hand over the smooth wall, and my stomach tightened. Another half-memory flared. There was something very important behind that wall, something in it, on it and Kael knew what it was ... but then the claw fell away and with it my pulse of memory. Unwanted, I met its emotionless gaze, and my heart stopped. My instinct was right. "Kael?"

For a moment, the reptilian gaze flashed with pain. "You haven't looked at me that way in decades." Clawed fingers curled into rough palms. "I was never..." His head dropped and for an insane second, I wanted to hold the monstrous creature and comfort the man within.

But then the head lifted, and the creature grinned, flashing too many large white teeth. The man inside it was gone. "I played about with what I had available in my genome... and came up with this." The voice had become a ragged corruption of Paxton's familiar one. He ran a clawed hand over the cloth tied at his waist. "Though my tailor leaves a lot to be desired." He padded down the steps. "What do you think, James? Do I look familiar?"

I risked a glance at James. He'd blanched and fear widened his eyes. "What is it?"

"I—"

"Oh, he recognises me, don't you, Your Imperial Majesty?"

"We need to get out of here, now." James dragged me back through the breaks in the consoles with a fierce grip on my arm that bit into muscle and bone.

"Damn it, James, what is it?"

"It's the Tirion Emperor."

My head whipped back to the creature padding across the metal panels, heavy, clawed feet buckling the sheets. "What the fuck? How can that be... you?"

“Just like old times, James.” Paxton’s voice rumbled around the command centre and the tone sounded off, vindictive, but somehow scared. “Run. Chase. Then Feed. Remember?” The grin grew, and too many glistening teeth flashed in the sunlight. “Well, go on.” He flicked a clawed hand and his voice dropped. “Run!”

Chapter Twelve

“Where the hell are you going, James?”

“Out, away.” He strode down the narrow corridor running out past the windows.

“We have a count of one hundred before he’ll start to hunt.”

I jogged to keep up with him, following the curve of the corridor as it burrowed deep into the rock. “And this is the plan? Running?”

“You want to stay in the command centre and let him just chew off an arm for fun?”

He increased his pace, pounding up an incline turning back around the command centre.

“Because that’s what he does. Eats chunks and waits for limb regeneration.”

“What?” I broke into a run. “This is insane, James. *You’re* the emperor.”

“Now, I am.”

If we hadn’t been running for our lives, I thought about kicking him. Hard. The familiarity of the corridor, with its silver doors cut into the sand-brown rock, hit me. I focused on my breathing. I didn’t want my brain overtaken with more memories ... but the insistent tug of ancient images dragged at my thoughts.

The echo of harsh laughter died away. My heart grew light, and a grin broke out on my face. I raced along a dark corridor, laughing. Someone chased me, someone who I wanted to catch me. The heat of his hot breath touched my neck, large hands grabbing at my waist. Time to play—

“Katya, keep up!”

James grabbed my hand, and I lurched forward. “Damn it, James, I can run, you know.”

“You almost ran into the wall—”

Paxton’s roar shook the air and shot more speed to our feet.

“What is going on, James?”

“The Emperor had reached the end of his life cycle and needed a new form. I was it, became it. But to ensure the proper transference of his consciousness into new flesh, he needed our biology to be compatible.”

Horror had my stomach turning, and I swallowed the rush of bile. “So he hunted you and ate chunks of you. That’s...”

“Hideously painful?”

“I was going with gross, but that too.” I caught a hand in my tangled hair, trying to make sense of the two men. “So... Paxton somehow grafted the emperor’s DNA onto his own. And you? You’re what? The original mixture of human and whatever that alien is?”

“I’m a mixture—”

The floor shook behind us. Paxton, or whatever he was now, would be on us in seconds. More explanation could wait. “We need to get to the lifts.” I lurched left, burst through a door and slammed it shut behind us. A single light flashed on overhead, a shot of white angling down over a small laboratory and its practical furniture. I pushed James around the benches to the far door, half hidden in thick shadow. “This leads onto a secondary corridor and should get us back to the lifts.”

“There’s nowhere we can hide.”

I pulled the door shut and shoved him back against the smooth metal wall of the

corridor beyond the laboratory. "I know you're freaked." That was an understatement. Fear pulsed off him, his skin flushed and a nervous terror flickering behind his eyes. It squeezed my heart, and I wanted nothing more than to comfort him. Which was crazy. I pressed my hand to his jaw and stroked his smooth skin, making him meet my gaze. "But what have we survived already? And Paxton isn't the original emperor. He's some freakish genetic experiment." I snorted. "But then aren't we all?"

A smile pulled at James' mouth for a quick second, but his eyes focused on my chin. He took a deep breath and ran a hand through his damp hair. "Disappointed in me, Katya?"

I covered his lips in a brief, hot kiss, his warm-spice taste sparking against my mouth. His sudden vulnerability had me wanting to hold him, protect him from the monster hunting us. My heart tightened and feeling swamped me.

I loved him. Completely. And how insane was that when I had no clue why I wanted to kill him? Pulling away, I bit back a smile. "Nice to know something about you is still human." I took his hand and squeezed it. "Shall we?"

Paxton's muted roar filled the dim corridor.

"He sounds pissed off." I kept my voice light even as my heart pounded.

James laughed, but the undercurrent of fear made it shake. "Let's get out of here."

We ran, breaking out of the narrow corridor, to weave through more cluttered rooms and laboratories. I slammed my palm into a screen, and double doors trundled apart before us. The lift still stood open. I ran my hand over the other lift pads but no power flared under my fingers. "It's another climb."

"After you," James said, waving me into the open lift.

I stretched, jumped, but my fingers fell shy of the hatch. James' large hands gripped my waist and lifted me. I clung tight to the metal edge, hauled myself up ... and tried not to feel the slow slide of his palms over my hips, thighs. "You're incorrigible." The lift began to shake in a quick, deep rhythm. Paxton had found them. "Move!"

James jumped, caught the hatch and heaved his body through the narrow gap. "Get up that ladder, Katya."

He didn't need to tell me twice.

I scrambled up the rungs, lighter gravity giving my tired muscles speed. "Did you ever once get away?" I bit out the words from a dry mouth and ached to have the time to wipe the sweat from my eyes. "Just once?"

"In five years he hunted me?" A tremor edged his voice, and I couldn't blame him. Five years of this? Of chasing him to snack on body parts. It was little wonder he'd freaked at reliving the nightmare of the time before he was emperor. "No."

"Comforting."

"What can I say? The emperor was a practised hunter."

My hands burned, flakes of rust digging into my raw palms. Paxton's roar filled the lift shaft, echoing, chilling me. I swallowed and willed more speed into my hands and feet. Tearing metal bounced over the walls, and Paxton's animalistic laughter chased it.

"Just like old times, isn't it, James?" Paxton's voice rebounded over the shaft's metal walls.

"Move, Katya!"

James rasped order, cut with terror, spurred me up the ladder. The taste of the air changed, the fresh scent of grass sliding deep into my lungs. I risked a glance up, and the

slice of light streaming over my head surged adrenalin. My hands flew. Above the smack of my own palms and dull thump of thickened soles, rose the scrape of claws on metal.

Shit. Paxton climbed only minutes behind us in the darkness of the shaft. I hauled myself up, scrambling over the lift frame to the cold stone beyond. I rolled to my feet and found James clambering out after me. "Time to run."

I turned and froze. "Shit."

A beast growled low in its throat, fangs bared. It couched, muscles bunching. I drew in a quick nervous breath and scented more of them in the shadows.

"Back away." James' soft words broke into my stare. I swallowed and edged back a slow inch at a time, stepping deeper into the blackness beyond the lift shaft. He fell back with me, eyes lowered, his movements slow and cautious. Still the beast growled, a low vibration of sound that had the hairs standing out against my skin.

It turned its head to the lift shaft. The scrape of claws and harsh breathing echoed. The beast scented the air, its white-furred muzzle lifting. James increased the pace, pushing me back. My heart thudded. It would buy us some time, with the beasts certain to attack Paxton.

His silvered head emerged from the open lift, and I took a sharp breath. James stumbled back. I steadied him, squeezing his arm, reminding him to be quiet. We had to get out of the terminal.

Paxton's claws gripped the frame, squeezing the thin metal with disturbing ease. The beast's growl deepened, and the pack slunk out of the shadows. Paxton grinned, his teeth gleaming and far too sharp. "Hello there," he murmured, his alien larynx cracking his voice.

The alpha-beast's head tilted and its growl changed. My stomach tightened. It was turning bad. Shit.

"Nice pussy cat." Paxton pushed himself free from the lift. Rust stained his chest and he rubbed his palm over a heavy pectoral. Straightening, he stretched out a hand to the beast and scratched a clawed finger under its chin. The growl softened and something like a purr escaped it. "Nice kitty." He looked up, and his gaze found mine. "I've had time to study genetics too, Katya. Do you like my pets?"

Yes, so much worse than bad. What had he done? I had memory of the creatures being native. "You trained them to hunt us by hacking their code."

He waved a hand down the alien body he now wore. "I'm good at that, don't you think?"

"They certainly smell as rank as you."

James' snapped his head back, and he held up a warning finger. "Don't antagonise the nasty monster," he hissed.

"He's going to eat us, James. I doubt his being in a good mood will make his teeth any less sharp." I blew out a hot breath and flexed my hands. The memory from the corridor suddenly made sense. It hadn't been a playful lover grabbing me. It'd been a simulacrum of the creature patting the alpha-beast's head. The laboratories had no clue about the Emperor's true appearance, so they'd approximated a large man with talons and fangs grafted from the specially bred beasts. Paxton had more strength, but they'd designed me well. "I can take him."

"Katya..."

"Distract the beasts."

“You can’t—”

“I’ve done this before.” I gave him a tight smile and wished I could grab a moment to kiss him. “It was what I was designed for, after all.”

I sidestepped James, pulling free of his tight, desperate grip on my hand. “I’ll play your game, Paxton.”

His still-blue eyes narrowed on me and something flickered there. “Really?”

Moving forward, I held his gaze, ignoring the low, threatening growl from the beast at his side. “You claim to know me. Don’t you remember that I’m built to fight?”

“Ah, *that* game.” His grin stretched over his face, pulled taut muscles tight. It didn’t have the full skull-like rictus, and something about that itched at my memory. Was he scared? “Are you sure you want to do this, Katya?”

“You’re going to take a chunk out of me. What choice do I have?”

Paxton eased forward, his wrong-jointed knees running heat through my body. I held down a wince. That was just wrong. James moved behind me, edging towards the beasts, but Paxton didn’t take his eyes off me.

“I’d nibble you.”

The rasp of his voice had the hairs lifting against my skin again.

“In all the right places.”

“You know I just threw up in my mouth a little, don’t you Paxton?”

He let out a dramatic sigh that rattled in the loose folds of his throat. “You never call me Kael anymore.”

“Maybe because you shoved me in a body-tube for maybe thirty years and wiped my memory?” I kept my distance, hands flexing, locking away the movement of his alien body. Except for the skin around his neck, he was thick, solid muscle and he towered over me. My nerve wobbled but I had to trust in my instincts ... and they screamed that I had the skill to take him. “Why did you do that?”

“The body tube?” The sudden odd bulge to his neck had me leaping back. An arc of white venom sprayed from his mouth to splat into my footprints. He wiped the back of his hand over his wet lips and grinned again. “Why, that was our plan.”

“*Our* plan?” The venom hissed through the cracks in the concrete floor. “And what’s with the spitting?”

“Didn’t James tell you about the paralysing goo?”

“No.” I risked closing in again. When I had enough information, I would attack. Kael Paxton had always liked the sound of his own voice, so I’d let him talk. “Why would I work with you? You’re deranged.”

He laughed, the edges of it vibrating. “Always one to speak your mind. Wiping your memory didn’t change that about you. And why I wiped it? Because it’ll be satisfying when you do remember ... just before I kill you.”

The open lift shaft loomed behind me, and my spine itched. I caught James opposite, still moving slowly, his focus darting between the beasts and Paxton. I had to trust that he wouldn’t just slink out of the terminal and leave me, abandon me. My gut cramped. Bad thoughts, and I pushed them out of my head. “Aren’t you going to answer my question? You’re insane, Paxton.”

“You’re James’ greatest enemy. Have been for centuries. You wanted rid of him, and you knew that you yourself would be the greatest bait.”

I ignored the twist of something like truth knotting in my chest. But it wasn’t all of it,

something else lurked. “That’s ... that’s insane.”

He laughed. “Think I was rubbing off on you? You’d lost the battle, Katya. You had nothing left, only me and the memory of Deimos. You flew us to the second moon yourself.”

Had I been that desperate to kill James? My gut clenched. Yes, I had. I’d wanted to kill the Tirion Emperor forever and the reason burned just beyond my memory. “James...?” The name had burst out of me and I cursed my stupidity. I didn’t want to draw Paxton’s attention away from me. So I surged forward.

Paxton struck out with lightning speed, grabbing my throat in a single, clawed hand. His unnatural laughter echoed dull in my ears, and blood pounded as he squeezed the life out of me. “How does it feel? Killed by one of the defectives, one of the ‘not-quite-rights’. Not one of the god-makers’ perfect creations.” My toes scrabbled to regain a hold on the concrete. In reflex, I brought the full force of my arm down on his, breaking his hold. I staggered, found my balance and kicked out at his thigh.

Paxton howled and I darted back, beyond the range of his venom. Adrenalin had my heart ramped. I fought to focus. “Not so easy to kill, am I?”

He slunk in a slow circle, his hard gaze never leaving me. “I tried, down the centuries, I tried to kill you. And it should have been easy.” There was that betraying flicker again, the one that looked like pain. “I wasn’t him, the one you remembered, the one you wanted. Then you pulled the shield of the body-tube down over you ... and this, this need to wipe out all that the god-makers created became simple.”

White venom sprayed and I leapt back. “Him?” Paxton wanted to kill me because I’d *rejected* him?

“Your Kael.”

“Why would I reject you?”

He waved a clawed hand down his muscled body. “Because of what this monster did to me.”

I staggered back. The emperor? What had the emperor done to Kael? The sharp yap of one of the beasts yanked my attention. James... A confused rush of emotion rioted through me. What had the man I now loved done to my Kael?

The glistening fangs of one of the predators caught the sunlight, and they stabbed a spike through my confusion. The stink of singed fur cut the air. James held the growling beasts back with an electrified bar. Whatever else he had done, he now gave me the chance to take on Paxton.

“Katya, look out!”

James’ warning shout burst over me as the silvered bulk of Paxton leapt. I sidestepped his attack, grabbed his arm and swung him around. Dragging him forward, I slammed my hand into his bicep and then his temple. He yowled and struggled to pull free, but I’d broken the strength in his arm. With an attack to his elbow joint, bone cracked.

Paxton screamed, but I didn’t stop.

It was me or him. And I wasn’t going to die. Not by his hand.

I yanked him forward. My hands grabbed his head, and I twisted, hard, quick, fighting the powerful neck muscles, the thick bone.

“Plan B. Remember...”

They became Kael Paxton’s last words as bone grated and muscles tore. His neck

snapped and I staggered under his dead weight. Stumbling back to the terminal wall, I watched Paxton slump and hit the concrete.

He was dead. My first love. Grief tore up hot and tight through my chest.

"Plan B. Remember." Kael's voice echoed in my head, echoed... Pain flared through my body, and a white, glaring heat surged over my brain. I slid down the wall, dropping to the hard ground like a rag doll.

Images, sounds, voices stabbed into my brain.

And in a searing rush, I remembered who I was.

"Katya?" James stretched out his hand to me, his fingers inches from my face. He looked worn out too, as if he'd defeated more than a few stringy beasts. The lies of affection, of something more, of love, softened his gaze. "We've done it. It's over. He's gone."

As if I would celebrate that fact.

In one fluid movement, I yanked at James' hand and crashed him into hard concrete. All air burst out of his lungs. I stood over him. Old hatred pulsed through my blood. I kicked him onto his back. I'd despised the Tirion Emperor for centuries because of what he'd done. "I should kill you." I kicked his leg, and he grunted. "You took Kael from me, destroyed all he was. He came back a shell, a man I barely knew." But new memories overlaid the anger, my love for James pricking my sudden fury. He'd been a pawn, had suffered as much as Kael ... maybe more as he'd held the emperor for half a millennium. My gaze slid to Paxton's wrenched head, and I winced. Hell, I didn't know what to think anymore.

"That isn't your Kael."

The alpha-beast slunk towards Paxton's body, sniffing cautiously. A rough tongue licked over his cheek and the sound ran a shiver over my skin. Paxton had been their master, but that wouldn't stop the animals from eating him. "He hadn't been my Kael for a long time." I couldn't even mourn him as I refused to hold the creature that had tortured him so long ago. "The monster living in you took him from me."

James held my gaze, and I wanted to hate him. I'd planned for this moment for years, when I would stand over the Emperor and pass the sentence of death on him. But the past two days still burned fresh in my thoughts... My new feelings mocked me, but still, something about James didn't sit right in my head. Behind me, the soft pad of paws told of more approaching beasts. They would only ignore us for so long. Damn it, I had to execute him.

"I never took Kael from you."

My muscles locked. I couldn't act. I could only talk. "You've played me from the moment I fell out of that body-tube."

"Katya, listen to me." James shifted and propped himself up on his elbows. His gaze flicked to the body to his right. "He was never Kael Paxton. Not the real one." He let out a slow, tight breath and his dark gaze found me. *"I'm Kael Paxton."*

Chapter Thirteen

Sour laughter burst out of me. “As if I’m going to fall for that.” The lie made up my mind. James Kinsare would do anything to save his own life. And once he was dead by my hand, I would get over my feelings. A tight, sour ache twisted my heart and screamed I was wrong, but I had to believe the lie. For all that the emperor had done to Kael, to my planet and its people, I had to end his life. “Time to die, Your Imperial Majesty.”

His eyes shot to the right, and damn it, I fell for the ruse. Probably because I wanted to. He shoved at my leg and jumped free. But he didn’t attack. Instead, he scrambled down into the darkness of the lift shaft. “Shit.” The animals looked up from Paxton’s body, and the alpha-beast emitted a low, threatening growl. “Shit.”

I had only one choice ... and so I followed James into the lift.

The sound of him clambering down the ladder mixed with his harsh breathing. I had His Royal Highness, the Almighty and Very Reverend Emperor of Tirion panicked. Good. Bastard.

Anger bloomed in my chest. How dare he claim to be Kael ... but then nothing was beyond him. Paxton had been right. The Emperor had destroyed everything I’d built up over the centuries. He’d dismantled my networks of informants, killed my soldiers, destroyed my safehouses, all of my effort to take down his regime wiped out only a few months before now—I tightened my grip on the rung until the old metal dug hard into my palms—not just a few months ago. Decades had passed. Betrayal had caused my downfall. I knew I had a traitor close to me, and one man had stood out.

Now I’d never find out the full truth. My main suspect lay dead on the terminal floor.

A loud thump echoed. James had reached the lift.

“James?” I winced. It felt odd calling him that now, but I’d be damned before I’d call him majesty. And I’d slept with him... My head fell against the rung, chips of rust digging into my forehead. Why had I done that? *Because he sets me on fire.* That disturbing thought almost had me groaning, but it was better than the fact that feelings for him had grown in me. *Me.* The woman who had tried to kill him with every chance that presented itself. My stomach cramped.

Hunger and thirst, that’s all my pain was ... and James had all of the supplies.

I willed my mind to focus on that problem. It was safer.

The slow climb down began again, my shout unanswered.

“Welcome to Solis Planum!”

The original Katya’s voice rang in my head, sudden, unexpected and it froze me to the ladder. I’d sorted the separate identities squatting in my brain years, *years* before, settled them into distinct units, apart from my own consciousness. The return of my memories had shuffled them out of place.

I winced and rested my forehead against a rusty rung. Shit. James had nowhere to go, and it would be hours before rescue found him. In the silent darkness, I could think and let my movements become automatic as I continued the climb down.

Time pressed down on me, centuries of history, experience and people slotting back into place in my brain. I let the past take me as sharpened memories shot across my mind. I didn’t fight them. I had to settle back into who I had been...

Doctor Ortaega laid a heavy arm across my shoulders. The heat of her hand bled through the thin surgical gown some unnamed research assistant had handed me. My first human contact. It sent prickles over my skin in a wild rush. "I'm very happy to meet you, Katya."

"Katya?"

Doctor Ortaega grinned at me and something about the freshness, the joy in her expression had the muscles in my face twitching, stretching until I mirrored her grin.

"That's your name." She waved her free arm around the refectory, to the silent men and women who stared at me, their mouths gaping. "And this is your home." She leaned in close, and her breath brushed my ear. My shoulder lifted, my head curling in to protect my skin from the strange frisson. "And you wouldn't believe how many pretties there are here. Hand picked most of them myself."

I blinked. "Pretties?"

"Oh your memories will surface in good time, Katya. I ensured they were some of my best ones."

I groaned and slid down a few more rungs. Doctor Ortaega had stuffed my head with her numerous—and often exotic—conquests, almost overshadowing her impressive academic achievements. I bit my lip. But I thought of Doctor Katya Ortaega as a mother in the few months we'd been together. The need to be like her had pushed her personality, her memories to the fore in the Amalgam she'd created. I'd become an environmental geneticist to honour her.

And her appetites had made my falling for Kael's pretty face, and James' beauty painfully predictable.

A tear leaked onto my cheek. They'd all died, of course, the lab rats of Solis Planum. The imperial blade Doctor Ortaega had identified on the monitor had been an advance scout for a massive fleet. My palms dug hard against the sharp metal of the rung as another memory rocked against my thoughts. I squeezed my eyes shut. Too much of my past held unbearable pain ... but then, it had made me who I was.

Engines screamed, the rock resonating with the shriek of sound, and it dragged me out of my bed, half-awake and blood pounding. Doctor Ortaega burst into the narrow room, her blonde hair almost as wild as her eyes.

She grabbed my discarded clothes and shoved them at me. "Come on!"

"What's going on? What's that noise?"

"They've been scouting us long before you emerged. The emperor has always had a suspicion that we'd succeeded in creating you. Seems he's had it confirmed. You need to hide."

"Hide? But you made me for—"

She grabbed my arm and yanked me out of my room and through the twisting corridors to the command centre. The place had swept into a whirlwind of activity with the shouts and the clamour of techs. Colonel Smith stood as its calm eye. I met her eye, and she gave me a brief nod, before the doctor dragged me up the curve of steps to a blank block of wall.

She pressed a series of nodules and revealed a doorway. Pushing me inside, she waved her arm around the cramped space. "A bed, a food unit and a communications console. All that you need now is a pretty boy..." She smirked at me, but the expression was forced. "We will fight off this first wave and then escape to Earth."

Katya Ortaega pulled me into a fierce hug. "I'm so proud of you. Couldn't be more proud." I tried not to hear the emotion in her voice, the press of tears and terror. "And I promise... I'll be back for you."

My throat ached, my jaw tight as I bit down on more tears. She never kept her promise. She never came back. When anxiety had driven me out of my shielded den, I found the whole place empty, no bodies, no blood. The invading army had sterilised the facility.

I blew out hot air and the grief faded back to the little box in which I'd hidden it for six hundred years. More of my life parcelled itself away, enabling me to function. A few of the memories jumped out at me in a brief, random jumble before dropping down into their little compartments. Snatches of the decades I travelled as a terraformer, laboratories and wild, barren lands. Leaving Mars in a crashed Blade I found on the other side of the planet. Leading a raid on one of the Emperor's flesh depots on the moons of Alpha-Volantis-3... But one, ancient memory flashed across my brain, and I fell back into it without thinking.

Solis Planum stood deserted, and I scavenged what I could as I tried to find a way to get off Mars. One month after the Tirion fleet had sterilised the facility, Kael found me.

"Care to share?"

I almost choked on the mouthful of bread. Without thought, I dropped the rations I carried and pulled out the short-bladed cook's knife from the sheath at my hip. Holding it up, I glared at the stranger.

He leaned back against the steel counter, arms folded across his chest, and a smug grin on his face. The shot of light shone down over his wild tangle of dark hair, his brown sculpted features and his long, lean body. He was a Doctor Ortaega pretty boy ... and that knowledge burned tight in my chest.

"How did you get in here?" I nodded towards the open door, my gaze never leaving him. "The doors are coded."

His head tilted, the light shifting over his face. Something about him pulled at me, the tug of it sharp in my chest. I flexed my fingers around the knife and found his eyes there.

"You look handy with that. Are you?"

"Enough."

I almost echoed his smile and humour shone in his eyes. "Should I be afraid?"

Maybe because I'd been alone for so long, I warmed to this stranger. My grin grew. Or maybe it was the echoes of Katya Ortaega in me that really couldn't resist a pretty face... At that minute, I didn't let it bother me. "How did you get in?"

"I'm handy in other ways."

The Doctor in me almost growled. Damned Amalgam memories, I still didn't have them separated and confined. They could erupt and taint my thoughts, words and actions at any time. It didn't help that this stranger had a completely kissable mouth. I tamped down the need to explore what promised to be a lithe and muscled young body under the smooth fitting flight suit. "Who are you and who's out there?"

His grin faded, and the deadness dulling his bright blue eyes chilled me. "My name is Kael Paxton. And to answer your question, no one. I've not found anyone else. At all." He waved his hand between us. "There's only you and me." His mouth pulled to one side, and I felt the sudden force behind his humour. "Well, you and me and that very

sharp knife."

I jammed the knife into a kitchen block on the counter beside me. The blade wobbled. I caught Kael's wince. "What?"

"You really do know how to use that thing, don't you?"

It was my turn for the smug grin. "That would be telling."

Pain burned in my chest, and I clamped my jaw to stop the run of yet more tears. My wild and beautiful boy. For years, I'd cursed him, thinking he'd abandoned me, until he found me on the Ghost of Jupiter service station—

"Fuck." The curse echoed around me. Some memories I didn't want to touch, just wanted them packed away—but this last one lashed at me. It was the reason why I'd hounded the Tirion Emperor for so many years, the moment I'd dedicated my life to that mission. I could taste the dry dust of the cramped room, undercut with my scent, overwhelming after months confined the dark little hole.

I stilled on the ladder and took deep, easing breaths and let the memory take me.

I fell back into the pillow, breathing hard with sweat coating me. I dragged a hand over my face, tangling in my damp hair. What had I been expecting? The rapture from my youth? It just hadn't happened. Staring up at the ceiling, I held back a wince.

"That was..." Paxton's head fell against my shoulder, his breath hot over my collarbone. His hands slicked down over my ribs, waist, hips and a brief flare of desire washed through me. "It was worth finding you again."

I snorted. "So that's all you wanted after almost a century." I turned on my side in the narrow bunk, propping my head up with my hand. I pulled at the sheet and drew it over my cooling skin. "And it has been years." I touched his bristle-roughened cheek, tracing over the remains of features I never thought I'd see again. "You haven't aged as you should. Been doing something illegal, Paxton?"

His gaze dropped. "No." His hand closed over mine, lifting it from his face, and his thumb rubbed slow, precise circles over my palm. I let him find what he wanted to say. Tension tightened his body, his shoulders hunching. His blue eyes flicked up to me for a brief moment. "That day on the plateau when I was hunting." The press of his thumb into my hand grew almost painful. "The emperor's guard took me, a Blade just swept down... I don't know what you've thought all these years, but I didn't leave you by choice, Katya. I would never..."

I stared at him, at the shine of tears in his beautiful eyes. My throat tightened, and the ancient pain flared again, edged with an unexpected rush that had the blood burning in my face. Adrenalin surged and I started to shake. "You ... you were taken?"

He let out a long, slow breath. "The Tirion Emperor has always wanted a way to extend his life. He needed something in Terran DNA and he found it in me." A wry smile pulled at his mouth. "Of course, he didn't take a quick blood sample, offer me a healing strip and send me on my way." The smile died and he was back to staring at the sheets. "He would hunt me, sometimes for days and he always caught me. Then ... then he would feed. The more he hunted, the more he fed, somehow it changed me."

Fury surged through me, fury and guilt. I held him, slowly rocking, whether for his comfort or my own I didn't know. His tears had burned down though to my soul.

The anger curled fresh and hot in my gut. James had confirmed the horrors Kael Paxton had endured. The emperor had changed him. Broken him. But in that moment, I put aside my desire to regain my easy life as a terraformer and remembered by purpose.

In the beginning, I thought Kael was human when I first met him, so I didn't tell him what I was. He never asked. I let out a slow breath, wanting to focus my fury. The plan to create diplomats had failed but the scientists had stumbled upon something else, something they hadn't been expecting. A weapon. I winced. How could I try to explain to the eighteen year old Kael that scientists had then grown me in a vat with only one purpose: to kill the Tirion Emperor?

"Time to fulfill that purpose," I muttered and increased my speed down the ladder.

I stretched my arms, rotating my shoulders, before I dropped down through the lift hatch and followed the twist of corridors to the command centre. James would want to see what damage Paxton had done. Anger kept my limbs hot and moving fast, the promise of the chase firing through me. Yes, he wasn't the only one skilled in the hunt. The emperor had proven a wily opponent down the centuries, but now I had him. He had killed my people, my planet and destroyed the only man I ever loved. The feelings I had for him were simply an aberration born in a distorted mind. My gut twisted. No, nothing more than that. His lie about being Kael, a last desperate act, only iced the satisfaction I would get at watching the light die in his eyes.

I held hard to that fury. I needed it because, as insane as it was, my nerve was failing me.

It had me slowing as I approached the wide mouth of the corridor feeding into the command centre. The *blip, blip, blip* of the distress signal still beat through the air. Had that been a part of Paxton's plan? For the imperial crew to find their emperor dead beside his greatest enemy?

James stood at the console, tapping commands.

My gaze slid down his lithe body, and I fought to ignore the curl of heat low in my belly. The age-old hate still flickered at the back of my mind, but time had dulled it. The love? That still had a freshness to it, one that had my breath quick and my heart pounding. I couldn't let it control me. "Did you think fucking me would stop me killing you?"

James typed in a final flourish, looked up and stepped back from the console. "It's been a long time, Katya. I wanted to make love to you while I still could."

"Make *love*?" I spat the words. "We didn't do that on Deimos."

"No." James sighed and he winced. "Can I have hypoxia as an excuse?"

"We had enough air, James. So no, it's not an acceptable excuse."

"I was angry." He took steps towards me, his body tense, nervous. He rubbed his hands together, the sound dry, rasping. "Angry at the emperor, at you, at myself." He stopped at the bottom of the curving steps. He straightened and let his hands fall to his sides. "I'm Kael." A smile pulled at his mouth and something about it tugged at my heart. "Believe me, Katya."

"You're not him." I closed the distance between us. His warmed spice scent wrapped around me and I couldn't help it, I drew it deep into my lungs. James' scent intoxicated me, but I had an eidetic memory. Kael Paxton smelled different. "You don't smell like him."

"Alrai-7."

James reached to stroke my hair, catching loose strands behind my ear. I let him, the brush of his fingertips tingling against the shell of my ear and slipping down to caress my neck. They'd built me to be a fighting machine. James Kinsare posed no real threat. Not

physically, anyway. “What about that planet? You took away my memory of it.”

“And I thought it permanent.” His gaze lifted to my forehead. “Should have known that brain of yours would break through it eventually.

“The emperor wanted to change me, break me.” His hand dropped away, and cool air washed away the warmth of his touch. I ignored the ache in my chest as he walked away.

“Was this before or after he took chunks out of you?”

“After.”

Pain lanced his voice, and I felt like a shit for hurting him. My hands balled into fists. Damn it, he had killed everyone I’d ever known. “So the emperor changed what you looked like, sounded like, smelled like.” Sarcasm dripped from my voice. “Poor you.”

“He did more than that. He cloned me. The old me.”

Ice sank into my veins. The past started to slot into place and the gaps in Paxton’s memory started to make sense. I jabbed a thumb upwards to the surface. “You’re calling *him* a clone?”

“The emperor never had the skill of the people here. The infamous god-makers.” James leaned back against a console and his hand waved over the sun-filled command centre. “The Kael that found you—what, about a hundred years after you thought you lost him?—wasn’t a true Amalgam.”

“This is insane. Why would he create a clone and set him free...” The ice slid lower and filled my stomach. “Me. He was a trap for me.” I laughed and shook my head. “Then he proved to be the worst mole in the whole history of moles. Five hundred *years*, James. Five hundred years before he tried to kill both of us.”

My argument made sense, but I couldn’t feel it in my bones. Kael Paxton had flitted in and out of my life in those five hundred years I hid and hunted through the known-worlds, never settling and always something tearing him inside. I’d blamed it on his time as the emperor’s prisoner. I still did.

“To turn him, the emperor mixed his own DNA in with mine, put a price on your head and sent him after you.” James frowned but then his dark eyes held me. Something old and remembered lurked there, something I hadn’t seen in Paxton’s eyes for so long. Love. My throat closed and I ignored the burn of tears. “Though he still couldn’t purge, even from a clone, what I felt for you—”

“Don’t.” I held up my hand. “You’re not him.”

James folded his arms. “Then kill me.”

“What?”

He shrugged. “You’ve been very vocal down the years about the ways in which you’d execute me.” The humour slid from his face. “So, pick one.”

“I...”

“Having doubts?”

I wanted to thump him, maybe give him a good, hard kick ... but I didn’t want to deliver the killing blow. Damn the man. “Why did you wipe my memory on Alrai-7?”

“I didn’t. The emperor did.”

I blinked. The resurfaced memory stood out clear in my mind. I *hadn’t* kissed an over-tall alien; I’d kissed James. The touch of his mouth burned fresh. “Liar. It was you.”

“He lived inside of me. And in the early days, I couldn’t fight him, push him back. Well, not to a great degree. He wanted you dead on Alrai-7. I forced a memory wipe.”

I ran a hand through my hair. There were only a few short years in which I *hadn’t*

hated the Tirion Emperor. After what happened to Kael, I devoted my life to seeing him dead, just as the long vanished scientists of Solis Planum had planned. Now he had my age-old purpose in turmoil. “This is crazy.”

“You keep saying that, but how many people live in you, Katya?”

“He wasn’t made here. Kael was human.”

“I was *born* human.”

“No.” I strode across the metal floor, avoiding the dents Paxton had left. I stopped only inches from James, glaring up at him. “No. Stop this. Kael Paxton is dead. I ... I ended his life years after *you* killed him.”

“You want me to prove I’m him? Fine.” James took my arm and pulled me back up the steps. He ran his hand along the rock wall, fingers digging into the smoothed surface.

I stared. He couldn’t know about...

A faint series of clicks ran in a distinctive sequence, dust burst out of the fine cracks and then a door swung open with a groan. The dull drone of fans kicked in, and I stared into the little room with its metal-framed bed, monitors and a battered food unit. The musky scent of old sheets mixed with rock dust, and my mind shot back to the hot, terrified days I’d spend locked inside.

“This is where Ortaega hid you from the Tirion troops. Probably where you hid after I disappeared.”

I pried his fingers from my arm. He couldn’t know that. “My Kael told you—”

“Do you think I’d share this? Tell the emperor about your bolt hole?”

I felt his eyes on me as I stepped into the hidden room, the walls closing tight around me. I shivered.

“Paxton didn’t know it was here, did he? He looked right at it and registered nothing.”

I ran my finger over the food unit, creating a line in the thick dust. The monitors hadn’t worked, that was the main flaw in the room’s design the first time the door had shut on me, locking me away. I’d sat on the bed and known nothing of the outside. When the food unit broke, it forced me to leave.

I sat on the mattress, disturbing a thin cloud of dust.

James was right. I wanted to believe that Paxton hadn’t wanted to reveal its location, but the room held memories neither of us could ignore. The man who lay dead in the terminal far above us hadn’t known of this room’s existence.

“I chased you into this room and propositioned you.” James leant against the wall, a smile tugging at his mouth.

I blinked. He looked, he leaned ... for a painful moment, the eighteen year old Kael Paxton lounged in his place.

“*Well, I hunted you down, caught you, so ... what’s my reward?*”

I heard his voice again. He’d hunted me, just as I’d asked him, chasing me through the twists and tunnels of Solis Planum until I led him to the little room. I’d wanted him. Understatement. With Doctor Ortaega’s memories still whirling untamed through my mind, he’d filled my thoughts and dreams with too many vividly carnal images. It was my good fortune that my designers had made me very good at luring my prey.

A wicked gleam had caught his blue eyes and need had surged through me hard and fast.

I stared at my feet and smiled. He’d opened his mouth ... but with the memories, the

attitude of the original Doctor Katya Ortaega beating at my brain and the wild adrenalin rush of being chased, the poor boy hadn't stood a chance.

I looked up and lifted an eyebrow. "*You propositioned me?*"

Heat slashed across his cheeks, and I bit back a smile. It was endearing. "You grabbed my arm and flipped me over your shoulder onto that bed." He winced. "Huge dent to my adolescent pride."

My fingers curled tight into the dusty blankets, and my heart thudded. I couldn't believe him, I couldn't, but still I fed into what appeared to be a shared history. "You got over it."

"Katya, it's me." He closed over the door, leaving a small open crack. The faint drone of the fans intensified, and the sly smile on his face had my chest tight. "And this time I get to play it out how I imagined."

"You imagined?"

James laughed. "Probably from the moment you threw down that knife in the kitchen. How could I resist an armed and dangerous woman?"

He had memories of us but memories could be planted. I was living proof of that. Still, a part of me wanted to believe. Then the hollow roar of guilt might fade as the creature lying dead in the Solis Planum terminal wouldn't be *my* Kael. "So what was your plan to seduce me?"

James pushed himself away from the wall and shrugged out of his jacket. He dropped it over the food unit. "I'd seen you looking at me. That time I fixed the kitchen unit and I had to strip down?" He smirked and his eyes shone. "You were practically drooling."

I shrugged, the memory suddenly sharp in my thoughts. His lithe torso had gleamed with sweat and grime, muscles straining as he stretched to work on the overhead pipes. The damn image could still get my flesh tight. "You were pretty."

"And you sound like your namesake." He chuckled as he tugged his tie free. "In fact she had that same vacant expression..."

I blinked. "You met Ortaega?"

"She visited me, came to crow about her Amalgam breakthrough. Then she prowled around me and I felt like ... dessert."

I snorted. "Yes. Grown men shook when she found them interesting." Licking at my lips, I pushed myself back on the thin mattress until my spine hit the wall. "So ... you noticed my noticing. And?"

His tie joined his jacket, and James started on his shirt. "I didn't know what you were. I thought you were the daughter of one of the techs and I had to be subtle."

I couldn't hold back the laughter. "Poor you."

He pulled off his shirt, and my humour fell away. I sighed. He was a man now, filling out in a way that made me want to throw him onto the bed again. I hoped it wasn't my imagination that had me seeing the lithe strength of his younger body. I wanted to believe he was my Kael too much. My heart rate jumped as his fingers moved to his belt.

"I planned to let you have a good long look and then let you decide if you wanted to go further."

"Subtle, James."

He shrugged. "I was eighteen."

"And you still plan to," he pulled off the rest of his clothes, "get completely naked."

I drew in a deep breath, heat flushing under my skin. My brain started to fog. "What was I supposed to do again?"

James tilted his head. "I was leaving it up to you."

I slid forward, took his hands and pulled him towards me. My fingers traced a slow pattern over the hard muscles of his stomach up to the solid curve of his pectorals. His skin burned hot and satin smooth. I closed my eyes, letting his scent sink deep into my lungs. He didn't feel the same, the texture had changed, subtle but my fingers knew the difference. "Did that monster leave anything of the old you?"

James covered my hand as it slid back down his chest. "Only my need to protect you."

Tears threatened. Damn it. To push down the threat of emotion, I made history repeat itself. With a half yelp, I had him on his back on the bed. I forced a bright smile. "Can't seem to help myself."

James winced and rubbed at his spine. "Was the mattress always this thin?"

I straddled him, and the memory of our time in the carriage rose through me, of him holding me and the shine of love in his eyes. I swallowed and fought the surge of emotion. I smirked instead. "You're obviously getting old, James."

"Old?" His hands gripped my hips. "I'm in my prime." His mouth twitched. "My six hundred year old prime."

I leaned forward, pressing my chest to his, our mouths almost level. The heat of him bled through the thin fabric of my suit, warming me. I didn't know whose heart beat harder. My hand slid around his head, tangled in his silken hair. "Were you born Kael Paxton?"

He opened his mouth to speak, and my lips took his in a slow, melting kiss that ebbed down to my toes. I couldn't taste Kael, not a trace, but the power of James flowed through me, exotic, intoxicating and I moaned, fisting my hand in his hair. "You're addictive."

"Can you taste the truth, Katya? I'm your Kael."

His words wrapped warm and sweet around me, and I wanted to cling to the truth I felt beneath them. But some part of me denied it, thought it impossible. It would mean that, for more years than I wanted to remember I'd tried to kill the only man who had meant anything to me. Sitting up, I ran my fingers along the securing tabs of my suit, peeling it away from my skin. I wanted it put from my mind ... and I had the perfect way.

James eyes darkened and colour heated his cheeks. "So you believe me?"

I pulled my arms free, cool, fan-driven air smelling of rock and dust brushing against my bare skin. I didn't answer, I couldn't. I dipped my head to his chest and curled my tongue around his nipple, smiling as he groaned. "Time to have my wicked way with you again."

"Katya..."

A few quick manoeuvres and I was free of the bottom half of my suit. I kicked it from the bed. "Now where was I?" I settled back over his hips, pressing against his erection in a slow slide. I leaned forward, my mouth hovering over his left nipple. My tongue darted out and James gasped. "I think I was here."

James' hands ran hot over my ribs, my spine, possessive, wanting. I twisted my hips, easing his cock over my waiting flesh. Slipping my hand between us, I guided him, rubbing him over my clitoris, welcoming the little pulses of pleasure tightening my

muscles.

“James...” I almost sighed his name and guided his penis back, back until I started to push him inside me. Releasing him, I sank down and groaned as he filled me. “Oh that is nice.”

The expression of want and desire in James’ gaze deepened the pleasure, and, slow and sure, I lifted my hips before sliding back down. His fingers traced over my thighs, thumbs pressing against the sensitive inner flesh.

I closed my eyes, lost in his teasing touch as I rode him. “What—?”

James sat up, his large hands holding me, and then his mouth found mine. Kisses melted together, his heat, his strength surrounding, invading me. We moved together, finding delicious rhythm, the sliding of slick skin, of tangling tongues building a slow, sweet tension deep in my pelvis.

The tightening of orgasm had me gasping, wanting more, demanding it. I met his thrusts, my face buried against his neck. His teeth grazed my shoulder, sharpening the growing pleasure, flaring it until I just... I just...

A cry tore from me, a rush of heat tearing up through my body. My spine arched, and then I clung to James, riding him through the unending wave of joy. I knew this, had first experienced it in the little hidden room. Light danced over my vision and my body shook. I wanted him with me, sharing the riot of pleasure.

James moaned against my shoulder, his bite involuntary as he came.

I laughed, crushing him to me. “Very nice,” I said, the words a breathless rush into his damp skin. “Very, *very* nice.”

His arms tightened around me, and his mouth teased my neck. He sighed. “Better than I imagined. So much better.”

“James, we’ve been at it like rabbits for two days.” Reluctantly, I pulled myself free and pressed a kiss to his mouth. “I need a drink.” The fans had strengthened, and air whipped against my damp skin. I shivered and bent to grab my suit, tugging it over my legs and twisting the fabric over my chest and shoulders.

James shifted off the bed and started to pull on his own clothes. He looked up from buttoning his shirt. “It’s ... not quite the same.”

“Why?”

“You weren’t you. Not my Katya.”

My heart squeezed. *My Katya*. But I still couldn’t process the raw emotion surging through me so I turned my attention to my suit. I massaged the fabric around my toes, evening out the thick soles. Still sitting on the bed, I stamped twice and then froze, my heart a stone in my chest.

I’d lost myself to the past, to a false dream. My spine straightened, and I slipped my hands to my knees. I’d fallen for his lie and now I had my reward.

Black-armoured men stood in the doorway. Weapons whined and gloved fingers slid too easily over sensitive triggers. I stared at the barrels of four Scythe-9-50s.

“Majesty,” barked a soldier, with a gold captain’s insignia on his sleeve, “we await your order to execute this traitor.”

Chapter Fourteen

James lifted his eyebrow and for a second—a whole second—I thought he would give the order to fire. Heat fired through my body. I would take the bastard out with me—

But then he smiled, something secret and too amused.

My stomach hollowed. Had he told me the truth? I swallowed and gripped my knees to stop my hands shaking. Was he really Kael? I had to label the nervous twist to my stomach ... trust. The need to believe him burned through my body. “Well, *Majesty*?” I asked.

James straightened and pulled on his jacket. “Stand easy, Captain Maas.”

“But, Majesty.” Maas’ shoulders shifted and his hands flexed around his Scythe-9-50, a gloved finger hovering over the trigger. “It’s *Katya Ortaega*.”

“I’m well aware of that, thank you, Captain.”

Maas’ face flushed and he killed his weapon, the teeth-jarring whine fading to silence. He ordered his men back and then fell back himself. James held out his hand to me, and the Captain’s eyes widened. He caught me staring, and his gaze dropped.

“Shall we, Katya?”

James’ fingers closed warm and secure around mine, and he pulled me to my feet. I wanted to believe him. Had to hope that I hadn’t seriously misjudged all of it and that I wasn’t walking into a trap.

James leaned in close and his mouth brushed my ear. “Still not quite sure you trust me?”

“What do you think?”

His smile curved against my skin, and liquid warmth eased through my body. I’d always loved it when Kael smiled. A real smile, not the sarcastic one, but the one that connected us, connected me to someone else. My eyes closed. Damn it, I still had to be wary ... but it had been so long since I’d been close to anyone.

“Let’s get out of here, Katya.”

James led the way from the room. Two soldiers fell into step in front of us, two behind and I fought to keep my shoulder from hunching. Every one of his men knew my face, knew it and wanted me dead. The soldier who killed me had been promised more money than could be sanely spent.

We set a brisk pace down the corridor, the thump of their heavy boots over the tile tramping through my memory. I’d lost count of the times I’d hidden from, run from, attacked one of the emperor’s elite squads. I winced and hoped they wouldn’t hold too much of a grudge.

I stared around me. Years hadn’t changed the structure of Solis Planum. They had built it to last, with only a few cracks and dents marring the metal-panelled floor. Memory played over the walls. They’d let me loose in these tunnels, training me to hunt and to kill.

Doors lay blasted on the floor, the frame seared and buckled, evidence of the squad’s determination to get to their emperor. Beyond carved steps dropped down into a curved, open hangar. A Scimitar squatted on the smooth bay floor, all sleek-white lines and its

size screaming its imperial power. Four Blades surrounded it.

“How did you get here so quickly, Captain?”

Maas trotted ahead of us down the steps. “The Commander thought it best to maintain regular deep scans. He picked up the distress call and ordered an investigation.” His gaze skirted over me. “We discovered the remains of your run-around in orbit, Majesty.”

So that explained what Paxton had done to James’ ship.

Warm winds whipped around me, filling the air with dust and the scent of the great crevasse beyond the cavern. The whine of Scythe-9-50s rose, and my nerves leapt. I couldn’t shake the belief that James led me, the woman who had tried to kill him for half a millennium, into a trap.

He squeezed my hand, and it snapped my attention to him. His mouth twitched. “I have plans for you, Katya.”

Heat flared under my cheeks. I wasn’t a naïve girl—hell, I’d never been one—but something about the promise in James’ voice had excitement firing through my blood. “You do?”

His reply was a smirk that made me want to kick him. Weapons still whined around me, sights trained on my head and chest, so stamping on James’ hand-made shoes probably wasn’t my best plan.

“Stand easy,” James’ smooth voice echoed around the hangar. “Katya Ortaega is under my protection.”

Confusion flickered briefly across more than one harsh face, but then the professional masks slid into place, and the soldiers lowered their weapons. Men stood back, leaving the way clear to the ramp of the Scimitar.

“After you.” James waved me up the narrow ramp stretching out from the blunt nose of the immense, wedge-shaped craft.

A uniformed attendant, standing in his starched whites, snapped to wary attention at the entrance, his gaze narrowed on me. His mouth pursed. I grinned at him, and his sour expression deepened. Out of the wild wind of the hangar, the air inside the ship warmed by skin and tasted clean, fresh.

“We are not to be disturbed.” James pointed the attendant back into the cabin, its white curved wall forming a short corridor. “Lay in a direct route to Tocularis-4.” He turned and took my arm. “This way.”

James marched me through the narrow corridor to a tiled hall. Columns of gleaming white marble stretched around, two, curved stairways reaching to an upper level. Washes of pale light played over the smooth floor and precious stones glittered. “You like this style?”

James shrugged and pulled me towards the nearest staircase. “Some of the emperor’s tastes I can’t seem to shake. Ostentatious displays of wealth and power seems to be the worst habit.”

“He’s still in there, in your head?”

James’ fast pace on the stairs slowed. “Fragments of him.”

“*He* destroyed my people?”

James winced. His hand squeezed mine, his thumb pressing soft circles into the back of my hand. “He saw you as my weakness. I barely kept you safe.” A rueful smile pulled at his mouth. “But then Paxton contacted me and informed me with some pleasure that

you were in a body-tube on Deimos, contained, ready, with no memory. That I could kill you whenever I wanted. It was time for me to act.”

“Act? You left me for thirty bloody years.” I stopped at the top of the stairs, and all thought drained out of my head. More imperial wealth stretched out before us, with another foyer lined by more white marble columns. Lush gardens, stuffed with every plant imaginable from spiky ubae ferns and broad-leaved hostas to the most delicate and rare Agasta lilies. They filled the space between the pillars and the curve of the hull. Disbelief had me asking, “Gardens? On a ship?” I didn’t wait for a reply as my mind kicked back into anger. “Thirty years?”

“I needed the time.”

“For what?”

“Time to do what *I* was designed for.”

James grinned at me and strode down the avenue of columns to heavy wooden doors. They swung in before him.

“Wait! What the hell are you on about?” I ran to catch up with him and found myself in a lavish sitting room that stretched the width of the ship. Natural light slipped through the transparent hull. James really lived like this? Of course, I’d studied his lifestyle, the ships, the palaces, hunting for a weakness ... but seeing his environment in person ... it was incredible. I focused. “I want an explanation.”

James tugged at his tie. “And I want a bath.”

“I can still kill you, you know. A quick twist.” I wrung my hands and made a grating sound.

“You’d be dead within seconds.”

I shrugged, but my expression had fixed into hard lines. Tiredness, thirst and hunger burned through me. “I want to stop playing games.”

James threw his tie over a yellow-silk chair and shucked off his jacket. “I have a bathing pool big enough for two.” His brow furrowed. “Actually, it’s big enough for twelve.”

I watched his fingers sliding automatically over his shirt buttons, and my mouth dried for reasons other than thirst. Naked James ... always a temptation.

I pinched at the bridge of my nose. Damn it, I thought that with the return of my memories, my life would make sense again. Instead, what I got was even more confusion. I had the woman I’d been for the previous two days, the one who loved James Kinsare. And then there was the woman I’d been for the last six hundred years, bitter, hardened by grief and loss. A fighter, whose single aim had been to destroy the man who had just pulled off his shirt to reveal the most biteable abs this side of Eta Carinae.

I let out a slow sigh. Damn it, my need for him was winning. “Do you often fit twelve people in your bath?”

“Not anymore.” He kicked off his shoes and padded toward a door. It slid silently back into the satin-lined walls. “I never got clean.”

I stopped myself from groaning and followed him, pulling at the tabs securing my suit.

Memories of the people who created me, of all those down the years that I’d known and lost swirled through my thoughts, breaking free of their little compartments. My past. A past that despite my best efforts had crippled me, and one perhaps I could finally lay to rest. My gut twisted. I’d known Paxton was a traitor. Known it for too many years,

probably from the time in the little room on the Ghost of Jupiter station. I'd agreed to his plan and climbed into that body-tube because I had nothing left. I'd become soul-weary, tired of breathing and *never* being able to walk away and just die.

The suit puddled to the floor at my feet and I toed it to one side. The small mosaic tiles eased warmth through my bare feet. For two days, I'd been alive again, felt my heart race with fear, excitement ... passion.

James, naked, stepped into the shallow end of the circular pool. Steam rose up around him as he waded through the water, until it dropped deep enough for him to swim. I watched the smooth cut of his perfect body through the blue water.

"Katya?" James turned, his arms curving through the water, holding him afloat.

"I'm so tired, James."

He swam back and climbed out of the pool. Taking my hand, he eased me to his chest. Warm, wet, I let the steady thud of his heart beat through me. His arms wrapped around me and for the first time in too long, the touch of another comforted me. "Who are you, James?"

He pressed a kiss against my hair and pulled back. With an arm about my waist, he eased me into the water. It ran smooth and deliciously hot against my skin, swelling up over my thighs, stomach, breasts. It carried me as the steam rose and twisted, scented with lemons, oranges and more exotic fruit even I couldn't name.

"We never shared that, did we?"

"What?"

"Where we came from originally." James pushed back a blonde tendril of my hair, his hands straying to the curve of my shoulder. "I had the resources to find out about you, about this base and the scientists. But you ... always on the run with your rag-tag bands of guerrillas from a dozen different worlds." He gave me a brief smile. "My father also worked for Webb."

Something contracted in my stomach. "You had a father?"

"I told you." He scooped his hand through the water and the curve of his palm filled with white suds. Sliding behind me, he washed the warm foam over my skin. "I was born human."

I let myself float and enjoy the caress of James' palms over my shoulder blades, the dig of his fingertips into tight muscles. "Lucky you."

"Maybe." He pressed a kiss to my wet shoulder and I shivered. "Ortaega's experiments kept failing, so Webb wanted a contingency plan. My father approached them with my fluke genome. I was almost what Ortaega had spent years trying to create by artificial methods. I couldn't hold your accumulated knowledge..."

"But you had the strength to hold one."

"They trained me, trained me to purge others from my mind with one aim. To offer me to the emperor. That was my childhood. Until the Tirion attack and my father hid me from the invading army in a research tube. I had to stay safe. Everyone, everyone was sterilised." His hands tightened on my shoulders, but then the sudden tension eased.

"Duck down, and I'll wash your hair."

I bit at my lip and did as he asked. Trust, still an alien concept to me. My heart beat fast, expecting an attack ... but none came. I rose up, water cascading over me, my hair plastered to my face and neck.

"See, I didn't drown you."

A sigh escaped me as his fingers worked lather through my hair. "It's not every day an emperor washes my hair." My body floated, the water letting me drift with ease. "Don't you have a host of concubines pandering to your every whim?"

"You get tired of concubines."

Something edged his voice. He was laughing at me, and it stung. "It's not like I didn't do my research on you, James. The orgies?"

"Rumours, innuendo, lies."

"All of them?" His fingers stilled in my hair. Busted. "So that's a no?"

He resumed the quick, rapid rubs over my skull. "In the early days the beast within me had an appetite for new ... experiences in his new body."

And he'd just made me pity him for exploring more flesh than probably was humanly possible. "Well said, James. So it was a chore?"

He paused. "Eventually..."

A small laugh escaped me. "You're incorrigible."

"Yes, I am. Now rinse."

I dropped down through the water, turning my head and running my fingers through soapy strands. The water swirled around me, suds clearing even as I turned my head. I resurfaced and sucked in fresh air. I turned, my body pressing up against James, slick and hot. "How long?"

He lifted an eyebrow, but his dark eyes shone. He knew what I asked. "Since my last orgy?"

"Since your last ... anything."

He looped a wet strand of hair behind my ear. "Is this a touch of jealousy?"

"Curiosity."

"Of course." His hand stayed on my jaw, and I willed myself not to lean into his touch. "You know this couldn't have run any other way. How we lived our lives until this point. I had to keep you alive. And until you were safe, I couldn't concentrate on driving out the emperor possessing me." His smile was wry. "But you kept hounding me."

His thumb pressed over my mouth, starting a slow slid over my bottom lip. Heat dropped through my body, encouraged by the soft caress of the swirling water. I wanted nothing more than to take his thumb into his mouth, graze my teeth over the pad.

"My mission was covert. Yours overt. You, apparently, were meant to be an army." His eyes dropped away, watching his thumb trace my lips. A frown creased his forehead before his gaze lifted to mine again. "The Emperor found the six other Amalgams and ... dealt with them." He let out a slow sigh. "Both of us had the same goal, Katya, to take out the biggest threat to Earth, the Tirion Emperor. We *had* to follow what they ingrained in us to do ... and so I walked away from you." James sighed and his forehead rested against mine. "Though in the end, we failed. Our people are dead, just a myth, the 'god-makers'."

"Walk away?" Another part of my uneasy past slotted into place, and it was a truth almost spoken by his clone so long ago on the Ghost of Jupiter station. "You let yourself be captured?"

"I came to Solis Planum with that intention, knew they'd focus their troops there. Instead, I found you and was ... distracted for too long. But when that scout Blade flew over when I was hunting, my duty kicked in. I'm sorry."

I pulled back, stroking my arms through the water to put distance between us.

“The Blade took me to the flesh depot on Alpha-Volantis-3’s third moon. The emperor had turned it into a massive laboratory to test the human race for the DNA he needed.” James crushed his eyes against old memories he didn’t seem able to share. He let out a slow sigh. “The emperor was very methodical and very thorough. It took his scientists almost a century to find me.” A smile twisted his mouth. “Despite my best efforts.”

I held down a shudder. I’d witnessed the horrors of a flesh depot first hand in my fight against the emperor and I wanted to believe but...

“You still can’t quite accept that I’m your Kael.”

“You say you were designed to destroy the emperor, to trap him in your mind and purge him.” I stared over the curve of the tiled ceiling, following the woven pattern of precious metals that ran in an intricate pattern through each tile. I looked back to the man, steam wrapping around him. I’d known his face forever. He *was* the Tirion Emperor. But I’d never met him in the flesh, never been close to him, breathed his scent so deep into my lungs he became a part of me. Well, I had, but James had wiped that memory out centuries before. “Yet here you are, living in his luxury, upholding his laws. And sometimes ... something else ... possesses you. You wanted revenge against me.”

In the silence, only the gentle lap of shifting water rose. James sighed. “When Paxton contacted me ... the beast, as I was then ... the thought of revenge against you raged through him. It’s the last fragment of the emperor I’ve tried to break, the hardest part, the part that doesn’t want to go away. You’d been the emperor’s enemy for centuries, Katya. The only one ever to escape him. He wanted you to remember, remember how he’d defeated you, wiped out your forces before he took your life. That was his revenge.”

James held my gaze. “Down the years, I fought for what I could. Mainly that was keeping you alive. And since I fragmented his consciousness, his power is almost nil. Almost. Severe stress and shards of him can surface and bring with it his need to have his revenge. They become pinpricks, puncturing who I am. And while I fight them, I usually become unpleasant ... I’m sorry you had to see that.”

“And he’s gone now?”

James watched the slow ripples in the clear water. “I did what Webb wanted. He’s broken, dead, but he’ll never truly be gone. I suppress the echoes of his consciousness. With your help, I beat him.”

“My help?”

“How you made me feel.” A smile tugged at his mouth and he changed the subject. “And you’ve been away for thirty years, Katya. The Empire is changing.”

All right, he didn’t want to talk about that. I ignored the cramping in my stomach. “Your men recognised you. You don’t wear the mask anymore.” I waved my arm around the lavish excess of what was basically his bathroom. “But you’re still...”

“I’m being fair. I’m *not* being insane. All that I know is how to run an empire ... and if I walk away, then it collapses and in the ensuing chaos, another monster will rise up. I know my history. The emperor is a necessary evil. I’m still a tyrant ... but a benevolent one. Better it’s me.” He laughed. “And really ... if I wasn’t emperor, I couldn’t afford all this.”

“You’re more than incorrigible.”

“But you don’t want to kill me?”

The emperor I’d fought against was dead; James—the original Kael, not the clone—

had killed him. The heavy weight of centuries lessened, faded until I no longer felt it pulling at my soul, and the relief lifted through my body, my limbs. “No, James, I don’t want to kill you.”

“James...?”

“I can’t call you Kael. I can’t...” I winced. “Kael, for me, is someone I lost a long, *long* time ago. I knew Paxton was a traitor.” I waved my hand through the water towards him. “You and I, we’re both different people now.” I frowned as another thought hit me. There was a lot we needed to share. Centuries’ worth. But we had time. The god-makers had seen to it. “And why did you change your name?”

“I couldn’t be Kael either. Both the clone and I betrayed you. The name’s a mix of my parents. James Kinsare is an easier for me to live with.”

I swam closer to trace my fingertip from his jaw, in a slow easy slide, down his throat, over his clavicle to the hard muscle of his pectoral. I wanted to ease the pain that had flitted over his face. “You have a brand new body.”

“Not so new.”

“New to me.” My gaze flitted over the hard perfection of his face. “And in the flesh you are quite pretty.”

James snorted. “That’s the other Katya talking.”

“I was a happily balanced Amalgam before a certain eighteen year old introduced me to lust.”

“Of course you were.” The gleam in James’ eyes had tension curling low in my belly. His hands turned through the water and heat prickled my skin ... and something else.

“What...?” The slow slide of fingertips ran over my body, *all over* my body. I gasped, grabbing at James’ shoulder. “What *is* this?”

“Intelligent water.”

“Intelligent...” The press of palms over my buttocks, inner thighs, breasts had all thought vacating my brain. And they felt known, familiar. They felt like James. “How...”

“When he changed my body, the old emperor built in defences. He didn’t believe a human body would hold enough strength, but I have never used them to kill. Much to his chagrin. One of my defences is my bio-electrical surge. I pour it into the water and the water reads my intent.”

“That’s...” A hand cupped me, the thumb finding my clitoris. The sudden flare of sensation had me biting at my lip, and my hips instinctively pressed against James, wanting, needing more.

“I like you incoherent.”

I growled at him, all too aware that his fingers still curled and twisted through the water keeping him afloat, yet his ‘hands’ stroked, caressed, teased almost every centimetre of my flesh. I pushed my palms down the strength of his back, which pulled me close and brought my aching breasts in full contact with his chest.

He groaned, and his mouth sought mine. Our kisses couldn’t lie. That sweet memory rolled down over me and with it came the knowledge that the clone had never shared a kiss with me. Not once. Whether it was me or James, I’d never known, but something about kissing had our emotions merging. In those precious few moments, lying became impossible.

“Is this a trap?”

“What do you think?”

I grinned at him, the man would never give me a straight answer. Had *never* given me a straight answer ... but only amusement swirled through me, that and a rising edge of desire. “I think... I want to kiss you again.”

I bit at his lip, grabbing at his buttocks and squeezing hard. James half laughed, half yelped and lost his concentration. In a rush the hands on my body slicked away, leaving only James’ fingers in a sudden grip on my hips.

“I prefer just you.” I deepened the kiss, tasting him, curving my tongue around his, exploring his mouth in a slow slide. I pressed hard up against him. His penis slid over my flesh, rubbing against my clitoris and sliding back, back... It dragged a moan out of me. James’ hands stroked by back and my skin tingled.

The water changed, thickening into a supporting wall of warmth. He lifted my thighs and I wrapped them around his hips. “I like intelligent water.”

James chased wet kisses down my throat. Nibbling my shoulder, his grin curved against my skin. “Now, you like it.”

“It has its uses.” I shifted, angling my hips and pushing, letting the head of his penis stretch me. James hummed against my skin, the vibration flowing through my body, urging the twist to my hips. He slid deep, and my eyes closed. I sighed. “Nice.”

“You know who I am.” The gentle thrust had my body pushing down against him. “I’ve waited a long time for that.”

Oh, he could say all the right things. Heat bloomed in my chest, and I held him tighter. But something of the old Katya remained, the woman who hadn’t trusted a soul for too long, and I covered my nervousness with humour. “Can we not wait *much* longer?”

James laughed, the lift of his body sparking inside of me. “We have time, Katya.”

I held his gaze, the affection gleaming in its darkness catching my breath. I swallowed, and nerves ate at me. “I’ve... I’ve missed you.”

“I know.” James’ lips brushed mine, teasing his tongue over my teeth. He pressed me back into the cushion of water and his thrusts increased. I clung to him, wanting, needing more, my mouth opening to him.

All thought and time vanished. Only the sweet friction of our bodies mattered, as I met the deepening push of his hips. Curls of tension tightened low in my pelvis and I pressed harder, my hands on his buttocks urging him, making him—

Water and steam swirled around us. I didn’t care. I wanted what his man could give me. Heat flared, and sweet pressure gripped me. I clung to it as I clung to James’ hot, wet skin.

There. Oh, just *there*. Each thrust hit in ... exactly ... the right ... spot.

My spine arched. My mouth ripped from his and I think I screamed as orgasm spiraled and then splintered through me, bursting in a flare of light. For a few moments, I lost myself, vaguely aware of James clinging to me, his face buried in my neck as his final erratic thrusts surged into my body. With a shuddering groan, he came...

...and I splashed back into the water.

I yelped, fighting free of his hold, to get my head back above water. I swatted at him, laughing. “Last time we have sex in a pool.”

James grabbed at the ceramic lip of the pool’s edge. He wiped the sluice of water from his face, running a hand through his soaked hair. His laughter echoed around the

room. "Probably a good plan." He turned his body back towards the steps and padded out.

I couldn't help myself. I tread water and let my eyes roam over his naked, wet perfection.

"Ogled enough?" he asked, palming open a section of wall and pulling out a bath robe. He wrapped it around his body. "Well?"

I pulled a face. "No, I hadn't."

"Tough." He held up another robe, smooth and black like his, with the Imperial crests edging the collars. "Time to get out, Katya. You're starting to wrinkle." He smirked at me. "It's not attractive."

I stuck my tongue out and followed his wet footprints out of the pool. Slipping my arms into the sleeves, James pressed the soft, warming cloth around my body. His arms stayed around my waist, and his chin rested on my shoulder. "Are you going to stay, Katya?"

The question surprised me. Was I? I had assumed that I would ... but James commanded a vast empire. He couldn't spend time like this. "What would I do?"

His arms tightened, and his chest pressed hard against my spine. "What do you want to do?"

"Besides throwing you over my shoulder onto the nearest bed?"

He smiled against my neck, and my shoulders dropped. It would kill me to give him up. "Yes, besides that."

"All that I remember is fighting and loss, anger, frustration." My head fell back, and I rested against James' shoulder. "I was so very tired ... and I let Paxton put me in that tube. I wanted it over."

"I'm sorry, Katya." His voice brushed over my skin. "I couldn't save your people. My priority was always to keep you alive."

I blew out a slow breath. That knowledge didn't bring me comfort. We still had chunks of the past to reconcile ... but I wanted to be with him. I'd been alone too long. And this was the one man I was designed to be with, both of us ageless, the last survivors of a mythical civilisation. The thoughts had my stomach cramping. Fear or excitement, I didn't know. I bit at my lip before I said, "Let's see where I fit in?" I turned, looping my arms around his neck. "Though no more orgies."

"Spoilsport."

"Are you going to argue with the woman who can kick your arse into next week?"

James grinned, and my heart gave an extra deep thump. "That sounds like Colonel Smith. I always did like her."

Smith, one of my more notorious splinters. Yes, she'd almost been as crazy as my namesake. "You're a sick man, James Kinsare."

He unlooped my arms and took my hand. "I used to be." He lifted my palm to his mouth and kissed it, the sensation sparking through my flesh. "I plan to be under a good doctor for a while."

I groaned and fought back the need to laugh. "Those lines, they're all you, aren't they?"

James flicked me a sideways glance. "Get used to them."

I smiled as he led me back into the sitting room. I stared. The transparent walls running along the slight curve of the hull, showed the solid blackness of space. I'd

travelled in enough tin buckets to appreciate imperial luxury. "Smooth lift off."

"Thank you."

He turned and another door slid open before him.

"*Welcome, Majesty. Welcome, honoured guest.*" The soft female voice brushed over me as I walked beneath the arch.

My gut tightened. That was something that would have to go. "That's me, James. Why do all of your computers have my voice?"

"It drove a wicked spike through the emperor ... and I missed you."

"Saying all the right things again."

"I try."

I stared around the room and more imperial luxury hit me between the eyes. A circular bed dominated the room, its four ebony posts running to the transparent ceiling. Space curved black and endless above us, the dim light washing up from the floor casting no reflection against the hull. "All right, that's unnerving."

James squeezed my hand. "Katya Ortaega scared of something?"

"Remember my ability to kick you into next week?" I swallowed and moved forward. "You may like your domain spread out before you. Me? I like a hull on my interstellar ships."

James laughed. "You'll get used to it." He stared up, the soft floor lights casting strange shadows over his skin. "It's always soothed me." A smile tugged at his mouth and it cast too sharp against his jaw. "Reminded me that the beast that held me was only a tiny speck." He let out a heavy breath and pulled me into his arms. "But enough of him. He's fractured, so many harmless splinters."

"Are you sure?" I winced. "There's been another you inside there. The one making the nasty little threats?"

"I need practice controlling him still. Help from an experienced Amalgam perhaps?"

"I think I can manage that." I smiled and pressed my face into his neck, breathing in his intoxicating scent, the one that had unbalanced me for two days. He didn't smell like Kael, not as I remembered, but something about him complimented me. I slid my hands inside his robe, exploring the smooth heat of his skin. My memory kicked in, and I looked up. "Information? You said you wanted information from me." I stretched up and pressed my mouth to his in a teasing kiss. I tasted truth there even as he smiled. "And so you do."

"I already have my answer."

And that was true too. "So what was it?"

Warmth, affection ... love ... shone in his gaze, and my heart missed a beat. For a moment, the centuries contracted and I stared into my first love's eyes. I swallowed and wanted to deny the sentiment that threatened to drown me, but it was real. *He* was real. My throat tightened, and the last of the old, bitter Katya fell away. I closed my eyes to protect myself. Some old habits still proved hard to break.

He pressed his lips to my forehead. "Two pieces of information. Help from an established Amalgam and... I wanted to know if you'd stay with me." I felt the curve of his smile. "Changed your mind?"

A new life. The relief of that spread warmth through me. I looked up at him and couldn't hold back the grin. My hands slid lower, enjoying his heat, his strength under my searching hands. "Katya Ortaega always said, 'Never turn down an offer from a

pretty face.”

James matched my grin with this sinful smile. “Wise woman. I always liked her too.”

“Yes.” I undid the ties to his robe and pressed an open mouthed kiss to his collarbone. “Thought you might.”

His hands pressed into my shoulders, holding me still. I looked up and found his smile gone, his expression sombre, his eyes serious. For a long moment, he stayed silent. He took a deep breath. “One thing I have to say, because it wouldn’t be fair not to warn you. The emperor’s echoes do reoccur. He surfaces, Katya, and I become as I have been in the past few days. Nasty, bitter. You have to accept that.”

The rapid thud of his heart beat under my palm. He wanted me to know the truth. And I knew his underlying reason, the one that had the spark of panic edging his gaze. “I have to commit to you.”

James closed his eyes, and he breathed slow and even. “I’ve spent thirty years breaking down the monster within me so I could be with you again.”

I slid a hand over his waist, his hips, the familiar heat of his skin burning against my fingers. “I won’t stay with you to keep the beast at bay, James.”

His eyes flashed open, and for a scorching moment, the shine of the beast flared there. Then he was gone and James gave me a slow, accepting nod. He pulled back beyond my touch. “Then go, Katya.”

A smile pulled at my mouth, and I moved into his personal space again. “I won’t stay for the beast. I will however, stay for you.” My long, *long* mission was over and I had a new life to begin. The man who stood in front of me was the only one I had ever loved. I couldn’t hide from that any more. I’d even fallen for him a second time. Now I had to say the words the woman who’d created me, my namesake, had never told anyone. Straightening my shoulders, I said, “I’m not leaving because... I love you.”

James blinked. And then blinked again. He stared at me and opened, then closed his mouth. “You *love* me?”

My gut cramped, and blood surged into my face. Had I just made a monumental mistake? “Don’t make me feel like a dick for saying it, James,” I muttered.

He laughed and swept me up into a tight hug, so tight I was certain he’d crack a rib any minute. “I thought... Have you *any* idea...” He buried his face in my neck and just held me. Each of his deep shuddering breaths pushed me hard against his arms.

“I need to breathe, James.”

He laughed and his arms loosened, but he still held me close to his chest. “I suppose you do.” His hands stroked my spine, heat bleeding through the thin material of my robe. James smiled, I felt it in the curve of his lips against my forehead. It sank through me. I would never tire of having him smile, but his silence unnerved me. Didn’t these sort of declarations require a reply?

“Aren’t you going to say anything?”

“Me?”

I seriously considered decking the man I loved. “James...”

His hand framed my jaw, his thumb stroking against my cheek. His brows had creased and confusion clouded his dark eyes. “If you want me to say it again, I will. I love you.” His mouth twitched upwards. “There. You can unclench your fists now.”

The warmth of his words eased around my heart, and an age-old pain melted away. His lips brushed mine in a slow, gentle caress that swirled a lazy heat down through my

body. I pulled back and blinked. "Again?"

"I told you this morning."

It felt as if something had swept my feet out from under me. Had I not regained a vital fragment of memory? "This morning?" The words sounded strangled.

"In the carriage, when we made love, I said it then."

I gave a violent shake of my head. "No, no you didn't."

"I *did*."

"Didn't!"

James growled. "I am not getting into a silly argument over this. I told you."

Anger knotted my gut. The morning ran through my memory, unwanted heat burning over my skin at the detailed recall... No, nothing. No gaps. No gaping holes. "You told me? All right, fine. What did I say?"

"The beasts interrupted us." James ran fingers through his damp hair, and a bitter laugh escaped him. "I didn't say it, did I?" He pulled me into a hug and more self-reproaching laughter brushed over my hair. "It seemed so loud, so real but I only thought it."

I jabbed him in the stomach, and he yelped, rubbing at his side. "Nice to know even His Royal Highness, the Almighty and Very Reverend Emperor of Tirion can still be a complete dick."

James stilled, and my heartbeat ramped. I looked up and found a glint in his eyes that I hadn't seen for centuries. The desire to hunt me down. "The palace on Tocularis-4 is immense, an organic labyrinth ... but, for now, this room will have to do."

I stepped back from him, my flesh already tight. For two days, I'd run for my life, stayed ahead of machines, beasts, monsters that wanted to kill me. And in that time, I'd never felt more alive. The fresh tang of it still tasted sharp on my tongue. For years I'd organised, led small units, fought a war against the emperor, but I'd never done what the lab rats of Solis Planum designed me to do: had my prey chase me down.

I smiled at James, and he echoed it with a wicked one of his own. The throbbing beat low in my belly increased in tempo. He was no longer the emperor I needed to kill. He was, however, still my prey.

I backed away. "Just like old times, James."

He edged forward and shed his robe, dropping it into a puddle of soft cloth. Starlight played over his naked perfection. My throat dried. I hadn't tired of letting my gaze wander over his sculpted chest, abdomen, thighs and, of course the solid length of his erection. Yes, I had a healthy dose of lust bound up with my love for James Kinsare.

The lust was my undoing.

Air whooshed out of lungs, I hit the soft carpet in a tangle of limbs and James straddled me. "You used to be harder to catch."

I stuck out my tongue. "You presented an unfair distraction."

He smirked. "I did, didn't I?" He loosened the tie to my robe, exposing my breasts and traced the soft curve of my belly with his palm. "I love you, Katya," he murmured. The shine of affection in his gaze had my throat tight. He watched his hand slide up over my ribs before he looked up again. "Probably have since I first saw you in the refectory." He leaned forward and pressed a slow kiss against my lips. "And now it's time to pay for insulting your emperor."

"My emperor?"

He lifted an eyebrow. "Aren't I?"

In one fluid movement, I flipped him and sat across his hips. The press of his erection slid against my slick flesh and I couldn't help the roll of my pelvis that pushed him harder against me. We shared a soft moan. "A single image of you has burned behind my eyes for centuries. Dressed in your immaculate suit, you stride across a marble courtyard. I kept the image alive, focused on it. I thought you'd destroyed the one man I loved." I let out a slow breath. "But the work of centuries, the desire to see you dead seems to have melted away."

His lips tugged upwards. "For that I am *very* grateful."

I matched his wry smile. "My hatred of the emperor kept me going ... until even that wasn't enough. I would sit and repeatedly watch the image, wanting you to find me. I wanted it over."

James sat up and wrapped his strong arms around me. "*It is over, Katya.*"

His warmth surrounded me, his heart beating against mine. "No, it's not over." I pressed my lips to the strength of his shoulder, the clean taste of the man I had always loved sliding through me. James' hands tightened on my waist, and I couldn't help my smile. Yes, it was time I forgot my past ... again. "This is our beginning."

The End

About the Author:

I love history and myths and take great pleasure in mixing the essence of past events into fantasy, along with the essential mix of magic and sex. I also write science fiction romance, pushing out into the future with effortlessly sexy men and the women who can't resist them.

I live half way between Penny Lane and Strawberry Fields under blue suburban skies...lol

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