
Chapter 1

Kirie

I was locked in the cage again. One thing I knew about Controller Lark, after being here for so long, was that he never needed a reason to hurt me. My existence was reason enough. I often wondered why he kept me here at all.

It wasn't my place to wonder anything. Even now, after everything that had happened to me, I still had to remind myself not to be curious. It was difficult, though. Right now, I was curious about what it would be like to drink even the tiniest sip of water. Would it sate me or would I want more? I'd been in the cage for several hours, and Controller Lark enjoyed tormenting me, so he'd put the heating up so high I was already parched. My tongue was too dry to even stick to the roof of my mouth.

I breathed through my cracked lips because my nose burned from the lack of moisture. He might leave me here for days. He'd brought me back from worse. That was the main problem, right there. I didn't get to die. Not ever. Not permanently, anyway.

I wanted to sleep but one of my legs was cramping too much and my ass burned from the bottle shoved in it. Laying down and

stretching out was a pipe dream. The cage was under his dining table, but my area of confinement was only two by four, and not even three feet tall. I had to stay on all fours like the animal he wanted me to be.

Sometimes, I wondered if I'd ever really been human in the first place. It was easy to forget.

"It's in here." Controller Lark's voice drifted in as the door opened and he entered the living/dining area with someone else. I kept my eyes downcast, knowing better than to even sneak a peek to see who accompanied him. Whenever my master entered, the best thing I could hope for was that he wouldn't notice me.

Two pairs of boots topped by the black pants of military uniforms stopped in front of the cage. One pair kicked at the bars and I flinched. Years ago, that might have been a visible movement, perhaps accompanied by a gasp of fear, but now, it was simply a swift tightening of my chest.

"Tonight, we'll take it out to the officers' mess and let them fuck it." Commander Lark was talking about me.

"That's very generous of you, sir." I didn't recognize the other voice. "Is s—i—going to withstand a hundred officers?"

"Easily. Keeping morale high is very important. Don't take it out there until twenty-one-hundred. Some people are inclined to take pity on it, and they try to feed it or pet it. Taking the cage out at the right time will ensure the officers are focused on getting their rocks off and nothing else."

"Understood, sir." They left again. Once upon a time, I might have cried to know I was being handed to a hundred strangers to be fucked this evening. Now, I couldn't summon any emotional energy to care. It was a pretty typical punishment. My life was like one of those cautionary tales that mothers pass down to young daughters. I'd questioned too much, argued too much, and I'd been taken away by the authorities. I used to think the truth was important, and that people needed to hear it. Now, I

knew there were plenty of things worse than living as a sheep in ignorance of what was going on around me.

Wolves preyed on sheep that strayed from the herd.

An explosion rocked the walls and floor, and dust fell from the ceiling. It was quickly followed by several more explosions. Some of them seemed to hit harder than others. The noise was immense. The pressure in the air as the shockwaves passed through me was so intense that I actually screamed for the first time in months.

Something had happened. I knew that even before the final explosion, which tore through the room, sending the cage skittering across the floor like a child's toy, coming to rest near a wall that was sliding downwards, until it had completely fallen away.

I gasped in amazement. I couldn't help it. This was the first new thing that happened in my recent memory. Underneath my surprise, there was a twisted gut sort of feeling because I knew, somehow, Controller Lark would take this out on my ass. If only I was a *little* closer to the hole, I could rock the cage until it pitched over the side into the smoky nothing that lay beyond.

When the smoke cleared, I couldn't stop staring at the sky and the endless golden desert stretching out before me. It was comforting and changeless.

The fresh, pure air from outside filled my lungs and my heart soared as a light breeze carried the intense heat of the room far, far away, to dissipate in the atmosphere somewhere. Openness. Freedom. It had been on the other side of the concrete all along.

I was sure it ought to terrify me to know I had been right, that the Stack wasn't built on a chemical-laden planet whose air was toxic. Perhaps being inside the cage helped me confront infinity with less fear than usual.

I kept expecting Controller Lark to return at any moment. I knew he was going to be back, probably with the steel cane he liked to whip me with, and punish me for being motionless in a cage where he'd put me.

When the light went away, the brilliant blue sky was replaced by endless blackness studded with thousands of white dots. Was one of them Earth? Being locked in the cage without food or water was nothing new, and I would wait for Controller Lark to return.

Even now, I knew much better than to call for help. Help didn't come on command. I had learned in my early teens that if I called for help, it sent terrifying monsters to punish me for being bold and stupid enough to believe I was worthy of deliverance. I would rather die alone, peacefully, gazing out at the rising sun than risk the sort of punishment meted out for begging out of turn. Master was probably testing me again.

My eyes were so dry I couldn't see properly, but I could tell the sunlight had returned from its slumber. My lower back ached and I couldn't suppress my inquisitiveness. I wondered if I might finally die, this time.

The door slammed open.

"Controller Lark? Lark! *Fuck.*" It was a man's voice. Someone must have seen the hole in the wall. If they wanted to blame it on me and punish me for it, there was nothing I could say or do to stop them.

"Are you alive?" It took three repeats of the question before I realized they were talking to me as they crossed the room. I opened my mouth to answer the direct question, like an obedient slave should, but my throat was too dry. I couldn't make a sound.

I gasped for air as the interloper moved the cage away from the hole in the wall, turning me to face him. I averted my gaze, so I didn't know what they looked like, but instead of the shiny black boots and military pants, this man wore expensive-looking dress shoes. Big ones. That scared me, and I knew why. Big feet, big cock. Little cocks didn't hurt so much when they raped me. They didn't choke me so easily when they forced me to deep-throat. Big cocks were dangerous.

"How do I open this?" he asked. I shook my head. I knew

how it opened, but I also knew if Controller Lark came back and found I wasn't in the cage where he'd left me, I would be in trouble, not this newcomer.

"It's a combination lock. Do you know the combination?"

I wasn't allowed to lie. I squeezed my eyes tight.

"You do, don't you? Why won't you tell me? I'm trying to get you out, you stupid girl."

Yes. Stupid girl. Trying to avoid getting into more trouble.

He walked around the cage, and I don't know if he was scrutinizing me or the bars, but eventually he made a decision. He picked up the whole cage, hefting it in his two hands, and walked out of Controller Lark's living quarters with me.

Lafayette

I'd gone to check if there were any survivors on the military levels, and I'd found a young woman in a cage in Controller Lark's rooms. The sick fuck. She was only a few feet from a gaping hole that had been blasted into the side of the Stack by the fucking Alaxians, who had chosen a *really* bad time to start fighting back once more. Early reports suggested the entire military had been taken out, and I'd had to see it to believe it. As far as I could tell, it was true. This woman was the only human left alive in the military levels. An attack that precise and calculated... they had to have inside information. I suspected they'd gotten enough from the second human woman to escape the Stack, which I'd only been told about this morning, by a very uncomfortable-looking Dr. Harker. It appeared my dear Director Harrow had been keeping things from me.

I probably should have gotten a trolley or something to move the cage, but honestly, I just wanted her where I could see her.

My muscles were straining by the time I got the cage and the

woman back to Sector One where I could put the cage down in my study. Catching my breath, I went to the water dispenser and filled two cups. I put one out of her reach on the floor, and I drank the other. As I suspected, her hand swiped at the plastic cup.

“You get the water as soon as you tell me the combination to open the cage.”

She held out for another hour before she finally held up her fingers.

“Three... five... one... eight.” I spoke them aloud and she nodded to confirm I was correct.

I unfastened the lock and she fell upon the water. She stopped herself before she took a big gulp, and instead dipped her tongue in it. I realized my mistake as I watched the self-control with which she allowed herself to sip the liquid. She had been kept without water often enough that, even when she was dehydrated, she knew better than to drink it quickly.

“Come out, please,” I told her, my voice taking on a dominant tone as I decided she needed to follow instructions or she’d be in that cage forever.

She crawled out on all fours.

“Fuck.” I had to stop myself from wincing when I saw the bottle. It was shoved unceremoniously up her ass so only the last three inches were showing. “Don’t move. At all.” I pinched the base and carefully tugged on the bottle. “This is going to hurt.” There was no easy way to do it. The bastard had shoved a beer bottle up her ass and I saw no traces of lubricant. Even if it had dried, I’d expect to see a residue. I took my time working the thing out of her, not asking her to bear down on it in case she prolapsed.

I’d never especially been fond of Controller Lark from a professional standpoint, but seeing what he had done to a human being took my opinion of him through the floor. If he wasn’t

dead, I was going to finish the job for the Alaxians and kill him myself.

That bottle had to be causing excruciating pain as I moved it, but she made no sound and remained perfectly still. That kind of training took years of intense punishment. When I got the bottle out and threw it in the trash, I tossed protocol, discipline and rank out of the window and pulled her into my arms.

“You’re safe, now,” I murmured. “Safe.”

As though she hadn’t heard me, she was completely rigid with fear when I pulled her to me, and she showed no signs of being comforted by my words. The lights were on, but was anybody home?

I had more than a few spare bedrooms in my living quarters; one of the perks of being the Controller of the Stack. All right, so there were actually three Controllers and a few support staff who made up the Zenith, but I was the one responsible for the day-to-day running of the top seventeen sectors and so I was generally the one who led things. Controller Lark was almost entirely preoccupied with his ridiculous military campaign aimed at wiping out all the Alaxians on the planet. Controller Wilson was busy with the middle and lower sectors. Director Harrow only ever cared about Grande Pharma. As a result, my decisions were rarely challenged, and even when they were, I was generally able to talk people around. I was an excellent orator.

I wondered who would take Controller Lark’s place, now that he was dead. It was too much to hope that everyone might agree we simply didn’t need a military. We didn’t. The solution to the Alaxia problem was about as bloody obvious as it got. If we would just make peace with them and agree to thresh out territory—perhaps even be upfront with them about the situation and why we were here—they would give in. From what I’d seen, they were capable of quite a lot more humanity than we were.

I suspected Director Harrow would be in line to be the next Controller Lark. She would re-assemble the military, handpicking

people she knew to lead it, and conscripting people from sectors thirty-eight through forty to be cannon fodder. She was utterly predictable. For that reason, I needed to take her out of the running, and fast.

I constructed a line of reasoning in my mind very quickly. Harrow had taken the Alaxians into Grande Pharma. She had experimented on them, giving them powers of mind control, using the DNA from my brother. When she had put them into impossible, uncomfortable situations that really amounted to torture, they had escaped. Twice. She claimed she was proving a theory but in reality she was feeding her own ego and refusing to back down.

She could not be permitted to get selected to run the military. She had far too many contacts and allies within the top three sectors, all of whom would use their influence to secure her the top position. If I had to fight Harrow at every turn, she would become impossible to work with.

I didn't think working with her was an option, anymore. She would challenge me for leadership of the Stack one day, maybe a month, a year or a decade from now. In the meantime, I knew her politics were the same as Lark's. Perhaps she was more extreme than he. At Grande Pharma, she'd been channeled into a force for the greater good, but I knew those days were now very limited. She had made too many mistakes. Which was fine, because I was going to use them to take her out once and for all.

I turned my attention to the slave I'd found in Lark's quarters. She hadn't moved five feet from the cage, yet. She simply stretched to get the water in those painstakingly tiny sips, then she knelt on the floor in a position that looked awkward and ungainly, and as far as I could tell, there wasn't even any advantage to a master. Her lower legs were bent around to either side of her thighs, so her legs made a big arrow shape, and the strain of it was obvious. The skin covering her knees had turned white

from the way the joints protested against the position. I dreaded to think what it was doing to her gait.

I had a mental image of myself teaching her the correct positioning for a slave. I suspected Lark had either not bothered to train her, or he'd trained her intentionally to cause her discomfort. Everything about her screamed slave, in the Alaxian sense. Perhaps I was going native, but I made a fast decision about her. If I freed her, in her current state she would either attack people or retreat into herself. There was no middle ground.

"You belong to me, now. I am going to train you to serve me. You will call me Master, and I will call you slave. Can you speak?"

"Y-y-y...ssss m-m'h...str," she replied, and I couldn't tell if her lips were struggling to move from injury, dehydration or terror.

"Good girl. When you are good, you will be rewarded. And when you are bad, you will be punished." She didn't react when I said that. It wasn't the same as ignoring my words. She visibly made herself still, fixed her eyes on a specific point and didn't even breathe. The response was as strong as a flinch to tell me how much she feared punishment. "We will take our time and you will learn everything I want you to do. You will not refuse anything I ask of you. For the time being, I want you to kneel like this." I showed her, with my feet tucked under my ass, knees spread apart, back straight, gaze averted a little but not utterly defeated, and my palms resting upwards on my knees. "*Nadu*. That is the name of this position."

The structure would help her. That's what I told myself as I watched her stiffly get into the described position.

"If your ankles are not comfortable, you can use your thighs to take your body weight for a time. Now go and practice kneeling in that corner. Stay on the carpet." I pointed where I wanted her to go. She scrambled to obey like a frightened wild animal that knew what to do to avoid pain. I didn't like that response.

I'd had submissives before, and trained them, but I'd never taken any as my own slave. Which brought me back to my current conundrum about Director Harrow.

She had made a lovely vision, bending over my desk for weekly reports and punishments. I would miss that. But she had gone too far with that ridiculous Unbreakable program and I had to take her out before she became my equal in political office. Shoving my cock into her ass and fucking her until she came, screaming with pain and shuddering over my desk, would have to be a memory, from now on.

I went to my communicator. "Faust? Ensure Director Harrow knows she has a meeting with me in ten minutes."

I decided to leave my new slave in the corner of my study while I spoke to Harrow. Not because I wanted to parade my new slave in front of my old submissive, but because the poor, broken thing absolutely shouldn't be left alone right now and I didn't care if the girl's presence hurt Harrow's feelings. A change of ownership was a huge upheaval, and if it wasn't handled carefully, she might lash out or escape, which would be dangerous for her especially if someone called a demolition squad on her. That was what I told myself, anyway.

I sat behind my desk making notes on a piece of paper. I was actually drawing up a training plan for my new slave, but when Harrow arrived, all she would see was that I was very busy. It was an image I liked to cultivate. I appeared busy when I had nothing to do, and I ensured everyone believed I had all the time in the world for them when they had a meeting with me. I wanted them to think I'd put down other, important work to see them. It was always beneficial to make people believe they were getting in the way of something. I found it prevented meetings from running on and on. And this was a conversation I wanted to finish, fast.