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## Chapter 1

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### Aspen

I awoke in a dark room. There were lights in the ceiling, and they were very slowly becoming brighter as I watched. I tore my gaze from them to stare around the room, once it was light enough to see anything.

The walls were metal panels, like everywhere else I'd seen in the Stack. They were etched with patterns I didn't recognize. My mind seemed blank, but I was certain this place was bad. I wished I remembered how I got here.

There was blood on the floor. My nose helpfully jumped in and told me it smelled it, just as my eyes picked it out. I was sitting in it. My hands were sticky.

Was it my blood? I didn't feel injured. That was when I realized I wasn't wearing anything. My skin was smeared with the sticky, metal-and-salt-smelling blood. It might have bothered me more, but in the lower sectors, I remembered second-gen human hemorrhagic virus, before they invented a vaccine. It was a mutation of the disease they'd used to control rabbit populations

hundreds of years ago. It had killed tens of thousands of people, before Grande Pharma developed a vaccine.

It literally made you bleed out of every orifice, and made your skin split so you bled out of that, too. It made your tongue bleed... even your eyeballs. You couldn't digest anything because your stomach was too full of blood, and you couldn't breathe, either, at the end. It killed my best friend. She was one of the lucky ones, because she didn't get hit by maggots before she died.

All I could do was watch her die, and hope I didn't get it, next.

Being covered in blood was as commonplace as being covered in soil, for me.

"Another fucktoy, already?" A man's voice made me startle. It was the deepest baritone I'd ever heard, like that vibrating low note on a church organ, and his tone was contemptuous. A thrill ran through my body when he spoke, but I told myself it was just because he'd startled me.

I didn't want to be in a room with anyone who called me their fucktoy. It was an illegal pregnancy waiting to happen, and I'd be the one in trouble if it did.

When we had settled this new planet, it had been an expansive, open space. Soon, Earth started dumping all their criminals, redundant soldiers, and eventually, people whose only crime was to have fallen below the poverty line.

The population problem had crept up, and the people in charge had responded the way they always had on Earth: Limit the access to good food and healthcare, keep the lower sectors fighting one another, and let us simply fade out of existence.

When that hadn't worked, they had reinvented this old Earth idea called social services, only, like many things from Earth, they had twisted it. Social services' entire job, here, was to make women ashamed to have given birth if they weren't at least middle-sector and didn't have a permit. It was an effective way

of making lower sector women too miserable or insecure to have any *more* babies.

If a woman was as low in society as I was, social services would fabricate evidence that she had a drug addiction or severe mental health disorder, and take the baby. Since the mother had no real problems, the baby was in perfect health and sold for adoption to childless couples in the middle sectors.

Social services claimed they were underfunded, but in reality, they were probably making a ton of credits through the baby market. It was another one of those things that everyone knew, and no-one talked about.

Since men suffered no ill consequences from fathering as many unwanted babies as they chose, they often forced themselves on women. I thought it ought to be a crime for a man to rape a woman, and a greater crime for him to leave her with a baby she couldn't support, but in the lower sectors, the only crimes were those that affected public order. I'd gotten used to defending myself and fighting back when men got too close.

"Where are we?" I tried to keep my voice steady.

"This place? Your tomb." He laughed coldly.

I shook my head, refusing to be scared by him. "So hand me a shovel; I'll dig my way out."

Before I saw where he was, I felt something seize my mind. I tried to move, but my body was not under my control. Fear gripped my heart and settled into my stomach. What was happening to me? I couldn't fight this; it had slid straight inside me, ignoring all the skin and bone that usually kept people out of my head. I'd never encountered anyone or anything that made me feel so powerless.

"Crawl to me," he said.

I wouldn't. It was a stupid request and I had no intention of following it, but it seemed I had no choice. Whatever had seized my mind forced my limbs to move forward, through the stream of blood, until I reached him.

“Kneel, slave.” When he spoke, my body was made to kneel, but not the normal way. This was far more humiliating and made me feel submissive and vulnerable, both of which I hated. My nose was forced to the filthy ground and my forearms were flat, taking half of my weight.

“As I thought. Another weak-minded human fucktoy. You’ll break by tomorrow, like the others did.”

He seemed to lose interest, for he released my mind and I sprang up from the kneeling position, sitting back on my ankles as I looked at him. He wasn’t human. No way. I’d heard rumors of an alien race that had lived on this planet before humans were sent here, but I’d never seen one.

His skin was almost entirely covered in what looked like purple tattoos, in unusual patterns that I half-recognized. He wore no clothing, and his body was ripped, there was no other word for it. His cock sat like a log between his legs, although it showed no signs of being awake. Like the tattoos, his eyes were also purple. Dark, with tiny white flecks that looked like spiral galaxies. His pupils were two black holes. His nose was flatter and wider than most of the noses I’d seen, making him look almost tribal. His hair was short and black, and shone even in the poor light. What I found strangest, though, given the rest of his appearance, was that he had human-looking lips, and straight, even-shaped teeth.

I caught my breath as I realized his gaze had roved over my body while I’d been drinking in his details.

“Is this another VR program?” I wondered. With that power he just used on me, he could make me do anything he wanted. He could fuck me any way he chose, and probably force my screams to remain silent while he did it. So why hadn’t he, yet? The only explanation was this was VR.

His laughter was so deep I wondered if it would bring the ceiling down.

“No. Mind control doesn’t work in VR, slave.”

“I’m not your slave.”

“You were mine when they forsook you into this chamber, human.”

I shook my head and got to my feet. “Fuck you.”

He arched a brow, and his mind wrapped around mine once more. I wanted to breathe, but he held my lungs still. I felt him squeezing my heart. My eyes widened and swelled. I landed on my hands and knees. I was going to die, like a cornered animal, on this blood-soaked floor. My entire existence had been for absolutely nothing...

He released me, and I gasped for air as the blood surged around my body once more. I stared up at him.

“If I’m yours, you can prove it without that party trick.” I was afraid, and that made me angry. How dare he get inside my body like that to force me to behave? I resented that he used that power so readily, when I had nothing at all to fight it with. How could I ever resist anything he wanted from me? He could take whatever he pleased, and I would be forced to submit.

“My mind control is not a *party trick*.” He seemed unsettled that I’d suggested it. Given that he’d just literally stopped my heart, I was more inclined to think I was the injured party, here.

“Go to sleep.” He waved a hand dismissively, then he got inside my head once more, and I was forced to fall asleep on the blood-soaked floor.