



ZIRKOV

ALIEN MARSHALS & MATES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JULIE K. COHEN

ZIRKOV

Sci Fi Romance

(ALIEN MARSHALS & MATES)

BOOK 6

JULIE K. COHEN

Julie K. Cohen

ZIRKOV

Copyright © 2023 by JULIE K. COHEN

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, institutions, organizations, agencies, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, institutions, organizations, agencies, places, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, screenshot), or stored in any retrieval system, without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in printed reviews.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this work via the Internet, email, audio, or any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized editions and do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Thank you for supporting the author's rights.

ZIRKOV (Alien Marshals & Mates series) 1st ed.

eBook edition / Sept 2023

Paperback edition ISBN: 9798393817473/ Sept 2023

Large Print Paperback edition ISBN:9798860678668/ Sept 2023

Published by: Julie K. Cohen

JulieKCohenRomance.com

ZIRKOV

Alien Marshals & Mates (book 6)

What happens when the woman you love is the traitor you've been hunting?

Maggie

Earth's invaders are gone, but not the og'dal slavers. And they have their hooks in Maggie, pitting her against the alien marshals she admires. She has the marshals fooled, except the one in charge. Zirkov. He doesn't trust her. He's bullheaded, distant, and infuriating. And yet he may be the only one who can save her from the web of lies she's spun.

Zirkov

All the evidence points to Maggie, but that's not the only thing pointing to the human marshal. His mating cock has risen for her. He can't deny the facts, professional and personal. Now he must put everything he has and is on the line for the woman who despises him.



Mine to Protect. Mine to Love.

Zirkov is a steamy enemies to lovers romance laden with betrayal, redemption and faith in others. Prepare for hot romance, raw determination, love, and a lot of twists along the way. This book can be read as a stand-alone but is best enjoyed as part of the series. Each book in the series ends in a very Happy Ever After.

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Whisked Away by the Alien \(blurb\)](#)

[Thank You!](#)

[Series by Julie K. Cohen](#)

[Newsletter Signup](#)

[About Julie](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Contact Me!](#)

CHAPTER ONE

MAGGIE

A putrid smell that reminded Maggie of decaying rats yanked her from the crazy dream where she'd been chasing a blue male with horns. She'd been naked, and the male... No. She refused to acknowledge she'd dreamt about Zirkov again. Especially with that horrid smell aggravating her pounding head.

And what the hell happened to her soft mattress? The bedding beneath her had more lumps than her mother's mashed potatoes. Fuck, had she gotten drunk on a date and slept with a guy?

No. No one held her interest, except Zirkov, and he avoided her as much as possible. One of these days, she'd figure out how to get his attention. Until then, she needed a shower. And something to stop the pounding in her head.

Need coffee. Now. World's worst hangover.

Especially since I don't drink.

With a deep breath, she pushed up on her arms and nearly threw up. If she didn't open a window and air the place out soon, she'd have a mess to clean up. Through sheer will alone, Maggie pried one eye open.

And nearly screamed. She wasn't resting on a lumpy mattress, but a man. A man she didn't remember going to bed with.

"Who are you?" she asked the male with... four arms.

An og'dal. WTF?

His glazed-over eyes stared up at the ceiling, never blinking, never closing.

Dead.

Stunned, Maggie jerked back and tumbled off the body. Her knees hit the ground beside the body. She wasn't in her bed or anywhere she recognized. The og'dal lay on a cement floor, with piles of old machinery dumped nearby.

What the hell was going on?

Maggie scanned her surroundings. Pre-dawn light wove through broken windows above rusted-out catwalks that crossed the length of the abandoned warehouse. The style of the warehouse signified Earth, but that still left a lot of territory. No noise from the outside penetrated the metal walls. That meant the warehouse was in an isolated area, not near any bus lines or construction.

Her car had to be nearby. Unless she took the bus. Or someone had kidnapped her.

A sense of dread filled her as her eyes drifted down to her hands. In her right hand, she held a three-inch throwing blade. She usually carried a double-edged knife in her boot, but never throwing blades. Maggie reached for her Glock, relief filling her when she found it holstered at her hip. No kidnapper would let her keep her gun. That meant she'd come here willingly. When? How? And who was the dead alien?

The last memory she had was of slipping into bed and going to sleep. Alone.

As her senses slowly woke to her surroundings, Maggie realized something soaked the knees of her pants. She swiped the liquid with her finger and smelled it. Blood. From the huge gash in the alien's neck.

Maggie stared at the blade in her hand. The optics of her situation looked worse every minute.

She had met an og'dal... willingly. With few exceptions, og'dals didn't have permission to be on Earth. Yet, she'd met

with one in an isolated location. Now he was dead, and she held the murder weapon.

The kill could be justified, except she hadn't drawn her Glock. She trusted him, apparently.

Who the hell was this guy? Why couldn't she remember any details, including why she'd met an og'dal in an isolated area without backup?

Getting to her feet, she cursed not having a comm. The Department of Alien Affairs didn't issue comms to agents in what they deemed low-risk positions. Like liaison officer to GI7.

"Okay, Maggie-girl. Need to think," she whispered to herself out loud, so she wouldn't feel so alone and vulnerable. She hadn't worked a case by herself in years. Ever since she began working alongside GI7, she'd had partners, people she trusted to watch her back.

Assess. Prioritize. Strategize. That's what Zirkov always reminded his marshals. To her, well, he'd ignore her. But she was a marshal the same as Zirkov, Konnitch, and Ri'Nom—another og'dal. One of the few good ones.

Maggie checked herself over for any sign of injury. Aside from a splitting headache, a rumbling stomach, and a parched throat, she was fine. She wore her usual black slacks, utility boots, and a white tank top beneath a black blazer.

She fingered her gun, still holstered beneath her left arm, wondering why she hadn't drawn her gun given the situation. Had she seen a body on the floor, she *would* have drawn her gun.

She had no reason to kill this male, except in self-defense. And yet she didn't have any cuts, scrapes, bruises, or other evidence of having fought him. Her clothing looked crisp and clean, except for the blood-soaked pants.

Aliens who showed up on Earth without permission always had something to hide.

And now, so did she.

“Magdalena, where are you?” Zirkov’s deep voice bounced off the warehouse’s metal walls. He called her Magdalena, which he only did in relaxed situations to annoy her. During ops, he called her Marshal Walsh or Maggie.

That meant whatever happened here, Zirkov didn’t know about it.

Maggie opened her mouth to yell out to him, but a pain in her head stopped her. That and an inner voice telling her she couldn’t let him see her covered in blood, with a dead og’dal beneath her.

She wouldn’t drag Zirkov into this mess. He already thought of her as an incompetent female simply for being human. Zyanthan warriors leaned toward arrogance. Zirkov was a prime example.

Maggie wiped the bloody blade against the og’dal’s pants, then reached down to hide it in her boot. The blade slid into her knife sheath... her *empty* sheath. What the fuck? She never left home without her boot knife.

“Come on, Magdalena, enough of these games.” Zirkov sounded closer.

Shit! Maggie wove her way through the rows of old forklifts stored in the warehouse.

“Drekk,” Zirkov swore nearby as she wove through the maze of abandoned machinery. “Stenikov, ovis eben nissik og’dal vozz. Maggie avuth caz.”

Even with her limited knowledge of zyanthan, she could tell Zirkov had discovered the body. She had to escape the warehouse unnoticed and devise an alibi... for murdering an alien she didn’t even know.



ZIRKOV

ZIRKOV CHECKED HIS COMM AGAIN. The message he’d received from Stenikov said he’d tracked Maggie to the upper

portion of Terminal Island, a mostly artificial land mass between the San Pedro portion of Los Angeles and Long Beach. Unlike the warehouses around Fish Harbor, the buildings at this end of the island hadn't been used in decades.

Maggie had no active cases that required her presence here, at least none that Zirkov knew about. She worked for Earth Intelligence in the DAA, not for Zirkov. As commander of Galactic Intelligence Sector 7, he had a duty to supply Earth Intelligence with any information affecting Earth's security. Which meant his marshals had to comply with Earth's laws, or the Department of Alien Affairs would rescind GI7's access here.

Zirkov turned the dead og'dal over, looking for clues that Maggie had been here. Anything more than her scent. Fortunately, he found nothing. One missing marshal and one dead og'dal. He didn't like the narrative the DAA would build.

Or the one forming in his head.

For seven months, a mole had been leaking information about witness locations to the Brotherhood and og'dal slavers. No one person had access to the confidential information leaked. Except Zirkov... and Maggie.

The female he watched from the corner of his eyes every chance he had would not betray her own people. Since the day he met her, he'd seen nothing but honor in her.

"I lost Marshal Walsh," Stenikov reported over the comm.

"I don't see her either," Zirkov replied, his worry starting to distract him. He liked knowing where she was, that she was safe. "But I found a dead og'dal."

"Drekk, that's not good."

"No, it isn't," Zirkov agreed. The situation continued to decline, and he couldn't share all the details with his marshals. Not without risking Maggie.

"I'll be at your location in a few minutes."

Stenikov had experience in both war zones and peaceful worlds, but he'd lost Maggie not long after she'd boarded a

bus that stopped a mile from this site. Zirkov wondered if she knew he'd assigned Stenikov to follow her and that he'd posted the warrior outside her apartment building. She might have taken measures to lose Stenikov. Equally probable, Stenikov lost her due to his unfamiliarity with Earth.

Either way, Zirkov needed to move faster, be smarter, and find a way to stop whatever the drekk was happening... all while protecting Maggie.

He bent down to inspect the body. The og'dal's throat had been cut. Though Maggie carried a knife in her boot, he'd never seen her draw or use it. She favored the semi-automatic Glock Earth Intelligence issued to all its agents. Whoever killed this og'dal didn't hesitate slicing across his carotid artery. The male bled out in ten, fifteen seconds.

"I checked the perimeter," Stenikov said as he approached from behind. "No sign of her or anyone else. Any idea who the og'dal is?"

"No."

"Are you sure Marshal Walsh came this way, Commander?"

"Stenikov, we've only worked together a few days, but this is one of those times where you have to decide if you're going to trust your commander or not. If Earth Intelligence asks you anything about what happened today, including why we came here, don't mention Maggie."

"You're asking me to lie?"

"I'm asking you to relay select facts. What and how you reveal information will condemn or protect a fellow marshal."

"She's not a marshal of GI7."

No, she was much more. But he couldn't tell Stenikov that. Not without making the male suspicious.

"She's still a marshal of an allied world. And we've worked alongside her for two years. She's one of us, Stenikov. When the humans ask why you were here, tell them I ordered

you here, and that you arrived after me. Describe the scene in your own words.”

“What about tracking Marshal Walsh to the bus?”

“They won’t ask that. They don’t know I ordered you to follow her last night.”

“That doesn’t leave you an alibi, Commander. It’s better if we say we arrived together.”

“The fewer lies, the fewer chances we trip up. We found a dead og’dal. That’s all anyone needs to know. The humans will be happy he’s dead. To them, he’s another slaver.”

“Not all og’dals are slavers.”

“We’re dealing with a post-occupation world. The humans tolerate us because they need help building their planetary defenses. As long as Galactic Intelligence considers Earth an ally, we will follow our orders and work with the humans.”

“Earth is inferior. They have no technology, nothing of value to help in destroying the Coalition.”

“We are stronger against the Coalition if we share information, even with a backward planet such as Earth. They want to divest their planet of coalition sympathizers and supporters the same as Zyan, Dal, and the other planets in the alliance.”

“What do we do about Marshal Walsh? Do you want me to return to her apartment building?”

“No. I’ll handle her from here on. This situation just got complicated.”

“Do you believe she killed the og’dal?”

If she did, I’m sure she had a drekking good reason. At least I hope so.... Gods, Magdalena, what are you doing?

“I’m not sure what to believe. I cannot imagine her killing anyone, except in self-defense. But she was here.”

“How do you know?” Stenikov asked.

“Never mind.” He’d caught Maggie’s unique scent that reminded him of quirky flowers from back home. Only heartmates became acutely attuned to a mate’s scent. Clearly, his nose was as drekked up as the rest of him. She could not be his sholani, and he had only himself to blame.

For now, he had to focus on protecting her. For that, he had to appear impartial. No one could believe she was his sholani, especially Maggie.

CHAPTER TWO

MAGGIE

After using four days of vacation time to investigate why the hell she couldn't remember meeting an og'dal, or who killed him, Maggie quietly entered the sixth floor of the DAA building. She half-expected her fellow agents and other personnel in Earth Intelligence would look at her like a criminal, but most ignored her. She breathed easier, realizing Zirkov never saw her with the body or found any evidence linking her to the crime scene.

“Mags! Welcome back. How was your vacation?” Shaunda asked from her desk. As an analyst, Shaunda fought crime sitting down, but that didn't mean she took crap from anyone. Being the only other woman in the office meant she had to stand up to the guys 24-7. Despite the pile of work on her desk, Shaunda always smiled and made time to listen to Maggie.

“Vacation sucked. I didn't venture far from home.” Maggie eyed the case list on the clipboard hanging from the side of Shaunda's desk. She needed to get caught up, but rushing to look over the list would catch Shaunda's attention. Analysts had an eye for details, especially changes in behavior. “But there's something to be said for staying home and doing nothing but eat and sleep in. I slept like a teenager, Shaunda. Ten, eleven o'clock, even noon.”

“Girl, you're living the life. I'm jealous.”

Maggie picked up the case list as she plopped into the chair next to Shaunda's desk and casually flipped through the pages of open cases. "Anything major happen while I was out?"

"Ortiz finally proposed to that woman he's been dating for two years."

"The one with the short red hair?"

"That's her. I met her once. Nice girl."

Halfway down the second page, one case jumped out at her. *Dead og'dal*. She skimmed through the details. GI7 had found the dead alien in the warehouse and Sutherland had assigned the case to them.

Maggie froze. Why assign the case to GI7? Murder cases didn't typically overlap with witness protection. Had Zirkov pushed to have the case? Did he know she'd been there?

"Have anything sweet?" Maggie asked. She needed something to calm her nerves so she could think this through. While exercise would be a better choice, she needed something fast.

The second Shaunda opened a plastic food container, the smell of dark chocolate soothed Maggie like a calming balm. She broke off a piece of brownie, popped the gooey morsel into her mouth, and savored the flavor as she assessed her situation.

Like any other day, she'd walked into Earth Intelligence and no one except Shaunda had noticed or even said hi. No one had connected her to the dead og'dal, but Assistant Director Sutherland had assigned the case to GI7. Why? Maybe she should tell him she'd been there.

Pain shot through Maggie's head and she nearly doubled over.

"Are the brownies that bad?" Shaunda asked.

Maggie rubbed her forehead. "God, no. They're fantastic. But I shouldn't eat chocolate when I have a headache." She snagged another piece and popped it into her mouth.

“Maggie!”

“The brownie’s worth the pain.” Except this time there was no pain. It wasn’t the chocolate, then, but the thought of telling Sutherland about her involvement in the case.

Shaunda closed the box. “You’re like a kid who doesn’t know when to stop. You’ll keep eating until you keel over.”

“But I’ll die with a smile on my face. These brownies are so good!”

“I’ll save them for when you’re feeling better.”

“Seriously, you should open up a bakery.”

“And deal with rats and cranky employees? No way.”

“Walsh! Get in here,” Assistant Director Sutherland yelled from across the floor.

Shaunda’s smile faded. “Fuck, what did you do now, girl?”

“No clue. Were any of the GI7 marshals here during my absence? He’s usually in a bad mood after dealing with them.”

“The tall, serious one. Blue with those horns... What’s his name again?”

“Zirkov.” Maggie’s body heated just thinking about him. That was not the reaction she should have at work, especially given what the marshal thought of her. “Though GI7 has another zyanthan now. I don’t know if you’ve seen him yet. Stenikov’s much taller and doesn’t brood, but he’s working for Zirkov, so that will change in time.”

Shaunda covered her mouth as she laughed. “You’re awful.”

“Did I ever say I was a nice person?”

“Now, Walsh!”

“Fuck, you better get in there. I swear, you spend more time in his office than any other agent. People are gonna start talking if you’re not careful, Mags.”

“Don’t worry. Sutherland’s not my type.” *Zirkov, however...* Maggie threw a parting smile at Shaunda as she

headed to the assistant director's office.

"Close the door," Sutherland barked the second she stepped inside his office.

With the door closed, she remained standing. The fifty-three-year-old's eyes ran down her as always. "Sit."

As soon as she sat across from his desk, Sutherland tossed her a file. "While you were out, we had a new case involving murdered og'dals. Aliens who shouldn't be on Earth. I need to know why they're here and who killed them."

"This isn't my case." Maggie pushed the file back across the desk.

"It is now."

"I read the open case list. It shows Marshal Kesk's been assigned this one."

"While you were on vacation, that motherfucker stormed up here and demanded the case. We'll get to that in a minute."

Sutherland hated Zirkov. That's why he appointed her as the liaison between their two departments.

Reluctantly, Maggie pulled the file back and opened it. The pictures showed the dead og'dal precisely as she'd left him. Forensics even documented where she'd wiped the bloody knife against his right pant leg. The second og'dal, however, she didn't recognize. He lay crumpled in a field with overgrown grass, his skin and clothing burned on his right side.

"Blaster wound," she muttered, then her eyes snapped to Sutherland. Zirkov had demanded the case, and Sutherland had handed it over. Her boss didn't cave to anyone. "Assistant Director, tell me you don't suspect—"

"Zirkov and his marshals are the only ones who carry blasters."

"Even so, that doesn't mean he or anyone in GI7 did it."

"That's why I need your help."

“These victims aren’t necessarily connected. The autopsy report says the first victim died from a knife wound, the second victim from a blaster.”

“It’s not a coincidence that we have three illegal og’dals murdered within days of each other.”

“Three? There are only two dead og’dals here,” she said, setting the photos side by side.

Sutherland rifled through the case file and placed a third photo in front of her before slamming a finger on the sandy-haired og’dal with dark eyes and thin lips. “Stabbed, like the dead og’dal Kesk’s team found in a warehouse.”

She’d seen this og’dal before, but couldn’t recall where or when, let alone his name.

“Three dead og’dals makes me nervous. And this one with the blaster wound was killed near the airfield where GI7’s ships land,” Sutherland said.

“You’re not suggesting the marshals are outright killing og’dals, are you?”

“They’re involved. That’s why Kesk demanded this case. He intends to cover for whoever’s guilty.”

“What evidence do you have?”

“The blaster wound on the second alien. Neither the og’dals nor the Brotherhood has access to blasters. Fuck, Walsh, we don’t even have access to any. But Zirkov and his marshals do. Whoever killed that og’dal probably realized using his blaster had been a mistake and then switched to using a knife to kill the other two, to shift suspicion.”

“No one from GI7 has any reason to kill an og’dal, except in self-defense. It’s more likely another og’dal or someone from the Brotherhood killed them. I think we should assume if the Brotherhood’s still allied with the og’dals, then they have access to blasters.”

“If that were the case, we would have seen blasters used in other Brotherhood activities by now. I’ve been at this a lot

longer than you, Walsh. These murders involve the og'dal marshal, Ri'Nel, Ri'Nil—”

“Ri'Nom,” she corrected him but said nothing more. Sutherland needed to focus on someone, and right now, that wasn't her. She had to keep it that way while she investigated the case. And now he was giving her the chance to do so officially. Except that would mean being in contact with Zirkov more than usual, something she wasn't sure how to handle. The zyanthan pushed her away at every turn, and when he didn't, she found herself watching and thinking about him more than work.

“Yes, that's it. Ri'Nom. It's not a coincidence that after he resigned from GI7 to live on Dal that we have og'dals showing up here. Are they spying for him? Are they—”

“No!” She couldn't let him talk that way about Ri'Nom. The marshal had always been good to her and loyal to Galactic Intelligence. “Ri'Nom doesn't need to use spies. He lived here for nearly a year and he's still in contact with the other GI7 marshals.”

“He is?” Sutherland took his seat finally. “You've been our liaison officer to GI7 for nearly two years. Through all our meetings, you never gave me the impression they've accepted you.”

“They trust me.” *Mostly.*

“Good. Use your friendship. Get closer to them. Find out what Kesk and the others are hiding from us.”

“What makes you think they're hiding anything at all?”

“Cybersecurity reported a breach. Someone compromised one of our surveillance feeds. Two minutes are missing.” He pounded a finger on the photo of the og'dal from the warehouse. “This alien was in the footage, talking with someone, but that part of the footage is missing. As I said before, Kesk's covering for someone. His people tampered with the evidence. Even the backups, which are stored in a different location.”

“You have proof they're responsible?”

“Cybersecurity hasn’t been able to prove how or when the footage disappeared, but these aliens have technology we’ve never even conceived of. They withhold all the advanced tech from us until they deem us worthy or they need something in exchange. I want to know what GI7’s doing, who they’re protecting, and why.”

Her stomach turned at the thought of spying on Zirkov and his marshals. Even if they didn’t fully trust her, they were allies... friends.

“I’m not an undercover agent. What do you want me to do, precisely?”

“Stick to them as much as possible and find me something, anything, tying them to these murders. Give them any excuse to be in their faces 24-7. Tell them you’re verifying that they’re following protocols as part of an annual compliance check on marshals. Fuck that blue bastard Kesk for all I care, but stick to those aliens like glue and get me answers.”

Someone higher up, like Director Nguyen, had to be pressuring Sutherland for him to even suggest she sleep with an alien. Both men constantly complained about having to work with aliens. And they’d voiced their disgust of interspecies mating between humans and aliens. Like many humans, they viewed having aliens in their lives as a necessary evil to protect Earth from another invasion.

Maggie genuinely enjoyed getting to know each of GI7’s marshals, but investigating them like this felt like a betrayal. “Marshal Protocols Annual Compliance Check, then. I’ll make up the details as I go.” She had to keep Sutherland happy, which meant appearing to go along with his orders. She’d investigate the murders, especially her connection, whatever it was, but she wouldn’t pin this on Zirkov or anyone from GI7, no matter how much Sutherland pushed her.

“This is a matter of planetary security, Walsh, and you’re in the best position to get the information we need. If you’re hesitant or if you can’t commit and do whatever’s necessary, I’ll send in a qualified field agent like Hobart or Yamato.”

She dug her nails into her thigh to keep from snapping at him. "I'm fully qualified. I've passed the same annual recertification as every other DAA field agent. In fact, unlike most of the agents here, I have practical warfare experience. Before the occupation ended, I fought with the resistance for two years."

"I'm well aware of your background, but your job as liaison has made you soft."

"I go to the firing range, I work out, and I've been involved in several GI7 ops."

"Not many, but that's not what I meant."

"As many as any other agent. I've been with the DAA since its inception three years ago, sir."

He tapped his temple. "You're soft up here, Walsh. You see these aliens like they're one of us. They're not."

"You can't use my personal views against me, not when my performance has been outstanding."

"We all have different strengths. Your ability to tolerate the aliens is part of the reason I appointed you liaison officer. Galactic Intelligence requires transparency, intel... cooperation," he spat the last word out. "You have an innocence that makes others believe you. Our other agents, Jackson, Mayfield, Kaplan... They know how to push back."

Did he call her a coward?

"You make the alien operatives feel like we trust them, like we're not watching them."

"You're watching them?"

"They're aliens, Walsh. Of course, we're watching them, along with every alien working on Earth. The only ones we can't watch are the ones they hide because that bastard Kesik refuses to give us their locations."

"There are only five alien witnesses in hiding here."

"That's five too many." Sutherland leaned forward on his desk. "Look, Walsh, we all play a part. My agents solve crimes

involving aliens to make our people feel safe while aiding in Earth's defense. You communicate between Earth Intelligence and Galactic Intelligence, making the aliens believe we're giving them everything they ask for. We still need them. But what we do is largely for our citizens. If our people knew the full truth of how much we rely on alien technology, and how easily these so-called allies could overrun us, they'd panic. Panic leads to riots and everything counterproductive to keeping Earth safe."

"As you said, they are allies. They're helping us build a defense shield and they protect Earth."

"For now. But they could turn on us any time. We need to be self-reliant, which means never fully trusting them."

"You don't think what I do as liaison matters."

"It matters. You're cheery and easy on the eyes. Women trust you and men want to look at you. You have what it takes to reassure the public we're in charge, not the aliens. If we lose a few witnesses, it's a loss, but not as big as losing Galactic Intelligence as an ally. Or handing them all our secrets.

"Having a few GI7 marshals on Earth and letting them keep alien witnesses here is how we prove we're doing our share for Galactic Intelligence. But when it comes to our people, we have to look like we're the ones in control. Which means minimizing alien activity on Earth. Bottom line, I need to know what Zirkov's hiding and if he's covering for one of his people or the og'dals. If I don't catch these og'dals and stop whatever they're doing, someone's head will roll, and it won't be mine. Got that, Walsh?"

"Yes, sir."

Bastard.

CHAPTER THREE

MAGGIE

“**S**hit,” Maggie swore as she walked the halls of the DAA, reading the latest report from GI7. They’d lost another witness, a human woman set to testify on Dal against the og’dal slavers who had kidnapped her from Earth during the occupation.

Ever since Sutherland assigned her to spy on GI7 two days ago, every mention or reference to og’dals put her on edge. She replayed that night last week over and over in her head without gleaning any additional insight. After she’d fled the warehouse, she’d raced home like a coward and searched every inch of her apartment, looking for clues about what had happened. There’d been no sign of a struggle or evidence that someone had drugged her. The best she could surmise was that she’d dressed for work, left her apartment, and then... what? Been overpowered? Or drugged and taken to that warehouse? She hadn’t found a single needle mark or bruise anywhere on her body. She’d had blackouts before, but nothing that ended in murder.

She had no defense. When she failed to find anything that could exonerate her or explain her actions, she hopped in her car and drove to Redondo Beach Pier, where she flung the murder weapon into the Pacific Ocean. Getting rid of the evidence disturbed her more than not having any answers to what happened that night.

Maggie slammed into a hard red wall, crushing the folder in her hands.

“Careful!” A huge muscular hand steadied her.

Not a wall. Konnitch. The only keentan marshal in GI7. At least she hadn't run into Zirkov. He would have stared at her with those bright silver eyes and said something that made her look like a fool.

Maggie straightened her blazer and felt for the gun at her side. Konnitch's eyes caught the movement. She'd never draw on him or anyone from GI7. They'd earned her trust in the past two years.

Then why did her hand move to her Glock? She was in a secure building. Earth Intelligence had moved into the DAA's building in Los Angeles to better coordinate security involving aliens, both allied and enemy. Earth Intelligence occupied the sixth and seventh floors of the nine-story building. She'd taken the back stairs to the fourth floor, which Zirkov's group, GI7, shared with Alien Immigration. There was no reason to reach for her gun, but she had, and Konnitch noticed. Thankfully, he had the good grace not to mention it.

“You're distracted,” the keenta said.

“I read the latest report. On the loss of Betsy Franklin.”

That wiped the smile off Konnitch's face. At least he smiled now and then, unlike the tall blue zyanthan approaching behind him. She couldn't recall Zirkov ever smiling, not at her. The other marshals had accepted her as their liaison to Earth Intelligence, but not Zirkov. The male was all scowl and no play.

And boy, how she'd like to play with him. She'd never seen such a gorgeous male before. Muscles... yeah, he had those everywhere, like every other marshal in GI7. But Zirkov had a commanding air about him that mixed with a reserved layer she had yet to reach. Maybe that's what she found so alluring... discovering what he was hiding from everyone.

“Magdalena,” he greeted with a curt nod.

She hated being called that, and he damn well knew it. She'd told him enough times.

“I have to go,” Konnitch said, nodding to her before he threw a sideways glance at Zirkov and headed toward the stairs. Zirkov returned the nod. Subtle, but full of underlying meaning.

She wished she could read Zirkov better, find a way to get his attention.

“Must I repeat myself?” he asked, his voice edged with impatience.

“Sorry, I zoned out for a moment.” Not the first time this week, apparently. “Please repeat your question.”

He drew a deep breath. “I asked what case you’re working on.”

“Why do you want to know?”

“We found a body in a warehouse on Terminal Island a week ago,” Stenikov said. For as tall and easy to spot as he was, he appeared out of nowhere. Unlike her, he’d make a good spy.

Maggie forced herself to lift a brow. “Oh? What were you doing there?”

Stenikov opened his mouth to reply, but Zirkov cut him off with a raised hand. “Go with Konnitch, report back later.” When Stenikov left, Zirkov motioned Maggie toward GI7’s office. “We received a tip of illegal activity involving og’dals. The victim was og’dal. The body’s been moved to the morgue. This case has gained Galactic Intelligence’s attention. Since you’re our liaison, you need to know what we’re investigating.”

Her! They were investigating *her*!

Calm down, Maggie. Use this opportunity to find out what they know, what they suspect.

He closed the door behind her. “Yes, I need to know, but why didn’t Galactic Intelligence contact me directly?”

“You took vacation time.”

“Oh, right.”

Zirkov's horns rose higher than usual. She'd annoyed him, a frequent occurrence these past few months. Nothing she did or said around him seemed good enough.

He's suspicious. Change the topic.

"I thought you'd ask me about the Franklin case."

His brow furrowed. "Why would I ask you about Betsy Franklin? I reported her death. There's nothing you could add."

Maggie curled and uncurled the file in her hands. She hadn't intended to mention his dead witness, but it was that or discuss the og'dal murder, and she wanted to steer clear of that.

"I'm asking because she was murdered before you could take her to Dal to testify."

"A bus hit her when she ran into the street," Zirkov corrected.

"Very few people just run into the street. If someone chased her into the path of that bus, then it's murder." Maggie kept her voice steady. Zirkov would think her as incompetent as ever if he realized she hadn't read the report.

"No facts support that theory." Silver eyes moved down her torso, sending a thrill through her. She needed to ignore his glances like she ignored the way he looked down on her.

Those thick biceps of his flexed gracefully as he clasped his hands behind him in a resting stance. "You appear distracted, Marshal. Are you ill?"

"What? You never had an off day, Z?"

"I don't like being called Z."

"Funny, 'cause I don't like when you call me Magdalena. Who's gonna give first, Z? It won't be me."

An eyebrow raised. Good. Confusing him seemed to be her only defense against the guy.

Maggie slammed her datapad against his chest.

“What is this?” He skimmed the file she’d opened on her datapad. A DAA field manual that detailed how to clean and maintain government-issued weapons,

“The MPACC manual. I have to complete the review.” She yanked the datapad out of his hands before he read the file and realized she was lying to him. Again.

“MPACC?”

“Marshal Protocols Annual Compliance Check. I’ll shadow you through your duties over the next few weeks to ensure you’re following the protocols established by Earth Intelligence.”

“I’ve never heard of this.”

“It’s new. And I’m the poor sod ordered to conduct the compliance check.”

“You humans have too many meaningless protocols and reports. I’m trying to solve two murders.”

“Three.”

That dark brow lifted again.

“The morgue has two og’dals stabbed to death, and a third killed by a blaster.”

“Ah. Yes, I must notify them about that last one. The og’dal attacked Stenikov and a new witness, Sorcha Collins, as they debarked *Kuvak’s Quest*. Stenikov shot the male to protect her. A justified kill.”

“I hope he’s taking her to Ireland, not Dal.”

Zirkov leaned forward. “She’s leaving for Dal soon. When she returns after testifying, she’ll be taken to her home.”

“She should go home first. You can’t deny her that right.”

“We cannot keep Dal’s council waiting.”

“Yes, you can.”

“The witness did not request to go home.”

Maggie sensed he wasn’t telling her everything. About the witness... and what he knew about the dead og’dals.

“Why didn’t you report the incident with the og’dal to me? There are agents upstairs unnecessarily working the case.”

“Because you, Marshal Walsh, are already a suspect in the death of one og’dal and I don’t care to report to anyone else in Earth Intelligence.”

Her entire body froze. “I’m a suspect? What are you talking about?” She hoped she mixed the right amount of outrage with shock to make herself appear innocent. Which she was, wasn’t she?

“Until proven otherwise, everyone is a suspect,” he added, though she couldn’t tell if he was joking or backtracking because he truly suspected her.

“I didn’t kill anyone. And if I were a suspect, then why not report me to Assistant Director Sutherland?”

“I agree. You’re not a killer. You don’t have it in you.”

WTF? Why did everyone think she was weak? Not that she wanted to argue the point. She’d hardly claim to killing the og’dal just to prove Zirkov wrong.

“Besides, Marshal Walsh, for as much as you frustrate me with your rules and regulations, you are the only one I tolerate in the DAA.”

He *tolerated* her. That was almost a compliment coming from her stoic alien. But he suspected her. This wasn’t good. Not at all.

The corner of his mouth ticked upward. Was that a smile?

“You like me,” she said, gladly letting the matter of the og’dal drop.

“I never said that.”

“You’re not denying it either.”

“Perhaps you are the one who likes me, Magdalena.” He rounded the desk and backed her against a wall.

Damn, her fingers itched to discover if his horns were as smooth and hard as they looked. Without warning, he pressed

his hips against hers and his nose along her neck and upward, as if smelling her. Fuck, more than his horns were hard.

How long since she had sex? More than two years, that's for sure. Two years she'd watched him command GI7. Always so decisive, taking charge of many dangerous ops and never losing a witness. Now he was trying to take charge of her.

She should tell him everything. Then what? Lose what little respect he had for her? Hell, no. For two years, she'd tried to get him to notice her. She refused to ruin it by giving him reason to doubt her.

His lips pressed against hers. With a slight nudge from his tongue, she opened.

If I'm sleeping, please don't wake me. I want this dream to last as long as possible.

A deft tongue glided along her lower lip before sweeping the inside of her mouth. With the same decisiveness as the male himself, that tongue danced with hers, lifting her up on her toes. Her body moved on its own, anything to get closer, to become a part of him.

The datapad dropped to the floor as she thrust her hands through his hair, reaching for his horns. For so long, she'd wanted to touch him there, to understand him better, and destroy whatever barriers existed between them.

Before she could stroke his horns, he broke the kiss. "I shouldn't have done that."

"I disagree," she said, not even trying to contain her grin.

"This is not why you're here."

"It could be." She wagged her eyebrows playfully until his frown deepened. "Okay, I get it. Someone might see us. Especially here at work."

"Something like that."

She'd gladly make an exception for him. "We have to stay professional while on the job. But off the job... well, that's an entirely different set of rules."

He caressed the side of her face. “You’re tempting me.”

“Is it working?”

He gripped her chin and stared into her eyes. “You think I’m not attracted to you?”

She nodded, still stunned he’d kissed her, or that she’d lost all her inhibitions around him. For two years, she’d thought about making a move on him, always caving to the fear that he’d reject her.

When his fingertips traced her lower lip, her entire body melted. A surreal warmth moved through her. Nothing had prepared her for how glorious his touch would feel.

“We shouldn’t be doing this. Fraternization at work is against the rules,” she squeaked out despite how much she wanted him to continue touching her.

He picked up the datapad she’d dropped and held it out to her. “Too many rules can stall progress.”

She clutched the device against her chest. “That doesn’t mean they’re not important.”

“Send me your MPACC rules via datapad, if you must, but I won’t read them.”

“Is everything human a waste of time to you?”

Intense silver eyes locked on her face before tracking lower. “Not everything.”

Maggie inadvertently dragged the tip of her tongue along her upper lip. Zirkov closed the gap between them, his hand working its way through her hair. “Such an unusual color, and yet it suits you.”

“Compliments will get you nowhere,” she said, despite the need to let him continue touching her. She pulled away.

“Answer me one question, Magdalena.”

“What?”

“Did you meet with any of the dead og’dals?”

Fuck! He *did* suspect her.

Heart racing, Maggie said, “You weren’t joking before, were you? You really think I could murder someone. I have no motive, Commander Kesk.”

“Commander, now?”

“It’s more appropriate, wouldn’t you say? After all, we both know you only kissed me because you thought I’d fall for you and tell you anything you wanted. If you suspect me of murder, then arrest me, but don’t manipulate me.”

“You’re overconfident for someone in your position.”

Maggie lifted her chin. “And here I thought we were on the same side, Commander.” She sashayed her way out of his office, taking her time and shaking her ass intentionally, though she didn’t know why. Only that the male infuriated her. He actually suspected her.

And he’d kissed her, anyway.

Using her.

“You’re playing a dangerous game,” he said when he caught up to her.

“I don’t play games. I’m a marshal.”

“You’re in trouble. Let me help you.”

“I don’t need help. I haven’t done anything wrong.” She wished she could have said that with more confidence, or that she could share what she knew with Zirkov. But doing so would make him an accomplice unless he arrested her. And right now, she wasn’t what he wanted from her...

CHAPTER FOUR

MAGGIE

“Get down!” Maggie yelled as she grabbed GI7’s latest witness and shoved her to the ground behind an overturned car in the alley. With his blood running down the side of his head, Stenikov got off one shot of his blaster before he slumped to the ground.

A hail of bullets whizzed by. Nothing like an old-fashioned shoot-out to finish off the week that started with Zirkov kissing her and then basically accusing her of murder.

This routine check on Stenikov and his witness turned out to be anything but routine. After parking her car down the street from the safehouse, gunfire erupted. Maggie never expected to find the marshal and his witness trapped in an alley three streets away from their safehouse.

“They’re gonna kill us!” the witness said as she crouched behind the car and covered her ears.

“No, they won’t. Not if we stay calm.” Maggie fired off several rounds to keep the gunmen at bay. “How many attacked the safehouse?”

“I didn’t see anyone. Maarshuhl Stenikov grabbed me, and we fled out the back. A few houses from here, those men started firin’ at us! They trapped us here, shootin’ at us loik fish in a barrel, ye know?”

Stenikov had kept the witness alive but erred by entering the dead-end alley. He likely didn’t know the area well enough and had taken a wrong turn. New to Earth, the warrior

probably didn't realize how incongruous the layout of residential neighborhoods could be. Either way, Stenikov, his witness, and now Maggie were in trouble.

Eyes wide, the curvy redhead tucked her legs to her chest. "Can ye help us escape?"

"That's the plan. Though I have to admit, I only stopped by to do a routine check on you and Stenikov. I didn't expect to walk into a gunfight."

"Bad timing, ye have, sorry. But good for us," the redhead said with a shaky smile.

The metallic ping of bullets striking the car rang out, sending the woman into a tighter curled-up ball. Those men across the street really wanted this witness dead to be wasting so many bullets.

Post-invasion, all nations focused on building up planetary defense. That meant producing weapons systems that would defend against enemy forces on a planetary scale. No one bothered making firearms or ammo anymore, except for one small government agency, and they only supplied law enforcement and the military. Civilians had to scrounge for guns and ammo. Knives and even arrows became their primary weapons, except for some top men in the Brotherhood who always managed to have firepower.

"Give us the witness and we'll let everyone else go free," a man shouted from across the alley.

Maggie peered over the car they crouched behind. "Looks like the Brotherhood found you."

"What would the Brotherhood be wantin' with me?"

"They may still have ties to og'dal slavers. Once you testify on Dal, you won't have to worry about them anymore. The slavers who use them to do their bidding won't be alive to pay them, so they'll move on to another illegal activity." Maggie aimed at where she'd seen the last muzzle flash. "How's Stenikov doing?"

"He's still breathin', he is. T'ree men jumped us when we left the safehouse. I'm not even sure why we left. It all

happened vaery fast. One of them struck him in the head with a pipe, but he defeated them, all t'ree, and got me out of there safe, he did."

"Do what you can to wake him." They couldn't stay in the alley much longer. Maggie had only one spare magazine on her.

When the witness didn't respond, Maggie glanced over her shoulder. The younger woman looked pale.

"How old are you, Collins?"

Maggie hoped she could keep her from passing out while she ran through the layout of the area in her head. The nearest bus stop wasn't far, but the Brotherhood would cover that escape route.

"Twenty-two. Call me Sorcha, if ye dunna mind."

"Sure. Nice to meet you, Sorcha. I'm Marshal Maggie Walsh."

"A wumman maarshuhl ? And Irish too!"

Another round of bullets thumped into the car making her screech in terror. Maggie squeezed her shoulder. "It's a new world. Women can do anything they want."

"Aye, if they have the connections or the body for it."

A muzzle flashed. Maggie returned fire, pumping eight rounds to the right of a large boxwood at the corner of the house across the street. Glass exploded when her shots struck a window.

"I'm a federal marshal for Earth Intelligence," Maggie shouted across the street. "Leave now, or the next shot will shatter more than glass."

"I loik ye. Ye don't give up."

"Can't afford to." Maggie looked at the tall chain-linked fence at the end of the alley. She scooped up Stenikov's blaster. One shot would create a nice hole in that fence. But she wasn't sure she could carry the zyanthan and cover their retreat.

She fired the blaster, setting the boxwood on fire. It handled differently from her Glock. Not as much kickback, and with more of an arc to it.

Maggie ducked down beside Sorcha as another round of bullets struck the car.

“I don’t want to die in a dir’y alley, Maarshuhl Walsh. Especially now that yer givin’ me ideas. I may not have t’ work in me da’s grocery when I return home. What did ye have t’ do t’ become a maarshuhl, if ye don’t mind me askin’?”

“Study. Train. Pass physical and written tests. The same as the guys.” Maggie fired again. This time someone yelled out in pain.

“Reale? Ye didn’t have to sleep with anyone? Wummen can do the same as men now?”

“I’m sorry for what you had to go through, out there,” Maggie pointed up to the stars as the men returned fire. “You don’t have to sleep with anyone. Though there are still men who will try to force you into that position.” Two teachers at the academy had propositioned and threatened her. “We have the same rights as before the occupation. At least in the U.S., U.K., and most of western Europe. Some countries are lagging in restoring full rights to their civilians, men and women. I hope you won’t let this incident scare you from testifying on Dal. Your testimony is important.”

“I didn’t know I had a choice.”

“Of course, you do. That’s what I’m saying. Things have changed. You have rights now. Didn’t anyone on the rescue team explain that?”

Sorcha shook her head. “The GI7 maarshuhl, the tall blue one who naever smiles, said he’d notify me ma and da that I’m safe. After I testify on Dal, they’ll take me hoowm to Ireland. We leave for Dal in t’ree days.”

“You’re supposed to go home to family before testifying on Dal, if you choose. That’s the protocol for rescued women.”

“They didn’t tell me that.”

“Commander Zirkov’s only thinking about the larger picture, not the individual.”

When a moan sounded to Maggie’s right, she felt for a pulse on the zyanthan’s wrist. The warrior thrust a knife against her neck.

“She’s on our side, ye know!” Sorcha said to Stenikov whose silver eyes hadn’t quite focused. He looked dazed.

“You know me, Warrior.” Maggie held out her hand to greet him. “I’m Marshal—”

“I remember everything, Marshal. But I want to know how the enemy found my witness so quickly. Minutes before you showed up.”

She hadn’t expected Stenikov to be so abrupt, rude, or to infer she worked for the Brotherhood.

“Marshal Zelin, lower your knife. I’m the one who’s been keeping your witness alive while you napped in the mud.” She flicked a piece of mud from his jacket.

“Stenikov, ye can trust her. She saved us when ye passed out.”

He nodded at Sorcha but took his sweet time lowering that knife. He didn’t trust her. She wondered if he’d come by that opinion himself, or if Zirkov had said something to him.

Maggie peered past the car, hoping to glimpse what the men of the Brotherhood planned next. She hadn’t heard any movement from them for several minutes. “We’re on the same side, Warrior.”

“Our people are allies. That doesn’t mean our goals align.”

“That’s the Brotherhood out there, trying to kill us. All three of us. Understand?”

Stenikov altered between watching the street and her. “You were there that night. At the warehouse.”

There was no question now. He and Zirkov knew she’d been there. But how?

Stenikov's silver eyes narrowed as if he debated whether to say more. Zirkov also had silver eyes, but unlike Stenikov, Zirkov had a talent for wiping all emotion from his face. This guy didn't, and his distrust shone through his face as clearly as crystal.

Zirkov must have cautioned Stenikov about her. Did the commander, the male she'd worked alongside for two years, really believe she killed that og'dal?

She *had* been there.

And didn't know how or why. Or who killed the og'dal. She couldn't have killed him and not remembered, could she?

She could have merely found the dead og'dal. The image of holding the bloody knife in her hand flashed before her eyes.

"What is the status, Marshal Walsh?" Stenikov asked in a more congenial voice this time as he rose with Sorcha's help. He wavered slightly, his tall frame towering over the slight Irish woman, but he never complained about his head wound. He merely put his hand out for his blaster.

Maggie returned it to him. "I only fired it twice."

"I'm not counting."

"Sorry. Habit. We're trained to count bullets, both our own and our enemy's."

"A blaster doesn't lose charge for weeks. Status?"

"Five males, possibly more. Human, two with handguns. I haven't seen any movement for the past few minutes. They might be out of bullets."

"Then we should leave." He motioned Sorcha to stand behind him.

"The best path is through the fence at the end of the alley. I'd planned to shoot through with your blaster."

"That could work, but the enemy could also be waiting on the other side. I've called for backup." He pointed to his comm.

“We can’t wait for backup. The Brotherhood hunts in packs. They’ll have reinforcements on the way. You need to trust me on this, Stenikov. They won’t expect us to escape through the fence. I know the area. Once we’re through, I’ll find us someplace safe.”

“You may know this area, but I don’t know you or your skills, Marshal.”

“Well, I do, and she’s doin’ a grand job, she is.”

Stenikov’s horns raised, but to his credit, he didn’t talk back to Sorcha.

“You’re new here, Stenikov,” Maggie continued. “On Earth, we accept help when it’s offered, especially among allies.”

“Then what accounts for lying to those allies?” Zirkov said behind her.

Maggie spun around. Help had arrived. Not the type she wanted to see, but for Sorcha’s sake, this was a good development. “Glad you’re here, Warrior.”

Zirkov drew a deep breath. “Why do you persist with calling me Warrior when you know my title is Commander?”

“Because you attended warrior training in Izoran on Zyan. Like Stenikov.”

“How do you know—” Stenikov began, but Zirkov held up a hand, silencing him.

“As the liaison officer between Earth Intelligence and GI7, Marshal Walsh has access to all information Earth Intelligence collects, as well as any information our marshals input into their system.”

“I learned about part of your past at Izoran when we were there, what little the warriors there would tell me,” Maggie said. “You never entered your personnel file in Earth Intelligence systems.”

“Because Earth Intelligence doesn’t need it. But since you are asking, I will clarify. I was a warrior until I wasn’t.”

“You’re talking in riddles.”

“You asked a question. I answered.” Zirkov tapped into his comm. “Stenikov, I’ve sent you the location of a new safehouse. Take the witness and go, now. The vicinity is clear.”

“He’s injured,” Maggie objected.

“Not enough to keep him from fulfilling his duties.”

“Which safehouse?” Maggie asked.

“You don’t need to know. Go, Stenikov. I don’t want to repeat myself.”

With a nod, Zirkov took Sorcha’s hand in his until the woman broke free. “Oi beg yer pardon, Maarshuhls , but b’fore ye take me t’ Dal, I wan’ t’ see me family.”

“No, you’re going with Stenikov to a secure location,” Zirkov said. “Tomorrow, we’ll transport you to Dal. I moved the date up. For your safety.”

“Bollocks. Ye don’t care about me, not at all. I’m goin’ home t’ Ireland, or I’m not testifyin’. Ye can either take me hoowm first, or I’ll start walkin’.”

“You tell him, girl,” Maggie said, to which Sorcha lifted her chin in defiance.

“This is your doing, Magdalena. You’ll get her killed. Or is that the intent?”

“How dare you! I’ve done everything you’ve ever asked of me since the day Sutherland appointed me to be the liaison between our agencies. And I just risked my life to save one of your witnesses. *Again*, Warrior.” She knew the title aggravated him, but right now going on the offense offered her something to focus on other than the pain of knowing he didn’t trust her.

Zirkov gripped her arm and led her away from Sorcha and Stenikov. “Magdalena, what is this all about?”

“You don’t trust me with the new location.”

“I trust you.”

“Then tell me you don’t think I had anything to do with that og’dal’s death.”

Zirkov’s mouth opened, then closed.

Maggie jerked her arm free. “I thought so. You’ve never trusted me. It’s why you barely talk to me and you resist having me on ops. For God’s sake, you chose Kaci, an untrained civilian, to act as Gabriella’s decoy!”

“She bore a remarkable resemblance to Gabriella.”

“That’s an excuse, another in a long string. Konnitch told me everything. You put out a call for women and found the one that would pass as Gabriella without even thinking of me.”

“You have blonde hair and blue eyes. And you’re taller.”

“I could have pulled it off, no different than with Nala. Wigs, colored contacts... There are a lot of tricks. But you never even thought to use me, because you don’t trust me.”

Zirkov growled and dragged his hand over his face. “That’s not the reason. Your skills are as good as any marshal or warrior I’ve ever seen.”

“Then why do you always push me away?”

“Because...” He shut down again, on the verge of saying something important.

“I get it. Trust has to be earned. Well, Warrior,” she said, poking him in the chest. “That goes both ways.”

“Magdalena, you’re not the only one who’s read the files of the other agents in our circle.”

“What does that mean?”

“Explain where you were a year ago, between October and December.”

“I was visiting my mother and sister.”

“Maggie, you don’t have a sister.”

“Of course I do. Her name is...” It was right there, on the tip of her tongue, just out of reach. She rubbed her forehead, trying to soothe the acute stabbing pain.

The sound of glass breaking nearby spurred everyone into action.

Stenikov grabbed Sorcha's hand again, but not before the woman pulled Maggie into a bear hug.

Maggie slipped a card with her contact information into Sorcha's hands. "If they refuse to take you home first, contact me. I'll make sure you get there."

"Thank ye, Maarshuhl. For everythin'."

"I'm the one who should thank you, Sorcha. It's good to know someone believes in me."

Stenikov and his charge clung to the shadows as they escaped the alley, leaving Maggie alone with Zirkov.

"My sister's name is Tallulah," Maggie finally said, her memory bouncing back as the pain receded. When she looked up at those amazing silver eyes, Zirkov no longer looked angry but worried. With a large, warm hand that made her want to melt against him, he cupped her face. For a brief moment, she felt at peace with the universe. All because Zirkov touched her, looking into her eyes with a softness she'd never seen in him.

"Maggie, you don't have a sister," he whispered.

"I should know if I have a sister. Her name is Tallulah Walsh, and she has blue eyes and blonde hair, like me, but she's shorter and... She passed away, ten years ago." That was the reason she couldn't remember at first. Painful memories were easier to shove aside than confront. She'd learned that from many of the abused women Galactic Intelligence rescued.

Zirkov ran a finger down her cheek. "Sholani, something is wrong. Your memory is faulty. And I think you've been leaking information for the past four months. Unintentionally, I'm sure, but I—"

"What did you call me?"

"I called you Maggie."

No, he'd called her sholani. She was sure of it. His calling her sholani had shocked her, making the rest of what he'd said slow to sink in.

"Wait... Did you accuse me of leaking information?"

"Yes."

"Why the hell would you say that?"

"Because the only Tallulah in your file is..." His jaw with that handsome scruff she loved clenched shut. The male never missed an opportunity to put her in her place. If this was some twisted, demented game, she'd make him regret it.

"She's what?" Maggie demanded. "Spit it out, Z."

"You're an only child, Magdalena. You've never had a sister or brother. Just a cat... named Tallulah."

CHAPTER FIVE

ZIRKOV

Konnitch leaned over Zirkov's shoulder as he viewed the five-year-old footage of their unidentified og'dal closing the plank of a known bride ship, one which delivered hopeful human women to brothels and slave markets instead of the husbands they'd been promised.

"Are you sure it's him?" Konnitch asked. "The og'dal in the morgue has blond hair and is only five-nine. This slaver looks six, six-one."

"The coroner confirmed the male dyed his hair and some slavers wear boots with thick heels that conceal weapons."

"When did you come by that info?" Konnitch asked.

"On Dal. Ri'Nom and I were discussing opening a field office there given the growing number of slaves GI5 has rescued lately. Taking rescued women directly to Dal for debriefing and testifying would prove more efficient."

"That will help ease the marshal shortage, too. Fewer women to protect if they've already testified before returning to Earth."

"Still making decisions based on what's right for Galactic Intelligence and not the victims, I see," Maggie said from the doorway of Zirkov's office.

She crossed her arms over her chest, calling attention to her lovely breasts despite the shapeless blazer she wore.

Zirkov forced his eyes up to her sweet face... which barely held her anger in check.

“I see you’re still mad about what I said yesterday,” Zirkov said as he stepped out from behind his desk. He should leave this confrontation for Konnitch to handle, escape where he wouldn’t have to inhale her feminine musk, but her expression held too much anger to dismiss and walk away.

She certainly had every right to be mad. He had no proof, just his instincts that she was the leak. He still couldn’t imagine she would leak information. She cared about the people who worked in Earth Intelligence and GI7. And she *fought for* the women they helped.

“Why are you here, Magdalena?”

“You’re right. I shouldn’t be where I’m not wanted.” Maggie turned around and headed out.

Drekk, no, he wasn’t letting her leave angry. Especially not when he needed answers from her.

For a female of her height, she had a long stride and fast gait. The stairwell door clicked shut as he entered the corridor.

He slammed against the crash bar and barreled into the stairwell. Blonde hair bobbed as she flew down the stairs. “Magdalena, stop running from me!”

“I’m not running,” she shouted back. “I’m heading to work.”

“Your office is in the other direction.”

That stopped her. She looked up the stairwell, bewildered.

“What’s wrong with you, Magdalena?”

“Nothing. You confused me, that’s all. I’m on my way to another federal building, one you can’t enter, so stop following me.”

“Enough,” he roared, bringing her to a halt on the landing between the third and fourth floors.

She squared her shoulders and waited for him to catch up to her. “It’s Marshal to you, Warrior, and I don’t work for you,

so lay off the orders. You're the alien here, not me. I have every right to be on Earth, and I could have your authorization revoked in a minute."

He loved the fire in her eyes, but he hated the venom behind her words. Maggie had never been vindictive toward anyone, even when he'd left her off ops as she'd accused. Perhaps he should explain that primal need to protect her.

That would entail explaining what happened back in Izoran.

Zirkov drew a calming breath and forced his horns back, demanding patience of himself. Deep down, he knew her odd behavior had to do with that dead og'dal... and the mole in GI7. But he couldn't interrogate her. This was Maggie, the female who always smiled at him. The female who went out of her way to help his marshals acclimate to Earth and smoothed over issues that arose between GI7 and Earth Intelligence.

He'd already accused her of being the mole. Without proof. No wonder she was irritated with him.

"I never meant to offend you."

"Why would you lie about my sister? Why would you try to make me think she doesn't exist, like I'm crazy or something?"

He'd revealed that truth yesterday, in an alley, after a fight with the Brotherhood when her adrenaline would have been high. He should have waited for a time when she'd be open to listening to him. She'd left without speaking to him, making him question himself and his information.

After she'd left, he'd returned to the DAA building and triple-checked her personnel file. He couldn't find any mention of a sibling, relative, or friend named Tallulah. Only the family pet. It was possible there'd been a data entry error at some point. He wouldn't know for sure until he found time to travel to her hometown and investigate the matter personally. Until then, he needed her on his side, so he could find a way to extract her from the trouble she was in... before

the DAA discovered GI7 had a mole and it appeared to be Maggie.

“Marshal Walsh,” he addressed her with a softer tone. “I may have been given incorrect information about your family.”

“Damn right.”

“It rests with me to verify the facts before making accusations. For that, I apologize.”

Her face eased. “Apology accepted. Mind if I go, now?”

“We still need to talk. Yesterday, I told you GI7 has a mole.”

“You still believe I’m this leak, Commander Kesk? Where’s your proof?”

“Your recent behavior has been erratic.”

“Why is it every time a woman does something a man doesn’t like she’s deemed emotional, confused, or erratic?”

“I’ve never accused you of any such thing before this week.”

“You also never asked what’s going on in my life that could account for my being a little distracted lately. Instead, you accused me of being a mole. A traitor, Commander! Do you know what that type of accusation could do to my reputation?” she whispered while scanning the stairwell in both directions.

He never asked about her life, intentionally. Digging into her files had always been safer than being in the same room with her, breathing in her rich scent. This was not the time to lose his objectivity, not with her at risk. How the drekk could he save her if she was leaking information?

“I’m quite familiar with the danger of accusing an agent of criminal behavior. Which is why I’ve handled this case with discretion.”

“Why me, and why now? You found a dead og’dal, and Earth Intelligence agents found the other. Then I show up to

check on your new marshal to see how he's acclimating to Earth. I don't see the connection. The ship the military found in Angeles National Park likely carried several og'dals. Given the dead bodies piling up, I'd guess one of them is double-crossing the others. As for what happened with Stenikov, I often check on new marshals when they arrive. If anyone's behavior is suspicious, it's yours. First, you place an inexperienced marshal with a witness—"

"Stenikov has years of experience."

"Not on Earth. He's only been here a week. Barely speaks English. And then you deny the witness the most basic of rights to return to her family. Exactly how did you find that dead og'dal in the middle of a warehouse in an abandoned section of the port?"

His horns shot straight up. "How did you know it's an abandoned area? That wasn't in my report."

"Basic logic. You know, that quality we females are incapable of having."

"I never said that."

"You want to know how I came to that conclusion?" She poked him in the chest again. He drekking wished she'd stop that, because any contact with her, even this annoying poking with one finger, stirred parts of him that made it hard to think straight. "No one dumps a body in an active warehouse unless they want to be caught. Hence, the dump site would be remote. Like an abandoned warehouse."

"Your reasoning is sound, but you're avoiding my earlier question. Explain why your behavior has been erratic."

"I'm not answering any more inane questions." She thumped down the stairs, stopped, then pounded her way back to him. "Maybe you're the mole."

"I assure you, I'm not."

"Then answer how you found the dead og'dal in that warehouse in the middle of nowhere."

"No."

“Sounds suspicious to me,” she added with such confidence he questioned every piece of evidence that had led him to suspect her.

“Maggie, only you knew which safehouse Konnitch and Kaci went to. No one else could have leaked their location to the Brotherhood.”

“Wrong. Anyone in Earth Intelligence with an F2 rating or higher has access to the list of safehouses. It wouldn’t take long for the Brotherhood to check each location.”

“What about Gabriella? When she returned to Earth to testify against Anton Rychenkov, the Brotherhood nearly killed her. They had no way of finding out where she’d be, but they did.”

Maggie unbuttoned her blouse at the top and pulled the top panel away from her shoulder, showing him the scar along her upper arm. “I guess you forgot they shot me while trying to get to Gabriella. I realize I’m only a human, not one of your marshals, but I thought you’d care enough to remember that.”

Seeing her delicate skin marred with the scar angered him. When she and Gabriella reached his ship that day, Maggie had insisted he launch and get Gabriella to safety. Against his instincts, he’d listened and left her behind, bleeding, with no one to get her to a hospital. He’d wrestled with his duty to the witness, GI7, and Maggie. Taking off, leaving her there, still haunted him, even though she’d survived. He’d chosen another woman and duty over his sholani.

No! She was not his sholani! She couldn’t be. His drekking mating cock was wrong. She was no more his sholani than any of the other women it had risen for.

Maggie crossed her arms under those lovely breasts. He wanted nothing more than to kiss that hurt expression off her face. “I’m waiting, Warrior.”

“Stop calling me that.”

The desire to touch her became too great to resist. He reached out to touch the scar, to feel her skin beneath his again and calm his frayed nerves.

A door a few floors below opened. He jerked his hand back at the sound of someone racing down the stairs. A moment later, another door below clicked shut, returning their privacy.

Maggie's eyes remained on him as she released the collar of her shirt. The fabric lay askew, revealing the top of one breast. Her chest rose and fell with each breath.

Zirkov did what he'd been dying to do since the day he met Maggie. He dragged his finger along her jaw and down to the base of her throat before edging along her collarbone. Such delicate bones lay beneath beautiful, rich skin. When he touched the scar, he realized he may not be able to protect her much longer... like he couldn't protect her that day.

"What are you doing?" she whispered, her voice full of caution even as her breathing hitched. Blue eyes remained wide as he caressed the puckered skin from the bullet wound. A calmness spread through him, one he hadn't felt in years. Not since before the Master Trainer at Izoran stripped him of his warrior tattoos.

"I don't know," he admitted. Telling her that he'd fantasized about this moment for years would only complicate the situation further. Krike, he was sure she was the mole. No one else had access to all the information except her. But it wasn't in Maggie's personality to betray anyone.

Either way, until he discovered the truth, he shouldn't touch her like this. As his fingertips caressed soft skin, his cocks twitched. Both of them. All of him wanted so much more with her.

"I have to go," she said, squeezing past him. The emptiness returned the moment he lost physical contact.

He slammed a palm against the wall, blocking her. "Not yet."

Her tongue, pink and lush, ran over her upper lip before disappearing again. The corners of her mouth kicked up in a seductive smile. "What? You haven't already touched enough of me?"

Was this more of her unexplained behavior, or was she teasing him? Maggie had always been professional in his presence... mostly. She talked back to him when she disagreed, but he admired a female who spoke her mind.

Something about her made him forget his own rules, especially the one about physical contact. After Enla, he'd been careful about interacting with females. Kept his distance from them whenever he could.

"The Mofa'Ti ambushed Ri'Nom on Dal," he said, wondering when Maggie would stop fighting him on this and tell him the truth. Whatever it was, no matter how bad, he'd help her. "You knew he was there and that he had the raakesh with him."

"Konnitch knew too. In fact, he was on Dal right before Ri'Nom got ambushed, but I don't see you questioning him."

"How do you know where Konnitch was?"

"Unlike some people around here, I read the AOE report."

"The Aliens On Earth list would only show Konnitch wasn't here, not where he'd gone."

Her mouth opened, and she struggled to reply. Instead, she closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead. "You're giving me a headache. It's too early in the morning to argue with you. I need coffee."

Morning? It was past two p.m.

Her body sagged against the wall as she drew a long breath. Maybe this was all a misunderstanding and her odd behavior reflected the long hours she'd worked, nothing more.

Graceful fingers lightly wrapped around his forearm. He stared at the delicate hand he'd seen punch and take down a male twice her size, but this touch held a softness to it, a familiarity. She'd never touched him like this before.

His cocks pressed against his trou. If it weren't for what happened to him on Zyan, he would believe Magdalena was his sholani. The doctors had been quite clear about his condition.

“Are you going to let me pass, Z, or do you plan to make me stand here all day while you interrogate me until you find something to use against me?”

A fire roared in his gut. “I’ve done nothing but try to prove your innocence!”

“I don’t know about the rest of the galaxy, but we’re innocent until proven guilty on Earth. On Dal, they convict suspected slavers without giving them the chance to prove their innocence. While I’m all for helping and believing the victims, many can’t identify their kidnappers with one hundred percent certainty. One said she was forty percent sure, and that was enough for Dal’s High Council to execute the guy.”

“This isn’t about Dal.”

“Then there’s your world,” she said, leaning into him, her hand sliding over his biceps. That enticing fragrance he was sure had to be a perfume struck him until he could no longer control his horns. The center of each curved outward toward her, while the tips pointed away from her. A mating position meant to protect her.

“What about Zyan?” he forced himself to ask if only to keep her from walking away. Her touch felt too drekking good.

“That entire business with Skaggs. They’d condemned him without all the facts. And then there’s you.” She released his arm and poked him in the chest.

“I did nothing illegal.”

“Then explain why you’re no longer a warrior.”

“That’s not information you need.”

“But you feel entitled to pry into my background? To learn everything there is about me? As if that wasn’t already an invasion of privacy—”

“I’m doing my job, female.”

She stepped back, shaking her head. “This entire mole business... You’re trying to piss me off because you don’t like me.”

Oh, Magdalena, if you only knew how I feel about you...

“Say something, Zirkov. Tell me you don’t seriously believe I’m the mole.”

He wanted to, more than anything he’d wanted in years. “I’ve gone over every incident myself and—”

“And I’m the only one you can’t clear.” Sky-blue eyes latched onto his. He could see the hurt there, the hurt he’d caused. “Supposedly who am I leaking information to?”

“Og’dal slavers.”

“The very people who’ve taken and abused the women I help protect. How could you believe—” She swallowed, unable to finish her question. “You never did trust me. From the day we met, you’ve avoided me, left me off ops, only worked with me when you had no choice... Now this. You really do hate me.”

He swallowed, no longer sure what to say. Confronting her with the truth had backfired. He’d let himself get too close to her and it was affecting his judgment.

“I don’t hate you,” he said calmly. “I’m trying to help you.”

“Says the scorpion to the frog,” she said as she pushed her way past him.

“Scorpion?”

“You sting because it’s in your nature. You can’t help hurting those who’ve done nothing to you. Like me.”

“I’m protecting you!” he shouted in the middle of the stairwell in the Department of Alien Affairs building as she disappeared down the stairwell. The door one floor down clicked shut.

She hadn’t heard him. Worse, she believed he hated her.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

CHAPTER SIX

MAGGIE

Maggie rifled through the papers on her desk. Reports she hadn't finished and ones that Assistant Director Sutherland had returned with questions. She couldn't focus on work, not with how she'd left Zirkov in the stairwell yesterday.

He truly believed she'd leaked information to the enemy. Before she ran into him again, she wanted to gather proof of her innocence.

Why did she care what he thought of her?

He can arrest you. Damage your reputation.

No, he wouldn't do that. That was her fear talking. There was a sense of sadness and loss that came with knowing he suspected her. Zirkov always came across as reserved and distant, but he had a good heart. She'd seen him fight for his marshals, even when they screwed up and deserved to be fired. He believed in his people and would sacrifice himself for them without question.

But her? He thought she was a mole. A traitor.

The fact he could even think that proved she wasn't part of his team, and that she meant as little to him as she did her own mother.

"Marshal?" came a deep voice in front of her desk.

There he stood, a tower of blue muscle with horns that intimidated her co-workers. She glanced around. Even now,

most of them had stopped working as they watched him with suspicion.

He didn't belong up here. In fact, he hated coming up to her floor.

Silver eyes that reminded her of a moonlit lake stared at her. No remorse, no apology, only a cold-hearted look from a man who didn't believe in her.

"We need to talk, Marshal Walsh. In private," Zirkov's voice held no emotion, but his eyes betrayed his anger.

"Talk here. I have nothing to hide."

"Don't you?" he whispered.

"Leave, Commander."

The din of talking and papers shuffling around them died down, nearby agents now watching their exchange.

Privacy or not, she wasn't ready to talk. Not without evidence to prove her innocence. Maggie grabbed her blazer and, without a word, shoved her way past Zirkov and headed for the elevator. The number nine lit up. The damn elevator would take forever to come back down to six. Slamming her body into the release bar, she barreled into the stairwell.

"Maggie, wait!" Zirkov's voice echoed through the stairwell.

"I have nothing to say to you," she called out as she raced down the stairs.

"We need to talk."

The male moved like a ninja, quiet and surefooted, while her boot heels thumped on every step. As she burst into the lobby of the DAA, cool fresh air struck her, allowing her to breathe again. Or perhaps that was because she'd lost him.

The door slammed shut behind her, then clicked open seconds later. Scores of people, all humans, moved through the lobby. This wasn't the place for a confrontation, not if she wanted to keep her career. If Earth Intelligence fired her, she had nowhere to go. She certainly couldn't go back to her

mother's home. Not with all the memories there waiting to crush her.

Maggie halted in the middle of the rounded lobby, over the federal insignia on the marble floor, the letters DAA encircling an image of the Earth.

Zirkov strode across the lobby, ignoring the humans who stared at him. To her surprise, he halted ten feet from her, aware of the attention he'd drawn.

"I have an errand to run, Commander Kesk. Is there anything else you need?" Maggie said in as light a voice as she could muster. If she didn't convince him of her innocence, he'd speak with Earth Intelligence about her. Even if she eventually found proof, she'd never work in law enforcement again because of the lingering doubt in people's minds.

With his hands tucked behind him in a casual military stance, he nodded, as if greeting her for the first time today. "I'll walk with you," he said, the sly devil.

Tall deadly horns pitched forward when she didn't reply. The usual hum of conversations and clicking of heels against the floor subsided as dozens of agents and DAA personnel watched them.

"Sounds good," Maggie relented, forcing herself to smile to make their interaction appear normal. "I need coffee first."

The casual conversations of the others in the lobby picked up again. She'd fooled them. Now she had to convince Zirkov she wasn't the mole.

A gust of cold November air blasted her the second they stepped outside. Maggie clutched her blazer closed, hoping to block out the worst of the wind. She considered returning for her coat, but that entailed going through the lobby again, likely with Zirkov on her tail, pressing her to talk.

He pointed down the street. "Let's go to the coffee shop on the corner. We can talk there."

"That's cute that you think I'll go anywhere with you." She increased her pace, hoping he'd take the hint.

Instead, her blue stalker matched her pace and maintained his position next to her. “You can’t keep avoiding me.”

“Sure I can. Watch me.”

“We don’t have to talk. But there’s something I need you to see.” He thrust his arm in front of her so she could see a video playing on his comm.

It was her, walking through a park late at night.

“You’ve been following me?”

“This is one of the cameras Earth Intelligence set up after Planetary Defense detected an unauthorized ship approaching Los Angeles a year ago.”

“I remember the push to wire key areas of the city.”

“Konnitch and I sifted through recent footage hoping to find the dead og’dal from the warehouse and discover why he was here. Keep watching.”

Maggie recognized the pull-up bars and climbing walls of the park in the video. Built after the Coalition left Earth, Freedom Park brimmed with kids during the day and drug users and black marketeers after sundown. No one strolled through that park at night unless they had business to conduct. *Illegal* business.

The video had caught her, not the og’dal. In the video, she wore dark jeans and a dark gray hoodie not her usual blazer and slacks required for work. She’d gone to the park for something personal.

“That’s you, Maggie.”

Back to ‘Maggie’. “Call me Magdalena.”

“You hate when I call you Magdalena.”

“Precisely. Maggie is reserved for friends.”

His horns dipped back in that way they did when something upset him. “I’m trying to help you.”

“You mean convict me.”

“Explain what you were doing in that park.”

She couldn't. That was the problem. She had no memory of being there at night.

"I probably couldn't sleep."

"Lies don't suit you."

They didn't feel good either.

In the video, a man approached her from the other end of the climbing wall. She stopped and waited for him, never resting her hand on the gun in the holster. That meant she trusted him, whoever he was.

"No audio, unfortunately," Zirkov added. "I didn't want to risk showing this to a lip reader I couldn't trust."

"So you don't know what he's saying to me?"

"I was hoping you'd tell me. I'm giving you a chance to turn yourself in. Not to Earth Intelligence, but to me. I will help you."

"This meeting could be about a thousand different things. It proves nothing."

"Keep watching."

Maggie squeezed the side of her leg to keep from crawling out of her skin as she watched the video. Whatever was on that footage had convinced Zirkov she was the mole. He hadn't arrested her, which meant he didn't have solid proof. But he was so damn convinced...

"If I were this mole, how would you help me?"

"It would depend on the full extent of your actions."

"I'm not the mole you're looking for."

"Then explain this meeting." The male in the video turned and faced the camera. Zirkov paused the video. "That, dear Magdalena, is the og'dal I found dead in the warehouse, three days later."

It was the og'dal from the warehouse. She'd met with him...

“You met this og’dal not once, but twice. First, in the park, then the warehouse where someone killed him.”

She stared into Zirkov’s silver eyes. “Do you think I’m a murderer, too?”

“No. Though I’ve seen you kill in self-defense.” His hand brushed along her arm. “Magdalena, I want to help you, but I can’t if you continue to fight me.”

She shook her head. Despite how closely she worked with him and the other marshals, she’d always been the outsider. He couldn’t ignore this footage. His team and his role as head of GI7 came before anything else.

“Drekk, Maggie, don’t shut me out!”

Maggie looked at the reflection of the gorgeous, hardened male in the glass window of the all-day laundromat beside them. “Why do you care what happens to me? Why not turn me in? You don’t like me and you sure as hell have never seen the value in anything I do. Even when I switched places with Nala on Zyan to help her escape, I was nothing more than a body to be used in whatever way met your needs.”

His jaw tightened. “I’d never use or endanger someone I care about.”

She faced him, so he wouldn’t misunderstand her. “That’s my point. You don’t care about me.”

As she stepped off the curb, into the street, his hand curled around her upper arm and he swung her against his chest. Firm lips crashed down on hers, taking her entirely by surprise. She would have pulled away immediately—she *should* have—but his hands cupped her head and his tongue swept the inside of her mouth, making her melt in his hold.

A tingling spread through Maggie like wildfire. She pushed up on her toes and lost herself in that kiss.... a kiss that stopped time and drove all thoughts from her head except one.

This man was hers.

Except he wasn’t. Zirkov didn’t do relationships. This had to be nothing more than pent-up sexual energy. Or frustration.

She should end the kiss, but she couldn't.

Her fingers dug into his thick hair, moving higher until she touched the smooth surface of his horns. Since the day she'd met Zirkov, she'd longed to touch them, but he'd never been approachable. Now, she stood in the middle of the street, kissing him in broad daylight.

A bus driver laid into his horn, jarring her back to reality. Maggie broke the kiss and hopped up onto the sidewalk. Her cheeks heated from the fire of the kiss, and the embarrassment of losing herself in that kiss.

Zirkov took his time getting out of the bus's way. The moment he joined her, Maggie poked her finger against his chest. "How dare you kiss me?"

"How dare you poke me?" he replied with a hint of a grin.

She pulled her hand back. "That's hardly the same."

"You've been poking my chest repeatedly for days. Is this a mating ritual among humans?"

"Have you ever heard the term WYSIWYG?"

"Are you telling me you wear a hairpiece like Jeffries in the DAA's armory?"

Maggie lifted his hand and set it on her head. "Does that feel like a wig to you?"

He sank his fingers into her hair and petted her. Damn, if she didn't want to cave to the male right there, let him touch any part of her he wished.

"Is all of you this soft, Magdalena?"

She slapped his hand away. "WYSIWYG means What-You-See-Is-What-You-Get, asshole."

A smirk crossed his face. "I've never heard you swear."

"You're pushing me to my limits, Z. Which is why I've been poking your chest. I'm sending you a message."

"We use comms to send messages." He glanced at her wrist. "You should get one. It would make everyone's job

easier if we could communicate with you via comm.”

She wanted to poke him in the chest again, but he was screwing with her... and not in the way she'd like.

Maggie shook her head, driving away the image of Zirkov naked. She really wanted to see more than those broad shoulders he showed off beneath that leather vest he was so fond of. “Poking is merely a way to get your attention. Nothing to do with sex.”

“That’s a shame. It reminds me of a zyanthan mating ritual.”

“Which ritual is that?” she asked, hoping he would open up.

He pressed his body against hers, letting her feel his rock-hard cock. “We poke with a different body part.”

She only had herself to blame. Her body, the traitor, woke to the feel of him pressing against her. With all her strength, she forced her hands to stay at her sides.

“Who are you trying to seduce, Commander? The Earth Intelligence agent who reports on how GI7 complies with DAA rules or a woman you believe is guilty of treason?”

The humor in his face disappeared. “Do you think I’d blackmail you for sex, Magdalena?”

How did he do that, turn things around on her? “I’m asking you to keep your big blue paws ... and other things... off me.”

He chuckled but didn’t step back.

She shoved him aside. “Stay away from me,” she yelled as she crossed the street.

Within two of his giant strides, he caught up to her. “I’m trying to save you.”

She spun toward him, her hands on her hips. “By sleeping with me?”

He lifted a brow. “Perhaps we should begin again.”

“Don’t bother. Whether you’re blackmailing me or seducing me with offers of help doesn’t matter. You think I’m guilty, and that’s a big problem, Commander.”

He scratched the back of his head, looking rather confused. And rather adorable. Had she misjudged him? Damn, but there was something about him that made her question herself.

“Several times now, I’ve offered to help you. I would not use your situation against you.”

No, he wouldn’t. That wasn’t his style. But her entire body thrummed with sexual need from one kiss and every touch, every look, made it worse.

His horns rose as a new expression crossed his face, one she didn’t recognize. “Magdalena, are you attracted to me?”

“Certainly not! And stop calling me Magdalena!”

The corner of his mouth kicked up into a cocky smile. “As you wish... Magdalena.”

The male was screwing with her. No question about it. Maggie stopped in front of a thrift store and took a deep breath to calm down. She could feel him standing, waiting, behind her.

He hadn’t blackmailed, threatened, or slapped a pair of handcuffs on her. He said he wanted to help... and she’d given him a hard time.

“Why kiss me if you think I’m guilty?” she whispered.

“It’s a good question, but I cannot answer. Not now.”

“You confused me, Z. One minute I think you hate me, and the next...” She shook her head. “I can’t figure you out. Especially when you call me Magdalena, a name you know I don’t like.”

“But Magdalena’s a beautiful name. Unique, full of strength and purpose. Like you.”

“I don’t care. Stop calling me that and leave me the hell alone.” She reached for the door handle, but a hand on her shoulder stopped her.

Zirkov's breath warmed her already heated neck as his mouth brushed against her ear. "I want nothing from you, other than the truth and a chance to protect you. I've already adjusted the evidence."

She released the door. "Please tell me you only said that to get my attention."

"I took action to protect you."

Maggie drew a deep breath, debating if she wanted to punch or kiss him. Whether through his scrumptious scent or the way he constantly ignored Earth protocols and took the law into his own hands, Zirkov would be the death of her. But he'd concealed evidence to save her.

"You can't tamper with evidence like that," she whispered as she grabbed his vest and pulled him around the corner of the building. She couldn't chance people getting off a bus hearing them. "This could impact Earth's security. And you'll get in trouble."

"Are you worried about me, Magdalena?" That adorable yet arrogant grin of his pulled at her, made her want to prove him wrong... or jump him. She wasn't sure which, damn him.

"I worry about all the agents I work with, especially those of GI7. Even you, Z."

He raised a brow. "I'm not a new marshal. Or new to Earth, like Stenikov."

"Maybe you don't need me, but the other marshals do."

He surged forward, trapping her against the brick wall in the alley. "I never said I don't need you."

What was he saying? And why did she have this sudden urge to reach up and touch the hard edge of his jaw? Maggie forced her hands behind her before she could give in to her impulse to run her fingers across his lips. He wasn't the one in trouble here. She was. With the DAA, if this video surfaced, and with him, if he continued to talk like he wanted to be with her.

“It’s not all about you, Marshal Kes.” She addressed him by his title and surname, hoping to achieve emotional distance. “Your other marshals are vulnerable in ways you don’t want to admit. Like Warrior Stenikov. A week after arriving on Earth, you thrust him into a situation for which he was unprepared. Guarding a witness on a world he doesn’t know—”

“Stenikov’s an experienced warrior. He knows how to adapt.”

“That doesn’t mean he knows Earth. It’s why I check up on you. All of you.”

“We do not need your oversight. My marshals go through intense training before being stationed on a new world, including Earth.” Zirkov edged closer, his body inches from her. He lowered his voice. “Unless you are offering personal training that would benefit me as their commander, do not concern yourself with my marshals.”

“And you?” she replied, her pulse racing as his enticing masculine scent enveloped her. He’d invaded her personal space, without hesitation, without consent, and from the fire in his eyes, determined to achieve his goal. But what precisely did he want from her?

“There’s only so much you can learn from books or computers,” she added, throwing as much strength into her voice as she could muster. When she lifted her chin, he backed off, but only an inch, as if to give her breathing space, nothing more. “Stenikov rushed the witness out of the safehouse and ran with her without cover. A tall blue alien with horns running through the streets catches people’s attention. The wrong people. That’s how the Brotherhood located her.”

Zirkov stared at her neck. Instinctively, she brushed her hand over the area. “Nothing’s there.”

“Did I say there was?” he asked, the hint of a smile forming on his lips.

“I understand there are times GI7 has to move a witness, but your horns and skin color stand out. Ri’Nom was a true asset here. He could easily hide his second set of arms.”

“That’s why finding og’dals on Earth is difficult. They blend in too well. But you humans...” Zirkov pushed a lock of her hair behind an ear. “...stand out on other worlds, more than my marshals. I only hire skilled and experienced warriors, and I’d trust them anywhere.”

“Meaning you’d never accept me.”

“I accept or reject a marshal based on skills. Females included.”

Zirkov leaned in and inhaled along her neck, distracting her.

Why don't I tell him to stop?

“Talk to me, Magdalena. Tell me why you fight me when I’m only trying to help you.”

“Maybe you’re the one fighting me. Have you thought about that? Listen to what I’m saying before one of your marshals or witnesses gets hurt. Stenikov rushed the witness out of the safehouse because he heard a siren. A mere siren from a fire truck spooked him.”

Zirkov backed off several feet and his horns bent at the top. “Sirens? Dreck. I never thought to explain their use here. On Zyan, the only sirens we have are for invading forces. We’re very attuned to them. Stenikov’s instinct would be to move civilians out of a house, out of the town, as those are primary targets. This will not happen with future marshals.”

“No one expects you to know everything about Earth. It’s why I have this job, to help mitigate potential problems. But this job requires trust between us. And respect.”

“I value your knowledge and skills, Magdalena. Which is why, despite the evidence against you, I removed the footage of you in the park and left the portion with the og’dal. Earth Intelligence will match the body in the morgue to the og’dal on that video without knowing about your connection.”

He’d more than covered for her. He’d *saved* her. Could she have misunderstood all the times he ignored her, grunted at her, and even turned his back on her to avoid listening to her suggestions?

“You want something from me, don’t you?” she asked.

“I almost wish you’d go back to calling me Warrior instead of talking to me like I’m your enemy.”

“From the moment Earth Intelligence assigned me as your liaison, you’ve acted as if I’m a burden, or worse, a stupid woman who would only get in the way and screws things up. I’m tired of having to prove myself to everyone.”

“I’m not everyone.” His chin lifted along with his horns.

Didn’t he realize he didn’t need to make himself appear larger, stronger than anyone else around? Zirkov already stood out among every male she knew. He exuded confidence and power merely by walking into a room.

“You are correct. I objected when Earth Intelligence assigned you as our liaison, but it had nothing to do with you being female. Females are equals on my world. They hold top government positions and a few become warriors, though most don’t choose that path.”

“Then why treat me like I don’t deserve to work alongside you and your marshals?”

“Because you’re—” His mouth clamped shut, and he donned that mask of indifference he wore so often around her.

“Fine, don’t tell me. It doesn’t matter. But I will prove my innocence.”

Zirkov caressed the side of her neck, sending heat between her legs. Her nipples hardened and ached for attention. Thank God she had a blazer on. Her body seemed bent on sabotaging her desire to remain professional around him.

“Stop pushing me away and accept my help,” he whispered in her ear, his cheek brushing hers. It would be so easy to slide her face along his and steal a kiss. “We both know you’re the mole.”

He truly believed she was a traitor.

She pulled away, all thoughts of kissing him gone and buried beneath her dreams of earning his respect. That footage would condemn her; it already had in his eyes. What was she

going to do about him? And if he didn't want anything from her, why had he covered for her?

CHAPTER SEVEN

ZIRKOV

Leaving fifty feet between them, Zirkov followed Maggie from the alley back to the DAA building. She never turned around to look at him. Not once. It was as if she had cast him out of her life completely. He'd lost her trust by confronting her with the video. Soon, he'd lose her.

When she entered the elevator in the lobby, surrounded by other humans, tears clouded her eyes. He could do nothing to comfort her. Approaching her would only anger her further.

Once in the stairwell, Zirkov punched the wall repeatedly, leaving a sizeable hole in the drywall and bruises on his fists. She wouldn't accept his help and if he couldn't prove her innocence, he wouldn't be able to save her.

Before Zirkov let his frustration overwhelm him, he raced up to the fourth floor, wondering where he'd erred. There was a time Maggie had trusted him, or so he had thought. The more he investigated her, the more he realized he didn't know her.

She'd been struggling to prove her worth to him. An unnecessary task, as he'd seen her skill and dedication many times over the past two years. Had he made her feel inferior? He only wanted to protect her from what would happen once her people realized they had a mole in their midst... and that she'd been meeting with an og'dal.

This need to protect her, even at the risk to his own career, disturbed him. She was a fellow marshal, but this drive came

from somewhere deep within him, making him wonder if she might be his sholani. Then reality always set him straight.

He wasn't like other zyanthan males and couldn't rely on his mating cock. Despite it rising for her repeatedly, he'd never know for sure if she were his sholani. He could never permanently bond with her, or any female. At most, his future held pleasure matings. No sholani. No younglings. No legacy.

Zirkov needed to focus on saving Maggie, no matter how hard she fought him. Sholani or not, she needed his help.

And he enjoyed her company too drecking much to lose her. She had an enthusiasm for life and a fresh way of looking at every situation. Maggie cared about people. Unlike many on her planet, she didn't distinguish between aliens and humans. To her, everyone was equal and deserved the same opportunities.

She truly was an asset to Earth Intelligence and the only human he cared to work with. Most DAA agents looked at the aliens who worked on Earth as a secondary wave of coalition forces sent to destroy them. On multiple occasions, Maggie had defended him and his marshals, reminding her co-workers that his unit protected witnesses whose testimony further weakened the Coalition.

He worried she cared too much, that she needlessly risked herself. As she had when she stayed with Stenikov and Sorcha Collins in that alley and engaged in a gun battle. Maggie could have easily fled with the witness and left Stenikov behind, but she hadn't. She'd risked her life to save him.

When Zirkov opened the door to the fourth floor, she was standing there in the middle of the corridor, arms crossed over her chest. Waiting for him.

“What do you want from me, Zirkov? I don't think I can stand you holding this information over me.” Her lips thinned as he approached. Anger focused her.

Zirkov wondered if she'd exhibit that same fire in bed. He inhaled. This was not the time to think of fucking her. “Come to my office, Marshal,” he said as he strolled past her.

“No. Here’s good.”

He halted and turned to face her. “Are you afraid to be alone with me?”

“I’ve gone up against the Brotherhood and assassins offworld. I can handle being alone with you in your office.” She charged ahead of him, through the main door to GI7 and into his office.

Maybe she could handle being alone with him, but he wasn’t sure he could. He feared he might lose control and act on his desire for her.

When he reached his office, he found her sitting in his chair, with her feet up on his desk, boots crossed at her ankles. “This isn’t a competition, Magdalena.”

“I just find your chair rather comfy compared to what they give us peons upstairs.”

He slammed the door shut. “Enough. We’re on the same side. You will speak to me with respect.”

“Respect?” She laughed, full of disdain. “You don’t see any need for me or what I do.”

Nothing could be further from the truth. “Why do you think I have such a low opinion of you?”

“Because you once said I’m an inferior human, an undisciplined female, and a token human marshal with substandard skills.”

He’d said that the first time his mating cock had risen in her presence. Shock, confusion, and fear had filled him and he’d reacted poorly, lashing out at the woman who had nothing in common with him. Worse, she wouldn’t listen to his orders and she’d unnecessarily risked herself.

That last part scared him. He’d seen too many warriors sink into a black hole of despair when they lost their sholani. What if she truly were his sholani? No, he would not entertain the idea. No matter how much he wanted a sholani to raise younglings and grow old with, that path closed long ago.

Zirkov lifted his chin. “I misspoke that day. I was angry, and I lashed out at you because... you were there.”

The corners of her mouth hitched up, erasing the darkness in her eyes. “You’re admitting that you were wrong?”

“I said I misspoke.”

“That’s the same thing.”

“You are a competent marshal. Now, may we move past this?”

A smile overtook her face, returning the spiritedness he’d grown used to seeing in her. “You think I’m a good marshal?”

He clasped his hands behind his back, stood taller, and focused on the window beyond the beaming female who, if he continued looking into her bright eyes, would cause his cocks to rise again.

“Yes. Will you now cooperate with me, Magdalena?”

“I’ll even let you take the lead, Commander.” She swung her legs off his desk, sprang out of his chair, and rounded the desk to stand inches from him. “Who is the og’dal I met in the park?”

“You tell me.”

“Information is a two-way street, Warrior. Prove I can trust you first.”

He let a growl slip. He’d done everything he could, including keeping away from her, to remove the temptation of touching her, and he’d still failed. “I told you I removed the damning portion of the footage.”

“That’s no guarantee you won’t show it to Earth Intelligence in time.”

“You either trust me or you don’t. I’m not here to judge or prosecute you.”

“No need to. The DAA will do that.”

He ignored her comment. “We still don’t know the og’dal’s name, but we found footage from a year before the Coalition

left Earth. The same male worked on one of the mail-order bride ships.”

“I think it’s fair to call them slave ships at this point. The og’dals matched very few women to alien husbands. Just enough to make videos of the women meeting their husbands and living a good life. Footage of happily mated couples became one of their best marketing tools. The women they lured ended up as sex slaves, not married to decent aliens.”

“The og’dals here may have returned to kill the witnesses scheduled to testify against them, but my instincts tell me there’s more going on than we realize. I want to work together to solve the murders and ensure there are no more... leaks.”

“Does that mean you’re no longer angry with me?”

He reached out and caressed her jaw with one finger. Soft skin and sparkling eyes called to him. How was he going to work so closely with her, convince her that he was on her side, without giving in to this attraction?

Her mouth opened, round and lush, unintentionally teasing him as his finger trailed down the side of her neck. If he didn’t pull away from her now, he might never be able to separate from her completely when this investigation ended.

Zirkov dropped his hand to his side, breaking the contact. “I’m frustrated with this investigation, but I’m not angry with you.”

Her brow creased as her eyes pinched together. “You... touched me. Why?”

It was an excellent question. One he could not answer, not without telling her everything.

“To convince you I’m not your enemy.”

“What happened to you, Z? With Konnitch, you laugh and talk freely. You’re relaxed. But when you’re with me, you’re reserved. It’s as if you’re afraid to be near me.”

“Working with you has been an adjustment. Nothing more. I trust you and your skills, Magdalena. I wish you could say the same of me.”

“Answering my questions would help, Warrior.”

His spine straightened at hearing the title.

Her face softened, almost revealing a smile. “This is what I mean. You call me Magdalena and I call you Warrior. Tit for tat. You need to lighten up.”

“You don’t know what calling me Warrior does to me.”

“I’m guessing it reminds you of a time you’d like to forget.”

“Then why do you do it?”

“Because it suits you. More than Commander.” When she set her palm flat against his chest, warmth spread through his body, down to his cocks. They both rose easily and often for her. It was beyond distracting at this point. Maddening. He wanted her, but she was off-limits, now more than ever. He could not compromise his position by associating with a suspect.

“You can avoid telling me about the scars, but you were a warrior. You can’t deny that.”

“I have a past, like anyone else. One I’ve put behind me.”

She chuckled. “Look at that. We have something in common after all.”

He raised a brow. “Explain.”

“We’re both trying to outrun our pasts. And we’re failing. At least, I am. Or you and the other marshals wouldn’t think I’m a traitor.”

“I never said you are a traitor.”

“Look up the definition of mole.”

“Your language is inadequate. Whatever the proper word is, you are the source of the information leaks.”

She recoiled when he said that.

“But that does not mean you bear fault.”

“How could it not?”

He shouldn't have said anything to her, but he believed she was an unwitting part of a larger conspiracy. He'd hoped she'd share everything she knew, but she didn't trust him. The footage proved she was involved...somehow.

"They'll brand me a traitor, Z. Anyone who gives information to the slavers *is* a traitor. Despite what you saw on that footage, I'm not the leak."

"It's more complicated than one meeting. That og'dal ended up dead. Explain the video and why you were with his body."

"What makes you think I was in the warehouse?"

"I scented you there, Magdalena. You are involved. Let. Me. Help. You."

Thick, lush blonde hair swayed as she shook her head. "I don't know anything. Honestly, Zirkov, I have no memory of what's on that video."

He ran his hands up and down her upper arms slowly, trying to... Dreck. He wasn't sure what he intended, other than fulfilling that insatiable need to touch her. He shoved his hands behind him.

"Marshal Walsh, I have a duty to report everything I've found to Galactic Intelligence. According to the protocols of the alliance, they will share the information with Earth Intelligence. Unless you explain your involvement, I may not be able to delay much longer."

She placed her hand on his arm and rotated his wrist. "Let me see the footage from the park again."

Suddenly, her scent deepened, more floral than before, while her fingers caressed his arm like a calming balm to heated skin. He wanted to explore her and understand how she affected him like this, but she was finally cooperating.

"Thank you, Maggie. For giving me a chance." Zirkov tapped his comm, bringing up the video.

Maggie watched the footage. "Bu'Tay," she said, her color dropping three shades.

Zirkov's horns shot forward. He had his proof. Maggie knew the slaver she claimed she'd never met.



MAGGIE

MAGGIE MUTTERED the name of a male she hadn't recognized when she'd woken up slumped over his body, a male she was still convinced she'd never met. But she was also sure the name fit that og'dal.

"You know him." Zirkov's voice fell into that command mode he used so often.

She lifted her eyes to him. Neither his voice nor his face held any warmth. Had he been playing her? Smooth-talking her to get her to reveal information? Every agent had his own interrogation style, and those often changed with the circumstances.

"You don't believe I'm innocent." She headed for his office door.

"What I believe is irrelevant. The facts, Magdalena. I need facts. How do you know this og'dal?"

She spun around. "I don't know. I just do. His name is Bu'Tay, but that's not his full og'dal name. It's the one he used working for..." She could almost see the name in her head, but then a flash of pain dissolved the memory and she doubled over.

Before she struck the floor, Zirkov caught her and cradled her against his enormous chest. "You're ill."

"I'm just tired. I haven't been sleeping well."

"Because you've been meeting criminals in the middle of the night."

She lifted her eyes to him. "I don't remember meeting anyone."

He pointed to the video. The *evidence*.

She tapped the arm holding her up. “I’m good now. You can let go.”

“No, you collapsed.”

“I didn’t lose consciousness.” But nearly falling on her face for no apparent reason added one more symptom to a growing list of unexplained occurrences.

“I’m starting to think you don’t hate me, Z.”

“I’ve never hated you.”

“You could have fooled me. In fact, you did.”

“We are colleagues.”

From the day she met him, she’d hoped for more with him. He didn’t see her in that light. Now, with her behavior in question, he likely never would.

Had she developed some type of PTSD after she’d been trapped in the courthouse that collapsed a few months back? Five days sitting alone in the dark and cold. Five days not knowing if anyone was even looking for her. She’d heard noises nearby. The creaking of metal, the crumbling of concrete, and the constant drip of water that made her so thirsty she thought she’d go crazy listening to it, but no voices. She’d shouted until her throat turned raw, but no one ever answered.

She shivered as that feeling of being so utterly alone, of believing everyone had given up on her, returned. Her therapist said the night sweats and aversion to small spaces would fade in time. As would the headaches. Except each successive one intensified and lasted longer... as did the gaps in her memory.

PTSD often led to people distancing themselves from trauma. Was that what was happening to her?

Zirkov touched her shoulder, and she jumped. “You should rest.”

That sounded like a good idea. Talking with him, struggling to remember memories that dissolved every time she got close to accessing them, drained her.

“Take a few days off from work, Magdalena.”

Her eyes snapped to him. “Are you trying to get me out of the way?”

“Distance could benefit you.”

“You don’t trust me to investigate what’s happening. You think I’ll contaminate any evidence you find.” She shook her head. “You’ve already done that.”

“If I hadn’t, you’d be sitting in a DAA cell right now.”

There it was. Another reminder that she wasn’t as good as him. “I don’t take orders from you,” she said as she barreled past him.

She knew this city better than him, how to shake a tail...

A memory of intentionally losing Stenikov at night flashed in her mind along with the sense that if he caught her, her life would be over. Why had he been tailing her? More importantly, why had she been trying to lose him?

Whatever she’d been doing wasn’t part of her regular duties. Was she the mole Zirkov sought or had she been tracking the mole? If it was the latter, why had she kept it a secret?

The second she glanced over her shoulder, she knew the answer. Sutherland might be right. The real mole was in GI7... and she couldn’t trust any of the marshals there, especially Zirkov.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MAGGIE

Maggie opened the slot to her mailbox in the lobby of her apartment building and pulled out the pile of messages from the DAA. She had taken a week off to investigate the leak.

Four messages were from human resources wondering when she was returning to work, one from Assistant Director Sutherland saying he needed to speak with her about a recent case involving the dead og'dals, and a notice from IT saying her duties as a liaison officer didn't qualify her for a comm. It further explained that her fellow agents in Earth Intelligence required comms because they were *field* agents and their missions put them in danger daily.

WTF? Did they think marshal was an honorary title? That she sat at her desk all day? She spent more time out of the office than in it. In the past year, the Brotherhood had shot her and a building collapsed on her, all while protecting witnesses. The letter stated that she could appeal the decision in six months.

As she climbed the stairs to her apartment on the third floor, Maggie stared at the signature. Adam Watkins. The asshole who hit on her when she first moved to L.A. She'd turned him down and denying her a comm was his latest attempt to get back at her. She could ask Assistant Director Sutherland to intervene and ensure she received a comm, but that sent a shiver down her spine, like doing so would be asking for trouble.

“Maggie!” Bruce’s chipper voice called out from behind. He lived across the hall from her and if she unlocked her apartment quietly enough, she could avoid him. With so much on her mind, she’d made the mistake of jingling her keys.

Maggie took a subtle but deep breath and plastered on a smile before turning around. There he stood, with his wavy brown hair in its usual state of disarray, wearing his blue artist’s smock that had dried bits of clay and fresh paint on it.

“Hi, Bruce. How’s the painting coming along?”

“It will be a masterpiece. You’re my inspiration, Maggie. You want to come in and see?”

“Some other time. I’m exhausted.” For the last three days, she’d traveled all over San Bernardino, Ventura, Riverside, and Los Angeles counties, trying to jog her memory. Nothing worked, and she was running out of vacation days.

“Wait here, I have something for you.” Bruce rushed back into his apartment.

Maggie slowly released a breath. Every time she ran into him, he gave her a yellow rose. She loved flowers, but not from him. Zirkov’s image popped into her head. He was all she could think of since that kiss several days ago. With this mole accusation hanging over her, she’d been avoiding him. The next time she saw him, she wanted to be able to give him proof of her innocence.

Bruce returned with a white envelope in hand and no roses.

“Really, Bruce, you need to stop wasting your money buying things for me.”

“Whatever this is, it isn’t from me.” He shook the envelope. “I don’t hear anything shifting around inside. Paper, then. An alien gave it to me, to deliver.”

“Alien?”

“Tall, blue guy, with horns and a nasty expression. I almost walked in the other direction when I saw him blocking the door, but then he asked me if I knew you and would deliver this. I told him it would cost ten credits.”

“You charged him *ten* credits to deliver a note to the person who lives across the hall from you? A service that took absolutely no effort?”

“I didn’t think he’d pay, especially not that much, but aliens pay for anything when they want it badly enough. And the dude seemed determined.” Bruce handed her the note. “If you think about it, he got the note delivered, you received the note, and I got paid. Win-win all around. Plus you get a bonus.”

“What bonus?”

From behind his back, Bruce presented a long-stemmed yellow rose.

“Bruce.... Flowers are expensive.”

He shrugged. “I enjoy seeing you smile. It inspires my painting. Plus, I have multiple sources of income.”

“Like aliens paying you to deliver messages?”

His crooked smile emerged. “I’m an entrepreneur. Have a sweet day, milady.” With an exuberant twirl, he disappeared into his apartment.

As Maggie entered her little slice of heaven, she inhaled the rose’s essence and immediately thought of Zirkov. Not that he smelled like flowers, but his scent held a unique note that existed nowhere else.

Maggie tossed the mail and her keys into the bowl on the entryway table. The note Bruce handed her had her name and apartment number in shaky handwriting. Zirkov’s. None of the aliens practiced writing English. They didn’t need to, given the prevalence of datapads and comms in Galactic Intelligence.

After adding the rose to the vase with the other two flowers Bruce had given her earlier in the week, she sat down at the breakfast bar and stared at the envelope. One day she’d get out of this building with its nosy neighbors and leaky pipes. She’d own a house of her own. Not the house her mother left her, either. That useless place needed to be torn down, along with all the bad memories.

She wanted a place to call her own, one where she could build happy memories with a male who would love and care about her. The house didn't need to be fancy or large. Something quaint, with grass and a small garden. Maybe a swing on the porch. A place to sit and talk with that special someone.

More images of Zirkov surfaced. All those times she'd tried to get his attention, and he had ignored her... Just thinking about it angered her.

With a knife from the butcher block, Maggie slit open the envelope. The note inside had all of five words in the same shaky handwriting.

We need to speak.

-Zirkov

"Ever the romantic, Z." Maggie propped the note against the bottle of red wine on the counter. Two years ago, a witness's family had given her the wine as a thank-you for rescuing their twenty-year-old daughter. One of Galactic Intelligence's units had done all the hard work. Maggie had simply protected the woman and kept her company until her family arrived to take her home. The young woman had been in shock and wouldn't let any of the male marshals touch her.

Maggie stared at the expensive gift. Very few bottles of wine survived the war. Shaunda suggested she sell it to a collector and use the money to buy her dream house, but Maggie couldn't. That bottle reminded her of all the women out there who hadn't been rescued. She wouldn't profit from their misfortune.

The note she'd propped up against the bottle stared at her. She couldn't avoid Zirkov much longer. For now, she needed sleep. The wine would wait until another day when she had something to celebrate and someone to drink it with, someone who would appreciate the fine wine... and her.

CHAPTER NINE

ZIRKOV

Zirkov kept his back to the wall as he scrutinized the humans entering and leaving the courthouse. It was nothing more than an old school in which to hold proceedings while the humans built a new courthouse. Security personnel failed to board up the dozens of windows in each courtroom, leaving officials and witnesses vulnerable. Furthermore, the humans still would not allow aliens in courtrooms during hearings. He had to rely on courthouse security to protect his witness when she testified against the Brotherhood. Zirkov preferred to be on Dal, where they didn't have inane rules regarding aliens observing the proceedings.

When his comm vibrated, he glanced at the screen. Stenikov's code accompanied a single word. Trilla.

Drekk, what now?

Zirkov clicked the audio on his comm. "Stenikov, why are you apologizing?"

"Because of me," Maggie said behind him.

How she snuck up on him, he didn't know, but he restrained his surprise. She wore a rumpled denim jacket and jeans, and that pixie hairstyle he loved on her looked more tussled than usual. Otherwise, she appeared well. For the first time in days, his body relaxed. Even breathing became easier. He hadn't realized how much her absence had affected him.

"He's apologizing because I spotted him. Two days ago. I shook him this morning, to make a point."

Zirkov immediately spotted tall horns moving through the crowd of people in the courthouse lobby.

“You need to teach your marshals how to blend in better, especially if they’re stalking another marshal,” Maggie said once Stenikov was in earshot.

Stenikov’s horns rose high on his head. “I wasn’t stalking you.”

The warrior wore the same button-down shirt and tight-fitting jeans as the humans, but he still stood out. Maggie was right. Zirkov hadn’t guided his newest marshal on what it meant to be one of so few aliens on Earth.

“You’ve been here ten days, Warrior.” Zirkov addressed him. “Your ability to remain discreet is sub-par.”

“I can’t help that I’m tall, or that my horns are long.”

“Never heard of camouflage, stilts?” Maggie’s mouth curled at the ends in that cute way it did when she was planning something.

“My name is Stenikov, not Stilts.”

Maggie pointed to his new marshal. “This one’s not as fun as Skaggs.”

Zirkov’s hands tightened into fists as his horns shot up. “Fun? What precisely did you and Skaggs do at the warrior training center on Zyan while I escorted Nala off planet?”

Maggie slapped the back of her hand against Stenikov’s chest. “There you have it, stilts. That’s how easily you marshals lose control of your horns, which is why you’re easy to spot, even from a distance.”

Annoyed at how easily she’d played him, Zirkov forced his horns to curve back. Meanwhile, Stenikov stood straighter, towering over her. For a moment, Zirkov worried the marshal had lost his patience with Maggie.

“I did not lose control of my horns. I’m tall,” Stenikov stated.

“Which means you should have forced them back on your head and kept them there so I couldn’t spot you when I turned around. You have that ability, don’t you?”

“Our horns move instinctively. Forcing them into any position requires great focus.”

“Which, as a warrior, you should have mastered by now,” Zirkov scolded. “All warriors learn to control their horns for situations such as these.”

“What made you turn around?” Stenikov’s willingness to learn from his mistakes pleased Zirkov, but this was not the time nor the place to analyze his errors.

“Enough, Stenikov. She’s a marshal, the same as you. Checking behind us is second nature, which you should have factored into your approach. Find Konnitch. You’re his problem until I speak with you later about your future here.”

Stenikov nodded, eyeing Maggie, then at him. The new marshal suspected something, though he had the common sense not to speak his mind in front of her.

“You were rather harsh on him,” Maggie said the moment Stenikov left the courthouse.

“No more than you. You taught him a lesson. As did I. Magdalena, I’ve been trying to reach you for days, but this is not the place to speak.” Zirkov motioned to the guards outside the courtroom, which had a paper with ‘Courtroom 2’ taped over the cafeteria sign beside the door. “I’m waiting for a witness to finish testifying against a top leader in the Brotherhood who sold her to the og’dals.”

“I won’t interfere.”

“I know that.”

“Does that mean you no longer believe I’m the leak?” Her face lit with such hope, that he didn’t know how to respond without stealing that light in her eyes. So he said nothing.

Her eyes drifted past him. “I understand. Being seen with me could jeopardize your position.”

Normally, he wouldn't give a drekk about who saw them together, but if anyone overheard them talking about her connection to the case, the situation could spiral out of control. He hadn't destroyed the footage of Maggie in the park with the og'dal, only altered the DAA's copy.

More than once, he considered destroying the unaltered version. He'd only held onto it to send to Galactic Intelligence to see if their lab technicians could glean additional information from it. But the more people who knew about Maggie's involvement, the harder it would be to protect her.

Zirkov's horns ached every time he thought about the DAA convicting her of treason. After being conquered and dominated for so long, humans had no tolerance for traitors. If convicted, she'd receive the death penalty.

"My desires have nothing to do with this case." Zirkov forced all emotion from his voice. He had to appear neutral to anyone listening to their conversation. If the DAA ever questioned his integrity, they could ban his unit from Earth, and then he'd lose his ability to protect Maggie. "As head of GI7, I have a duty not only to Galactic Intelligence but Earth Intelligence as well."

"What are you saying, Z?"

When he first arrived on Earth and met with the senior staff at the DAA, he'd pissed off Director Nguyen and Assistant Director Sutherland in Earth Intelligence. The men treated him like he was part of the Coalition and not an ally. Maggie had become the buffer Zirkov needed.

"You will address me as Commander."

She took a few steps back. If she fled thinking he didn't trust her, he'd never find her again, not until she wanted to be found. And that could be too late.

"We found another body." That stopped her, as he knew it would. Above all else, Maggie craved justice.

"Og'dal?" she mouthed.

The noise level inside the courtroom intensified. Zirkov's hand slid to his blaster. The moment his witness emerged, she

would be his top priority. Not Maggie.

His gut twisted at the thought of putting another woman before Maggie.

“Marshal, we need to talk in private, after I escort my witness from the courthouse.”

“I’ll find you later,” she said.

The next time he looked in Maggie’s direction, she was gone, the set of double doors clicking shut behind her. He hoped she’d keep her word. If she didn’t, he’d have to take the additional evidence to Earth Intelligence, making Maggie a hunted woman.

CHAPTER TEN

ZIRKOV

Zirkov ignored the sound of GI7's outer office door opening and closing. Whoever stopped by would wait while he sifted through DAA video footage from the past two years. He'd reread his notes and pinpointed the start of the information leaks. Mere days after Maggie joined GI7 as their liaison.

"Should I see who that is?" Konnitch asked between lobbing wads of paper into the wastebasket. He propped his feet up on Zirkov's desk.

"Whoever it is can wait. And stop wasting paper. The humans don't have a lot of it."

"If they'd invest in solcaps to power datapads, they wouldn't have to cut down what remains of their forests. Besides, throwing paper into the refuse bin is culturally appropriate. Powell in Earth Intelligence does it all the time when he's talking with other agents. I'm not even sure why I'm here. I should be searching for the other og'dals."

"You're helping me strategize. We have no idea how many og'dals landed in Angeles National Park two weeks ago or where the drekkers went. Let the humans hunt the og'dals while we contain the leak."

"If we find the og'dals, we'll get the information we need on the leak."

Zirkov's horns pitched forward. "Maggie's not responsible."

“I didn’t say she is.”

“You thought it.”

“I don’t want her to be guilty any more than you do, but right now she appears guilty.”

“She wasn’t present for all the information leaks. We hid Dekar in Ohio before she became our liaison. Only you, Ri’Nom, and I knew his location, and we never spoke in front of her or entered information about Dekar in the humans’ database. No human has access to our systems. And when the Brotherhood found Gabriella, Maggie nearly died. I doubt they’d risk her if she was their source.”

“She’s the prime suspect for leaking Kaci’s location, Zirkov. And there are three murdered og’dals in the morgue. Maggie’s connected to at least one of them.”

“I won’t accept she’s behind all of this.”

“But some of it?”

Zirkov thought about it. Her behavior had been off, lately. “Are you sure you told no one else about the knife Ri’Nom was returning to Dal?”

“Only Maggie. I explained he’d be staying on Dal because his father gave him a dagger, a family heirloom to return home. I didn’t know the significance of the knife at the time.”

“I doubt Maggie knew either. She has less experience, fewer connections with other worlds than we do, and she’s never been to Karthika or Dal.”

Konnitch flicked Zirkov’s horn. “Stop questioning yourself. Follow your instincts and do something, anything. Arrest her even.”

“I won’t arrest her.”

“Then sleep with her. Get your cocks and your head taken care of so you can focus on our mission.”

Zirkov growled. “You will not talk about her in that manner.”

“She’s tougher than you give her credit. But you’re hindering this investigation by hiding in this office, avoiding her.”

“I’m not avoiding her. She’s avoiding me.”

“You’re both stubborn, but you’re in charge here, Commander. Don’t let whatever’s going on between you two interfere with this investigation.”

“Enough. Tell me about any connections the Mofa’Ti have to Earth.”

“They don’t have any. They are wholly concerned with Dal’s internal politics. And Ri’Nom has no other leads on any associates of Bu’Tay, the og’dal Maggie identified.”

“I think you’re right. We need to find the remaining og’dals before they disappear. They don’t need more than five males to control a shipload of unarmed females.”

“If taking more females is their objective.”

“Those slavers won’t pass up an opportunity to replace inventory now that Earth’s defense shield is down for repairs. The real question is how they knew when it would be down.” Zirkov glared at Konnitch. “Don’t say it.”

“How many times has Maggie been in our office, with our datapads, alone? Plenty of opportunities to log into our systems.”

“She’d never do anything to hurt her people. It’s someone else.”

“Only people working on the shield and GI7 have access to the codes to lower and raise the entry portal. I’m betting Earth Intelligence doesn’t even know.”

“Which means Maggie wouldn’t know.”

Konnitch frowned. “She sees everything we see.”

“Seeing isn’t the same as leaking information.”

“You’re talking like a heartmate, not a commander.”

“She’s not my sholani. I’ve told you this several times already. What I did—”

“Drekk that and start paying attention to the facts. Both about her activities and what you feel for her.”

Zirkov pounded on the desk, sending a glass of water jumping into the air. “I’m acutely aware of everything involving her! Maggie has no reason to help the og’dals. No human does.”

“Except the Brotherhood.”

Zirkov’s anger waned. “Yes, they do, don’t they? Just because the Coalition is gone, doesn’t mean the Brotherhood isn’t thriving and looking for ways to increase their power base. Og’dals have access to advanced technology that would give the Brotherhood an advantage. Blasters instead of guns, for one.”

“Comms for instant communication,” Konnitch added. “Drugs and poisons the humans don’t have or know how to combat. There’s a long list of ways the og’dals could help the Brotherhood.”

“And the Brotherhood can help the og’dals. Sounds like you have work to keep our new marshal busy after all.”

“I’ll grab Stenikov and visit a few Brotherhood strongholds.”

“Check in with me when you find something. But don’t take long. Earth Intelligence suspects a mole. Once they realize Magdalena’s involved, they’ll arrest her.”

“Then get in her bed while you can,” Konnitch said lifting both brows. “Then you’ll be justified taking her off Earth if it comes to that.”

“Stop inferring Maggie’s my female.”

“Stop fighting the truth.”

Zirkov’s eyes hardened. “I’ll never know the truth. The damage is permanent.”

“Physiology isn’t everything. I resisted the signs with Kaci until I lost her. Sometimes the woman we think is wrong turns out to be what we need, but we can’t see it because we let our pasts get in the way.”

“We are not discussing my personal life. If we’re going to help Magdalena—”

“It’s Maggie,” Konnitch corrected him.

“You’re trying to aggravate me. Why?”

“Because the more steam you blow off with me, the better focused you’ll be to handle this situation with Maggie.”

“And why do you get to call her Magdalena without her getting upset? I’ve seen her ignore you every time, but with me, she gets angry and insists I call her Maggie or Marshal.”

Konnitch grinned. “I’m handsome, well-liked, and taken.”

“Then let Kaci take you... far from me. Leave.”

Konnitch snapped his hand to his forehead and mocked Zirkov with what the humans called a salute.

“Leave. Now. Bring me back something useful for once.”

As soon as Konnitch left, Zirkov kicked the garbage can across the room. If he couldn’t convince his closest friend that Maggie was innocent, then how would he prove her innocence to the humans?

“Whatever it is that has you upset is no reason to abuse the poor wastebasket,” Maggie said from the doorway.

Zirkov spun toward her. “What did you hear?”

“Hello to you, too, Z. Nice weather we’re having.”

“Magdalena...” She strolled into his office, carrying a leather-bound book and sporting a confident smile.

“It’s Maggie, Commander. Or weren’t you listening to Konnitch?” Even in the dim office lighting, her hair, thick and soft, shone as if it reflected Earth’s sun. He tried to peer beneath her blazer to see if she was armed, but he never made it past her lovely breasts.

“Something on me?” she asked, looking down at her plain, white shirt.

“How long have you been spying outside my door?”

“Should I have barged in here during your meeting?”

He tried to recall every facet of his conversation with Konnitch. “What did you hear?”

“Enough to know you still think I’m the mole. Is that why you asked me to see you after court? To show me more so-called evidence?”

She didn’t look upset or offended. Then again, she remained calm in tense and dangerous situations.

“I’m trying to help you, Magdalena.”

She tugged on his vest. “Believe me, Z, I’m not the mole you’re looking for. I have very little authority or value to the DAA. And I have that from the horse’s mouth.”

“Horses can’t speak.”

“An expression. Sutherland made it clear that I’m low on everyone’s priority list. Solve this case, give him a name, and then things will return to normal. At least for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Apparently, my main function is to sit here and look pretty.”

“You are beautiful, but what does that have to do with your job?”

“You think I’m beautiful?” Her voice pitched high with an excitement that went right to his cocks.

Drekk, he shouldn’t have said that. She was a fellow marshal, not his sholani, as Konnitch believed. A male’s mating cock rising for a female proved nothing. At least for him.

“Very beautiful. For a human,” he replied, hoping to deflate his earlier comment. He’d never seen a more beautiful

female, human or zyanthan, but telling her that would make working together awkward.

He'd never know, without doubt, who his sholani was. And yet when he imagined his sholani in his arms, he pictured Maggie.

“Just once, I'd like to see you smile, Z.”

“I'll smile when I have cause.” One mistake at Izoran had drekked him up for life.

“You mean proving I'm the mole? You're never going to give up, will you?”

“I can't. There's too much at risk.” *You.*

“If you asked me to meet you, so you can talk me into confessing, forget it. I won't confess because I'm not a traitor. And stop holding that damn video over me. If you're so convinced I'm a traitor, turn me in. Then you can go on to the next project or continue protecting witnesses without having me around.”

He gripped her face in one hand. “Maybe I like having you around.”

“Because you respect my skills as a marshal sooo much.”

“You're a marshal, as much as me, Konnitch, Skaggs, and Stenikov.”

She huffed. “Stenikov...”

“He will acclimate. I've already found another assignment for him. But you, Magdalena—”

“Can't you call me Maggie?”

Both cocks stirred at hearing the plea in her voice. “You once said your friends call you Maggie. And that I'm not a friend.”

“But you could be.” Her expression softened.

“We need to keep a professional distance, Magdalena.”

“Can you smile just this once? For me? That wouldn't break any rules.”

“Why?”

“Because I need it. You’re going to turn me over to the DAA at some point. We both know it. You have no choice.”

He wouldn’t let it come to that.

Zirkov reached out and traced her shapely eyebrow, then continued over her soft cheeks. “You’re hiding something from me, Magdalena. I will find out what it is.”

Maggie slammed the leather book against his chest. His cocks hardened from the fire in her. “Do what you have to do, Commander Kesk. As will I.”



MAGGIE

“YOU’RE A STUBBORN FEMALE,” Zirkov said as he circled behind his desk, putting distance between them. The move felt like a slight, but nothing hurt as much as knowing Zirkov thought she wasn’t being honest with him. Technically, she hadn’t told him everything, but only because she hadn’t found the answers yet. Once she did, she’d tell him every little detail... even if the facts condemned her.

Maggie followed him, filling the narrow space behind his desk. Being only inches from him confused her senses. Her legs bounced, eager for her to push up on her toes and kiss him, all while she considered punching him. Two years she’d known Zirkov, and she’d never done anything to make him question her integrity.

“I’m not hiding anything, and I don’t appreciate the attitude. If you asked me here to berate me for not giving you information I don’t have—”

“It’s never been my goal to berate you. I’m on your side, even though you don’t believe that.” Zirkov took a calming breath. And she could see the change in his expression. Worry.

“I asked you to meet me to discuss the second dead og’dal. He worked with the one you identified as Bu’Tay, which is a

common name on Dal. We've narrowed the suspects down to half a dozen males with access to ships."

"Seymour." The name popped into her head.

Zirkov's hand drifted to the side of her breast. "That is quite an offer coming from a female who hates me."

"No, not *see more*. Seymour was his first name. Seymour Bu'Tay. Or rather the name he gave himself. I couldn't remember it earlier. I read it in a few reports from women he sold to brothels. He thought it endeared him to the women he matched to alien husbands. That's before he turned to outright kidnapping. He worked for the Shagwell Mail Order Bride Agency. A front for his illicit activities."

"We'll look into that agency and search for connections to the second og'dal. Thank you, Magdalena."

Lightly, she squeezed his arm. "I don't hate you, Z. I never have." The thrumming in her lower half intensified the second she touched him. One night with him. That's all she needed to get this lust out of her system.

He plucked her hand from his arm. "What else do you know about Bu'Tay?"

The dismissiveness in his behavior and tone stung. He wanted more from her. Information she couldn't give. Not yet.

Think like a marshal, Maggie girl. Give him what you can without incriminating yourself.

"He used marriage contracts recognized by many planets. But for every woman he matched to a husband, he sold five or six to brothels and slave markets. He probably thought he could produce all those contracts and provide the names and locations of those happy couples to legitimize his business should Dal's authorities capture him."

"You have a good memory for details. I've been too focused on Dal and ship registries."

"I talk to the witnesses you protect." She tapped his chest with the leather-bound book, twice, instead of slamming it against him as she did earlier. "You have trouble seeing what's

right in front of you, Warrior.” She bounced her eyebrows, wondering if he’d pick up on her flirting.

“More rules?” he asked, his brows lifting in response. Was Zirkov showing a playful side? God, she hoped so.

Maggie couldn’t contain her smile. Then he added, “Your rules won’t help the situation you’re in.”

He was all business. Or he wasn’t interested in her. She’d taken a chance, leapt off that cliff without worrying about the repercussions for once, and splattered all over the pavement seconds later.

“This isn’t the MPACC manual,” she said, trying to keep the hurt out of her voice. “It’s my diary. Proof that I haven’t been doing anything illegal. Not proof that would stand up in court, but it’s proof to me. I read through the last few months of entries, including the date of the footage from the park. Those dates are blank, meaning nothing unusual happened.”

“That only means you’re too smart to leave a written confession.”

“If you think I’m guilty, then turn me in.”

“No.”

“It’s your duty, Warrior.”

He gripped her upper arms, silver eyes gaining a desperate look. “We share information, all of it, so we can solve this. Together.”

She lifted her chin. “Tell me you don’t believe I’m the mole, and I’ll follow your lead.”

“The evidence against you is strong.”

Hurt welled in her belly. He didn’t believe her. “Then arrest me.”

“No.”

“Are you trying to torment me? Is that why you’re dragging this out?”

He said nothing.

“I get it. If I’m this mole like you believe, my people—”

“They’ll execute you!”

“Can’t you believe in me?”

“Magdalena, you are the only one with access to the information in each situation. I need to know how you got involved, and who your contacts are. Then, I’ll find a way to protect you.”

Her contacts... That’s why he hadn’t turned her in. He wanted everyone involved.

All that kissing, those touches... nothing but lies. A GI7 marshal would do and say anything necessary to complete his mission including preying on her desires.

“Where are you going?” he demanded as she turned to leave

“I’m hungry. I’m going to find some place where I can sit and eat in peace, where people aren’t mad at me or accusing me of treason.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“I didn’t invite you.”

“I’m hungry, too.” He tapped his comm. “Better yet, let’s meet in an hour. I have to review a few items with Stenikov before he escorts Sorcha Collins to Ireland.”

“You’re taking her home?”

“Yes. You were right. I ignored the protocols in place. She deserves to be with family after what she’s been through. Dal will have to wait.”

He’d listened to her. Maybe dinner wasn’t such a bad idea after all. “Dinner. In an hour, then.”

“Good. I’m hoping we will come to an understanding.”

“It’s a date then.” She rocked on her heels, straining to hold her enthusiasm in check.

She might never have another chance to spend time with Zirkov outside of work. She wanted to get to know him away

from the office and not on an op where people shot at them. Maybe she could chip away at that wall he'd built around himself.

“Not a date,” he said, as stoic as ever. “We will talk about work, nothing more.”

She'd spent enough time with him to know that wasn't an order, precisely. More like him deciding the course of the evening together, without asking her opinion. She needed to break him of that.

“Yes, work. What else is there? Unless you'd like to hear about my love life.” That topic would take all of three seconds, long enough to confess she had none.

Zirkov's horns pitched forward like she'd pissed him off.

“You need to loosen up, Z, or you'll never find a woman.”

His horns relaxed slightly. “What makes you think I'm looking for one?”

“All guys want a woman. To fuck, if nothing more.”

“Is that what human females think of all males or just human males?”

“All males.”

“That's not what Zyanthan males want.”

“Really? What do they want?”

“To connect with their sholani. The heartmate destined for them. Until then, we take pleasure mates and learn what it means to be with a woman. Our males treat females right, unlike the human males here.”

She couldn't argue with that observation.

“Your tradition for mating sounds nice. But Zyan never fell to the Coalition. The Coalition only left Earth two years ago. They warped the thinking of a generation. It will take time to undo the damage they caused, and I don't mean to our infrastructure or our sense of security. The younger generation doesn't remember what Earth was like before the Coalition imposed its ideals on us. They don't understand what it means

for women to be equal to men. But I remember. I was twelve when the Grud invaded. Then everything ground to a halt, including education. When the Coalition took control they changed the rules. Women lost more than men. We finally have our rights back, but now we're fighting a different war. The Coalition's legacy warped the way men treat women. Human women want to be in charge of their own lives. To make their own decisions. A man should understand that, support her, not control her."

"We don't control our females. We treasure them."

Oh, how she wished he felt that way about her.

Maggie stepped close to Zirkov and inhaled that heavenly male musk. "Dinner six p.m. You pick the place."

Yours, please say yours!

Too many nights she went to sleep picturing herself holding his horns and riding his dick hard and fast, drawing out not only her orgasm but his. She'd love to find out what would drive him crazy in bed, unhinge the overprotective male. More than anything, more than sleeping with this unbelievably handsome zyanthan, she wanted to know the real Zirkov. He hid his emotions under so many layers of stoicism that she wasn't sure how to reach the male within.

Zirkov thought for a moment and then replied, "I know a place. Ride 'Em, Cowboy."

She blushed and her throat went tight. Only giving him a firm nod, acknowledging where to meet later, Maggie walked away, mumbling to herself, "Oh, I plan to."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ZIRKOV

With a strained smile, the hostess wearing the wide hat, short skirt, and white leather boots at Ride ‘Em, Cowboy led Zirkov to his usual table. The female tapped her hat down in front to avoid meeting his eyes. None of the humans here cared for him, but they’d accepted him, more or less. The food in the restaurant didn’t compare to zyanthan cooking, but it met his nutritional needs. He always ate by himself, the way he liked it. No awkward conversation with a female he didn’t care to know.

Since the day he met her, he’d considered talking to Maggie outside of work. But forming any intimacy with her would have led him down a dangerous path. Now her future and her life were at risk. He needed her full cooperation. He hoped she’d be more open in a social setting.

The question was how to gain her trust. She wanted to be treated as an equal. He thought he’d done that, but perhaps he hadn’t. That would be his approach then, ask for her insight on other cases and witnesses. Maybe discuss the Franklin case, even though he’d closed that. Or he could talk about the drekkers who worked in Earth Intelligence.

What if she turned the conversation to something personal? She wasn’t meant for him, despite his drekking mating cock rising for her every time he was in her presence.

He glanced at his comm again. Maggie should have been at the restaurant five minutes ago. That sexy female was a

thorn in his side when it came to conducting GI7 business his way, but she was never late. Earth Intelligence didn't appreciate her. They'd assigned her to liaise with GI7 as a way of babysitting him and his marshals. Despite distracting him with lips he wanted around his cocks, she provided invaluable insight into how humans behaved and thought. She also routinely filled in on ops to protect witnesses. No easy task, considering the information leak plaguing GI7.

Maggie may be the leak.

He could not forget Konnitch's words. Maggie had been privy to every piece of information involving the targeted witnesses. Gabriella, Kaci, Ri'Nom, and others.

Now he had the murder of two og'dals to solve. And he had smelled Maggie at one of the crime scenes, he was sure of it. Unless it was his body's way of pushing him toward her.

Any other male would accept what the rising of his mating cock meant. Sholani. Heartmate. Zirkov would never know if she was his sholani, not for sure. He'd lost that luxury years ago.

"There you are," Maggie said, her voice cheerful. He looked up to see a beautiful woman with short angled blonde hair cut to frame an elegant face. She wore a short red cocktail dress that hugged every lush curve on her body... curves he'd never noticed before. This was not the same human female who always wore a white blouse beneath a boxy blazer that hid her gun... and her exquisite figure.

Instinctively, his horns stood taller and his back straightened. Light blue eyes that reminded him of Earth's sky latched onto him. Her smile lit up the room and stirred both of his cocks. She'd dressed so sexy.... for him.

Drekk, he shouldn't have suggested meeting outside of work. With other agents around, like Konnitch, he could focus on business and not how impossibly hard she made him. She wasn't his destiny, just another female who triggered his mating cock.

Except he wanted her, more than he'd wanted any other female.

"I arrived on time," he snapped, upset that he'd put himself in this position where he couldn't escape her.

Her smile faded and his horns tried to twist, but he forced them to remain still.

"I had trouble finding appropriate attire or I would have been here sooner."

His eyes ran down the shimmering red dress, past her breasts and hips. The hem only reached the middle of her thighs, making him think of what lay beneath. His eyes trailed lower to find long, bare legs balancing on tiny, high-heeled shoes. Impractical, but they made her appear taller. The dress served no purpose other than to entice. And it worked. His mating cock couldn't possibly turn any harder.

He looked away, hoping to distract himself from her beauty, if that were even possible. Every night, he closed his eyes and thought of her, falling asleep to the fantasy of being with her, despite his condition.

The odd silence in the restaurant caught his attention, making his hand slide toward his blaster. When he peered past Maggie, he discovered the reason for the lull in conversations. Most of the males, waiters and patrons alike, ran their eyes down Maggie.

Zirkov's horns pitched forward in standard attack position. The males stared at Maggie with more than admiration in their eyes. Lust. He didn't like it. Not at all.

"Your usual clothing would have sufficed." His words came out clipped.

She didn't shrink back at the slight. No, not his Maggie. She was as tough as any marshal he'd ever met. Eight months ago, she was shot protecting a witness—Gabriella Evans—but she never let the wound stop her from doing her job.

"I'd be out of place wearing my work clothes here. Look at the women around us, Z. They're gorgeous."

“They are?” He hadn’t noticed. Hadn’t cared to look at them, not when he had this beautiful female with hair the color of the setting sun and eyes as blue as Earth’s sky standing here before him.

He motioned to the chair. “Sit, Magdalena.”

“Am I in trouble?”

She didn’t like it when he called her Magdalena, but it was a beautiful name, one that fit her perfectly, like that dress.

“Why are we here, Z?”

“We have business to discuss. And I’m hungry.”

“Is that why you’re cranky?”

“Yes.”

“What’s your excuse the rest of the time?”

He raised a brow. “I don’t like when og’dals show up so close to where I’ve hidden my witnesses.”

“We have, what, three women in the L.A. area awaiting transport to Dal? The og’dals could be targeting any of them to keep them from testifying, but they could be here for other reasons, too. A few dead og’dals might be nothing more than every-day citizens seeking revenge for everything the og’dals did when they were here with the Coalition.”

“Then why kill them in isolated locations?”

“Enemy or not, murder’s still illegal, and everyone knows it. Have you learned anything from the bodies or the crime scenes?”

Maggie displayed no sign of nervousness, but she remained calm under pressure. She’d proved it when she took Nala’s place as a decoy on Zyan.

Zirkov leaned forward in his chair. “I know you were in that warehouse, where we found the first dead og’dal, Marshal.”

“Oh, it’s *Marshal* now. So much for the expensive dress.”

“You meant to seduce me?” He strained to keep his eyes from roaming down her figure. Seeing her in that tight-fitting dress threatened to make him forget why he’d suggested this dinner.

Her mouth fell open. Such a beautiful sight. He could see himself thrusting into her, with her hands bound behind her back as she knelt before him. Drekk, he had no right dreaming of such things, not with the damage he’d caused.

With her chin lifted high, she rose from her chair. “I don’t use my body to get what I want.”

“Sit down. I didn’t dismiss you.”

“Must I remind you, Warrior, I don’t work for you?”

“You know I’m not a warrior. Never call me warrior again.”

She sauntered over to his side of the table and peeled back the leather vest he wore. “I see the scars, Z. You had warrior tattoos at one point.”

He thrust the vest closed. “That is none of your concern.”

“If you’re not ready to talk about it, then wear a shirt next time.”

“You said never go into an unknown situation here without wearing a vest.”

“A bulletproof vest,” she clarified. “When you expect to be shot at, not to have dinner with me. It’s in the manual I gave you two years ago. You know, the black book you use to keep your desk level in your office.”

“I find the book extremely useful.” He grinned. “My desk no longer rocks.”

“You never read the manual, did you?”

“I follow Galactic Intelligence protocols. Earth Intelligence protocols get in the way.”

“Is that your way of saying *I* get in the way?”

She'd come dressed to seduce, not discuss work, and now she playfully bantered with him to get a rise out of him. Zirkov strained to keep his horns back in a calm stance.

"You are the DAA liaison. I trust you will notify me when I've done something wrong. Which I haven't here tonight." He tugged at his leather vest. "Though I misunderstood the type of vest you intended."

"It's just as well. There's no need to wear a bulletproof vest to dinner with me."

"You carry a gun, and I've seen you shoot. I'm safer with the vest on." He peered at the thin leather. "The correct one."

"You wish you could shoot as well as me! I'm a dead shot, and you know it."

He'd shot one of the projectile guns the humans loved and found it less than ideal for a marshal's needs. "Blasters are much more effective and can take down several enemies at once. And we don't have to reload."

"Just the same, cover up when you're out in the field." She waved a finger toward his naked chest. "Not that I mind the view." Her smile lit up the room, but he didn't know how to handle the suggestion hovering in her sparkling blue eyes. They were allies, fellow marshals. Nothing more, despite what his drekking mating cock would have him believe.

"We are here to eat," he reminded her as he discreetly adjusted his pants beneath the table. They'd become incredibly tight in her presence.

"After you explain the tattoos." She wielded that smile like a weapon, almost convincing him to tell her everything.

"I have no tattoos."

She leaned forward over the table, giving him an amazing view of her breasts. Her breasts would fit nicely into his hands. "The outline of those removed tattoos are roughly the same size, location, and pattern as the warrior tattoos on Stenikov and Skaggs. Stop denying the truth. You were a warrior, and they stripped you of your title and tattoos. Why?"

He set his lips against her ear. “Do you want to see more than my scars, Magdalena?”

She eased back into her chair. “We both know you despise me. Why are we here? Other than to feed you so you don’t get cranky.”

When he didn’t answer her, she rose to leave. He grabbed her wrist, stopping her.

“You’re in trouble, Magdalena. Deeper than you realize. I believe Assistant Director Sutherland suspects a leak. He’s had his people pouring through videos, looking for ties to the dead og’dals. And the coroner’s been ordered not to talk to anyone from GI7, including you. It’s that last part that concerns me. Why would they bar you, Magdalena? You’re part of Earth Intelligence. I think they suspect you. Tell me whatever it is you’ve been hiding from me.”

“There’s nothing to tell. I read the report and saw the photos, the same as you.”

“Damn it, Magdalena, you were there!”

She paled, then glanced around the room to see who had heard him. “I have to go.” She shot to her feet and wove through the tables.

“You can’t do this on your own,” he called after her. The restaurant fell silent, all the patrons watching them.

The informal setting should have relaxed her, but his plan backfired. Zirkov tossed a credit chip onto the table as he rose to leave. He’d lost his appetite, and worse, he’d lose Maggie if he didn’t figure out how to protect her. And that scared the hell out of him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ZIRKOV

“Is Maggie with the witness yet?” Zirkov asked Stenikov who waited on a rooftop across from the witnesses’ apartment. Maggie wouldn’t spot him if he wasn’t tailing her directly.

“Not yet. Still waiting for her to show up. The rain may have slowed her. The land vehicles humans use do not perform well in water.”

“Maintain your post.” Zirkov ended the call. Early this morning, he’d asked Maggie to check on the witness GI5 had returned to Earth a month ago. Alexa Burns had no family or friends and refused to testify on Dal. That made her an ongoing target. Until Zirkov could convince her to testify, she remained under his protection.

Maggie had requested permission, several times, to speak with her, but he’d always told her to keep her distance. He’d feared Maggie would lead the mole to his witness.

That was before he realized *Maggie* was the mole.

But Maggie knew which safehouse he’d taken Burns to. Now, months later, Burns remained unharmed, which made him wonder why.

The situation presented him with the perfect opportunity to search Maggie’s apartment. While he detested invading her privacy, she’d left him no choice. He’d take any measure necessary to protect her. Every part of him said she wasn’t a traitor, but he needed hard evidence before the DAA came to

the same conclusion he had. That she was the source of the leaks. He'd erred by demanding Sutherland hand him this case. That had made the assistant director suspicious, but it was the only way of controlling the narrative.

That unique floral and feminine scent of hers pulled at him as he rifled through her dresser. He reached in and felt something incredibly silky. The dark gray garment had tiny straps and a high slit up one side. He'd never seen a dress like this, but he could imagine Maggie wearing it. With how little skin this would cover, this was not clothing he would want her to wear in public. But he'd like to see her wearing it for him... in private.

His cocks hardened at the thought. One day, the doctors on Zyan would find a cure, returning him to the male he once was. Then he would find his sholani, his heartmate.

As Zirkov moved through the kitchen, he found the source of the floral scent. Six yellow roses filled a slim glass vase on the counter. A note lay next to the vase.

Have a sweet day, milady.

Who had given his female flowers?

Drekk. She wasn't his female, and he had no business getting between her and another male.

Except he couldn't stop thinking about her. His horns shot forward at the mere thought of another male touching Maggie.

As Zirkov left the kitchen, he noticed another note sticking out of the garbage. He routed around and found four more notes, six in total matching the number of roses. All read the same. *Have a sweet day, milady.*

The feeling that he'd missed something gnawed at him as he searched her bedroom one last time. When his comm vibrated, he tapped the screen.

"The witness Alexa Burns is leaving. Alone." Stenikov sounded frustrated. "Should I follow?"

Where the drekk did Maggie go? Was she meeting her contact, handing over information? Drekk, he hoped not.

“Wait a few more minutes to see if she shows up.” Zirkov ran his hand between her mattresses. Nothing. “Then join Konnitch. He’s tailing a male in the Brotherhood known to have sold females to og’dals in the past. And keep your drekking horns down.”

Just as he was about to end the call, Zirkov’s fingers struck something hard in her pillowcase. He reached in and found the diary she’d waved in his face the other day.

The human custom of writing down their feelings mystified him, but if she’d bothered to hide it, it was worth examining. He opened to the middle of the book. The script used English, characters but it wasn’t in English, Common, or any of the half-dozen languages he spoke.

“Change of plans, Stenikov. I’m sending you some scans. Run them through our computers. Let me know which Earth language she’s using and give me a translation.” Zirkov ran his comm over each page, scanning as quickly as he could turn them.

His comm vibrated again. A message flashed across the screen.

Not a language. Code. Trying to decipher.

“What are you doing in my apartment?” Maggie asked, her shock teetering on the edge of anger.

Drekk, he hadn’t heard her unlock her door.

“And how the fuck did you get in?”

“I told the building manager I’m a marshal and that I needed access. He knows you’re a marshal and assumed I was here to check on you. I didn’t correct him.”

“Get out.” She pointed to the apartment door, looking incredibly beautiful despite the anger on her face. Or maybe it was the anger that accounted for that deep pink glow.

Before he could remind himself how getting involved with her was a bad idea, she lunged forward and tried to grab the

diary from his hands. He held it high, out of her reach.

“I only showed you my diary so you could see the dates where nothing notable had happened. I was making a point.”

“I want to read it. To gather evidence.”

“Those are my personal thoughts, not evidence. You have no right reading it.”

“I didn’t read it. Yet. Why did you encode your diary?”

“So people like you don’t read it!”

“Konritch is running it through analysis now.”

She stopped grabbing for the diary. “You copied it?”

“Yes.”

A deep red infused her lovely features. “This is a betrayal of the deepest type, Commander.”

“I won’t apologize for doing what is necessary to get to the truth.”

“You mean, to bury me.”

“I’m trying to save you, female. How many times do I have to tell you that?”

“You broke into my apartment—”

“I didn’t break anything. The manager let me in.”

“You invaded my privacy—”

“I’m investigating, not invading.”

“You’re reading my diary!”

Zirkov noticed she held a yellow rose, the same as the others. “Where did you get that rose?”

“That, too, is none of your business.”

He untied the red ribbon and read the note.

Have a sweet day, milady.

“Are you involved with a male?” His chest tightened at the thought of another male touching her.

Her face went fully blank for a millisecond, then she punched him in the gut. Not as hard as Konnitch struck when sparring, but hard enough to distract him while she grabbed the diary.

Her eyes held a mixture of vulnerability and fiery determination. Zirkov ignored the pulsing of his cocks and the intense need to be inside her.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her expression yielding to the stress of the situation. He’d never seen her look so soft, so incredibly beautiful.

“I’m not injured.” He cupped the back of her head as he eased the diary from her.

“Zirkov...”

“Shh,” he said as he brushed his lips against hers. “I won’t let anything happen to you. I promise.” When his lips settled on hers, she opened to him, allowing him to push inside.

Her hands moved up his back, slowly caressing every inch of him, touching him with a gentleness he hadn’t experienced before. “What’s changed?” she whispered.

“The DAA is planning to arrest you. They have footage of you with an og’dal.”

“You said you removed that from their servers.”

“This is different footage.”

“Shit. Who?”

“The second og’dal, the one we haven’t identified. Maggie, please, tell me what you know.”

She pressed her head against his chest, not meeting his eyes. And then her hands slid inside his leather vest, pushing it back and off his shoulders until it fell behind him.

Soft lips kissed his scars where his warrior tattoos used to be. As she ran her tongue over one pectoral muscle, his cocks

strained against his trou. He moved one of her hands over them. "This is what you do to me, vasha."

The corners of her mouth lifted as her hand moved up and down his cocks.

"Don't tease me." The words came out gravelly, filled with need. He should leave before things went too far with her, but he'd wanted her for so long. Denying himself was easier when she fought him, but this... He could not resist her like this.

She unfastened the clasp of his trou and slid his pants down his hips. His cocks sprang outward. Her eyes widened, staring at his cocks. "Two," she whispered. "How very... unique." Blue eyes tipped up to him as graceful fingers lightly traced along each of his cocks.

When she sank to her knees in front of him, he knew he was in trouble. He couldn't move, couldn't tell her to stop, especially as the warm wet heat of her mouth enveloped the tip of his mating cock.

He'd never felt such ecstasy, not even with his pleasure cock. The fact that his upper cock stayed hard for her appeared to be a miracle, but maybe that was because it had been so long since he'd been with a woman. His mating cock had risen for other women, but he'd never used it with them. The doctors warned his mating cock would never stay hard long enough to enter a female or even to achieve his release using his hand. But no other woman infuriated or excited him like Maggie.

She gripped his pleasure cock in her hand, pumping it as she sank deeper onto him. He couldn't resist the urge to thrust any longer. His hands sank into her hair and held her still. With long, slow strokes he fucked her mouth. Her moans reached inside of him, owning him in that moment.

The moment she dug her fingernails into his ass, he lost all control and shot his cum down her throat. A release... from his mating cock. That couldn't be!

As he pulled out of her mouth, sky-blue eyes stirred a possessiveness in him he didn't know he had. He needed to

claim this female, to make her his, in every way possible.



MAGGIE

MAGGIE'S BODY slammed into the mattress. One by one, Zirkov cut her pants, top, bra, and panties off her and tossed the shredded pieces aside. Cool air brushed over her bare skin as his hands caressed her breasts, ribs, and belly.

His eyes darkened with a feral look as his tongue circled a nipple. Already rock hard, they ached for more. As if he'd read her thoughts, Zirkov pinched the hard peaks, twisting and pulling on them, arousing her until the wetness leaked between her legs.

Her hips rose with a need to grind against him. A hand gripped her pussy, holding her still. One, two fingers entered her as he sucked on a breast.

Her hands gripped the bedsheet as so many sensations pulled at her. Those thick fingers moved from her pussy to her back hole, coating her with a liquid that tingled. A moment later, a thick finger eased inside of her. Then another, stretching her.

“I will take you here as well.”

“Yes,” she said, not wanting the dream to end. The male hovered over her, magnificent horns tempting her to grab hold and never let go. Then Zirkov's face pierced the fog of her brain. She'd gone to sleep dreaming of him for months now, touching herself while envisioning him thrusting into her. This exceeded any of those dreams.

His horns loomed over her, hooked upward, the tips pointing away from her.

“You're mine to take. Do you understand that?”

She'd been holding a yellow rose, taking in the sublime fragrance, when he'd appeared in her apartment. There'd been

a conversation on her roof. Instructions. She had something to do...

Yes, now she remembered.

Her hands moved up the sides of those horns. So smooth. Lower, she found the bumps along the base beneath his hair. She'd heard touching a zyanthan male's pleasure nodes would drive him wild, which is what she needed right now. If only she could grind against those horns. Her hips bucked.

"Patience," the deep voice said as another finger entered her back hole.

"Are you close to catching the og'dals?" she asked.

"Later, Maggie."

He called her Maggie. They'd been arguing earlier. That rose reminded her of something she wanted to tell him. A pain seared across her brain, making her hands tighten on his horns.

A sensual growl escaped his throat and erased all the agony. Her fingertips circled the nodes faster with the growing need to hear that possessive, masculine sound again.

"Drekk, I can't wait any longer," Zirkov's deep voice said a hard cock slammed into her pussy. The thrusts came fast and furious, and with each one, her hips bucked. A moment later, his hand parted her ass cheeks. A warm liquid ran down her skin, leaving a tingling behind that numbed her back hole.

"What is that?"

"Frem. From my pleasure cock. It will ease my entry," he said between thrusts. His head lowered against her chest, alien words drifting around her as the tingling spread.

When she opened her mouth to ask him another question, his pleasure cock thrust between her ass cheeks. Two massive cocks drove into her, filling her, possessing her. As they moved in tandem, a fire spread along her every nerve. She gripped his horns out of reflex, holding onto them for leverage as he drove into her without abandon.

The orgasm ripped through Maggie like lightning arcing across a night sky. She dug her nails into his horns as her body

rode the wave. Then that fantastical energy ended, both cocks sliding from her. She barely had time to fill her lungs as he flipped her onto her stomach and lifted her hips. The thick cock that had been in her pussy slammed back into her, striking nerves she didn't know existed.

Something in her brain commanded her to wiggle her ass, to tempt him further.

“Do not tease me with that beautiful hole or I'll take you again before you're ready,” he warned, the lust in his voice crystal-clear. Fulfilling his needs, his desire, consumed her every thought.

“Fuck me. Harder. Faster.”

His sharp inhale told her she had him. He wanted to lose control, to fuck her hard.

“You've already had my pleasure cock in your ass. My mating cock is thicker, longer. And stays hard inside you female... which it's not supposed to do.”

She couldn't focus on the confusion in his words, not when her pussy quivered at the idea of him taking her there with such a massive cock. Pain meant nothing. Only pleasing him mattered. That's what the voice said.

“Fuck me. Use me,” she demanded.

“You're not ready.”

She swung around and sucked on his mating cock again, brutally hard and fast. She swallowed it down as far as she could take him until his moans filled the room. Before he peaked, she withdrew and ran her tongue up his torso and along his lower lip.

“Maybe I should find someone else to fuck. Someone who knows how to use his cocks to satisfy a woman.”

He picked her up and shoved her face down on the mattress. One massive hand pinned her between her shoulder blades. “Spread your legs. Now!”

One hand reached around and vibrated against her clit even as his hard mating cock pressed against her ass cheeks.

Anything he wants. Give him everything.

“Are you spent already, Warrior? Maybe I should find that young marshal. Stenikov.”

“You will never threaten me with another male again,” he roared as he thrust his mating cock into her and pinched her hard nub with his fingers.

The sensations came too fast, too extreme. She thought she’d pass out as he drove her body into the mattress. He wasn’t holding back. This is what she needed from him.

“Tell me you’re mine, female.”

“Prove you’re worthy, Warrior.”

He released her clit, and gripped her pussy, plunging three thick fingers inside.

She couldn’t move as the waves crashed over her. His hand disappeared from her pussy as a warm liquid sprayed her back.

“You’re mine, Magdalena. Mated and marked. With both my cocks. Mine. Forever.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MAGGIE

Bright sunlight streamed in through the windows of Maggie's apartment. She slept on her stomach, not her usual position. When she turned onto her side, every muscle in her body protested.

Not ready to wake, she closed her eyes and drifted off, hoping Zirkov would return to her dreams.

When she opened her eyes again, she was staring at a blue-skinned back. Her eyes darted up to the head and horns.

No! It wasn't real, it was only a dream!

She shot straight up in bed. She had no clothing on!

Maggie yanked the sheet over her breasts to cover herself. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Zirkov rolled over. "Is that your way of asking for more so soon?"

More? That smile on his face... He never smiled at her. And she was so fucking sore, and naked. In bed with him!

He cupped the back of her head and leaned in for a kiss. She tried to pull away, but he held her, his tongue pressing against her lips, until she opened for him.

What had she done?

Had she been drinking? She dragged the sheet with her as she raced to the kitchen. The bottle of wine rested in its usual

spot on the counter. Unopened, next to the roses. Everything was normal, except she'd *slept* with Zirkov!

"What's wrong?" he asked.

She spun around, nearly losing the sheet when she saw him standing naked in her kitchen. His body was gloriously ripped with muscles that stirred her sore pussy and her very sore... ass. Had he fucked her in the ass, too?

No, she didn't do anal. Never had. Her eyes moved lower, and she stared at his massive cock... Cocks!

"You have two cocks."

"Was that not clear last night when they were inside you?"

"Both?"

"Last night was my first time using both."

"At the same time?" How did she not know this about zyanthan males?

Stupid question! It's not the type of thing people advertise! Stay on track. You slept with him!

"Maggie, are you ill? You've lost four shades and you're not making any sense."

"I... I...have to go to work." She raced back to her room. Clothing lay everywhere. Rather, pieces of clothing. She picked up her bra and panties, both cut down the middle.

"I'll replace those," Zirkov said behind her.

"It's fine. Just... go. Please." She picked up his clothing and shoved it at his chest.

"Don't you remember last night, Maggie?"

No. Pieces maybe. Fuck, did she really sleep with him? This couldn't be happening. She had no memories, except... Going down on him. Oh my God, she'd given him a blow job. She'd started this. But why? When did he even get here? She reached further back through her memories and cried out. Pain arced through her brain, bringing her to her knees.

Zirkov scooped her up. “Talk to me. Tell me what’s wrong.”

She spotted her diary on the nightstand, grabbed it, and flipped to the only page with the corner bent.

Ask him the questions. Find out what he knows.

Nothing made sense anymore. “I have to ask you something.” The moment she said that, the pain lessened, and a memory returned, one of Zirkov rifling through her apartment. “You came here last night looking for...answers. I need answers, too. What leads does Dal have on og’dal slavers?”

“I can’t answer that.”

“Yes, you can.” She reached up and stroked his horn. What the fuck was she doing?

Zirkov roughly dumped her onto the bed, his horns twisting at the top. She’d made him suspicious.

“It’s just a question. If you care about me, you’ll tell me what I need to know, so the DAA doesn’t come for me.”



ZIRKOV

ZIRKOV COULDN’T COMPREHEND what happened between last night and this morning. He’d had the most erotic, pleasure-filled evening of his life. He even thought Maggie might be his sholani, that’s why he’d stayed hard for her. But he’d never know for sure, and that’s why he couldn’t let himself get attached to her.

“I need to know about Dal. Their intel, their strategy regarding the slavers they’re hunting. All of it,” she demanded while holding the sheet up to cover herself.

He couldn’t think about Dal or work. How could she not remember he had two cocks? He’d been inside her with both... at her insistence.

“Are you ill, Maggie?”

“I’m fine.” Her smile didn’t reach her eyes. “Lately, I feel very disconnected with GI7... and you.” She sidled up to him and ran a finger along his jaw. “You recently returned from Dal after spending days with Ri’Nom who has access to everything. I’m sure he told you whatever Galactic Intelligence wanted to know.”

“That’s not why I was there. And what Dal does with their citizens is of no concern to me or Galactic Intelligence. That’s internal to their world.”

“Then tell me about the information Earth Intelligence has on the og’dals.”

“You mean the information they have on you.”

She thought for a second, then her hand flew to her head. Her eyes pinched like when she had one of her headaches. “I’m not the mole and I’ll prove that once you give me the information I need.”

Information. That’s what this was about. “Last night... Everything you did with me... You never wanted me, only what I know. You’re using me!”

“You’re the one who used me. I have the bruises to prove it.”

“I didn’t use you. I *claimed* you.”

Tears formed in her eyes as she pushed against his chest. “I don’t belong to anyone. Especially you!”

“Sholani—” When he reached out to soothe her, she slapped his hand away.

“I’m not your heartmate. I couldn’t possibly be, not with how you used me last night.”

“Used you... You seduced me!”

“Then why can’t I remember anything? And I’m so fucking sore. Everywhere.”

He’d been rough with her, but he had never forced her. He’d checked with her several times last night, and she’d

always begged for more.

“Did you drug me?” She truly didn’t remember last night. Between the rough sex, he’d made love to her slowly, taking his time to worship every inch of her. How could she not remember the glorious orgasms they’d shared? Or the three in a row he’d given her with his mouth?

“Do you even remember falling asleep in my arms?”

She shook her head, tears pooling in her eyes. “Answer the question. Did you drug me?”

“Never. I could never harm you. Something isn’t right here, Maggie.”

“Don’t you ever call me Maggie again. Call me Magdalena.”

“But you hate when I call you Magdalena.”

“Exactly. Just like I hate everything that happened last night. Get out, Commander. Now.” Her eyes moved to the gun on her nightstand.

“Maggie, whatever you’re thinking—”

She lunged for the gun and whipped around, the gun pointed at him. Blonde hair fell in her face as she placed a second hand on her gun, steadying her aim, and cocked the trigger...

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MAGGIE

Zirkov's expression puzzled Maggie. The zyanthan looked worried, not a look she associated with him.

"Put the gun down, Maggie."

Gun? She looked at her hands. She was pointing a gun at him!

Maggie tried to lower her Glock but couldn't. Her hands wouldn't move, not even to point her gun away from him.

She tried to push past the confusion miring her brain, but every time she did, the pain returned.

"Marshal Walsh, we don't shoot unarmed people."

Protect yourself at all costs, an inner voice instructed.

"Leave," she ordered. She had to get him out of her apartment, away from her, where he'd be safe. Then she could figure out how she'd fucked everything up.

"If you don't trust me, then what about Kaci? You like her. She's human. I can call her on my comm. Would you speak with her?"

"What are you talking about? Of course I trust you."

She couldn't remove either hand from her gun to rub her temples and calm the stabbing pain behind her eyes. "Please, Z. You'll be safer if you leave."

"I'm not leaving you like this."

“I’m pointing a gun at you, damn it! Get away from me, so I can’t hurt you!”

His jaw tightened, but he didn’t move. “You need a doctor.”

“I’m not sick.”

“You said you trusted me, right?” He held both palms up. “No weapons. No tricks. Let me take you to a doctor. Or we can call a friend to take you.”

“I tried being friends with you, but you never wanted me around. You didn’t think I had the skills of a real marshal, not like those at GI7.”

Tears rolled down her cheeks. This wasn’t like her. She never cried over a guy, and certainly not while aiming a weapon.

“I was wrong about a lot, Maggie.”

Her hands began to shake. She needed to holster her Glock, but she couldn’t make her hands listen.

“I want to help you,” Zirkov continued. Steady, unfaltering, and in extreme danger.

Tears clouded her eyes and the pain in her head intensified. “I can’t think with you here. Everything is wrong.”

With his hands raised, he backed out the bedroom door. “I’m leaving. Promise me you won’t hurt yourself.”

“Leave!” she shouted, her hands shaking so badly she feared she’d lose what little restraint she had.

A moment later, her apartment door clicked shut. Relief replaced the terror coursing through her as she sank to the rug and set her gun down. Her entire body shook uncontrollably. So many thoughts popped into her head at once, overwhelming her until one took center-stage.

Her go-bag had a stash of credit chips, extra ammo, clothing, maps, and a stolen comm. A stolen comm? What the fuck was going on?

When she looked up again, there he stood, holding a yellow rose. The dead og'dal from the picture Assistant Director Sutherland had shown her. He offered her a hand up.

She wished Zirkov were with her instead of this og'dal, but she'd threatened him. He'd never trust her again. That was for the best. He'd be safe if he kept his distance.

"I'll take care of you," the og'dal said.

She reached up and slid her hand into his. Warm and inviting, like she was home...



ZIRKOV

ZIRKOV QUICKLY DRESSED in the hall before messaging Konnitch. He needed help securing Maggie. He could capture her on his own, but her erratic behavior increased the risk she'd hurt herself. That possibility sent a near-paralyzing fear through him.

Through the thin walls, he heard Maggie talking to someone, though he couldn't make out what she was saying. How the drekk did someone get in there? The window!

Drekk, he was slipping. Just because there was no fire escape on her window didn't mean a male couldn't rappel down from the roof of the five-story building. He never should have left her alone, even for the few minutes he needed to fool her into thinking he'd left.

Zirkov crept back into her apartment, careful not to step on the wood floor boards that creaked as he'd exited. The bedroom door remained open.

"Will you take the pain away?" she asked whoever was with her.

Zirkov waited to hear the male's answer, but none came. Krike! He must have alerted the intruder to his presence. With his blaster raised, Zirkov moved to the bedroom door and peered inside.

Maggie knelt on the floor, her weapon inches away from her. She didn't notice him in the doorway as she talked to an empty room.

Drugs, maybe. That could explain her hallucinating. And her odd behavior earlier.

Zirkov holstered his blaster. When he reached her, he stepped on her gun to keep her from taking it. As he crouched down to her level, he said, "You will be fine, Maggie. No one will hurt you."

She lifted her head, revealing tear-stained cheeks. "Why are you here, Var'Len?"

"It's me. Zirkov. Will you let me care for you?" He held a hand out to her.

"I can't. I'm a marshal. My duty is to protect our witnesses."

"I won't harm them. Come, Magdalena," he said as he bent down and lifted her into his arms. The weight of her, her skin warming his, her floral scent... brought back all the memories from last night. Glorious memories, all of which meant nothing now. She hadn't been present with him, not in mind or spirit.

Her head settled against his chest. "I'm tired. And sore. Everywhere. I slept with Zirkov, like you wanted. I didn't want to use him like that." Tears streamed down her face.

Zirkov swallowed, forcing back his own confusion. Later, he would assess what had happened between them, and what it would mean to them going forward. For now, he needed to take care of her.

"How's your head, vasha?"

"Hurts. I resisted with everything in me, but I still shot him."

"Who?"

"Zirkov."

"You didn't shoot him."

“I did. Just like you told me to, Var’Len. After I asked him the questions.”

“When did I say this?” Zirkov asked, playing the part of this Var’Len she saw in his place.

“In the morning. Before work. But I can’t shoot him. He’s important.”

“Indeed. Killing the Commander of GI7 would cause problems for Earth Intelligence.”

“I don’t mean them. Or those stuffy aliens he works for at Galactic Intelligence.”

“Then who?” Zirkov asked as he navigated the stairwell with her in his arms.

“Me. He’s important to me.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ZIRKOV

Zirkov stared at all the tubes running from Maggie's arms to the machines beside her hospital bed. Seeing her lying still, her head wrapped in gauze, and her color so pale scared him. What if she never regained consciousness? The very thought shook him to his core.

"Movement," Stenikov stated as her head shifted slightly. Her eyes didn't open, or even flutter. The younger marshal stood at the foot of her bed, guarding her. He alternated from looking for signs of improvement to watching the DAA agent standing outside her room. The warrior didn't trust the DAA any more than Zirkov did.

"I don't think Agent Morris noticed. He's busy watching the female nurses."

Zirkov glanced at the DAA agent through the glass pane. "As soon as Magdalena wakes, the DAA will want to question her. Then they'll arrest her under suspicion of being an enemy agent."

"How did the surgeons even know she's a DAA agent?"

"They didn't. When they found the implant in her brain, they contacted the DAA. They're under a mandate to report all alien technology."

Zirkov didn't want to think about the DAA right now, not until he knew Maggie would recover. He ran his fingers up and down her forearm, steering clear of the tubes. She'd woken so many feelings in him, and now he might lose her.

“It’s been three days. She should be awake.” *Please, Magdalena. Wake up.*

“I spoke to the lead nurse,” Stenikov said as he moved to the window and peered at the street below. “Three days is not much per Earth standards, but the level of medicine here is alarming. I’m surprised Galactic Intelligence didn’t grant your request to take her to a planet with advanced medical facilities. Earth doesn’t even have steripatches to close wounds. Humans use the intestines of mammals and a needle. A needle, Commander.”

“Earth Intelligence warned Galactic Intelligence not to interfere with their investigation into Maggie. If it weren’t for the alien technology they removed from her, the humans wouldn’t care. They’ve condemned her without giving her a chance to defend herself.”

Zirkov looked at his comm when it vibrated. Konnitch. “Yes?”

“GI3 finally cracked the code in her diary. You won’t believe what the cipher was. Your name.”

Zirkov ran his hand along Maggie’s cheek as she lay there so incredibly still. He had no choice but to ask. “What did it say?”

“Only one page of significance. She wrote about a meeting on her roof and being given a mission. No reference to the person she met. These are her words... ‘Ask him the questions. Find out what he knows.’”

“Var’Len’s orders,” Zirkov said.

“That’s my guess. Do you want me to forward a copy of the translated text for the entire diary or only that section?”

‘I don’t want you to know what I wrote, okay? They’re my private thoughts... about you.’

Zirkov closed his eyes. Her coloring had dropped three shades when she’d said that. He’d thought she’d been hiding something integral to his investigation. Now he knew, but it didn’t change anything.

“Not necessary. She didn’t want anyone... *me*... knowing her thoughts. They should remain as private as possible. Keep what you learned to yourself and destroy the translated text. We found what we needed.”

When the transmission ended, Zirkov looked at Agent Morris standing guard outside her door. “Konnitch found more evidence the DAA will use against Magdalena... if I share it with them.”

“Will you?” Stenikov asked.

“I will not aid them in any way. She’s been a victim in all of this, but they do not seek the truth, only a person to blame. If I don’t find a way to protect her while working within Earth’s laws, I’ll have to do something drastic. I could resign from GI7, take her away from here before they arrest her.”

“Galactic Intelligence will hunt you. They’ll have no choice under the terms of the accord with Earth. Even if you manage to evade Galactic Intelligence, running is no way to live.”

“Do you have another suggestion?” Zirkov asked.

“They ordered us to keep her here, but they never said we can’t work the case. Or put her under protective custody. Someplace the humans don’t know about. As long as it’s on Earth, you won’t be violating orders.”

Zirkov quirked a brow, surprised Stenikov would suggest circumventing orders. “Timing will be tight,” he said, nodding toward Agent Morris.

Stenikov flipped one of his knives in the air, catching it by the blade before launching it into the air. He barely watched the blade as he caught it. “I’ll distract Morris when the time comes, but you’ll have to get Marshal Walsh to cooperate.”

“That could be a problem. Magdalena and I... mated,” Zirkov confessed, still battling his confusion as to who he slept with. Maggie or a Maggie controlled by Var’Len, the og’dal she thought she’d been reporting to. “Afterwards, she turned on me. Then she thought I was Var’Len. This thing in her head... I’m not sure what it’s done to her. The surgeon who

removed the neurosphere warned there could be memory loss.” What if she woke and didn’t recognize him?

“When she wakes, she will remember you and she will be the female you’ve known for two years. Once you explain the situation, she will cooperate.”

He appreciated Stenikov’s confidence, but the warrior hadn’t seen the disgust in Maggie’s eyes. “Maybe if you speak with her. She likes you.”

“She calls me Stilts.”

“Humans have an odd sense of humor. She calls me Z all the time. It took me months to understand it was a sign of friendship.”

Stenikov huffed. “Even so, she does not think highly of me. I’ve not proved myself to her... or to you.”

“Acclimating to a new world takes time.”

“I will speak with her, if you order me, Commander, but I barely know her. Even if she is displeased with you, you have her trust. I do not.”

Krike, the warrior was right.

But she’d cried when she realized she’d slept with Zirkov. Being with him, sharing herself... had never been her choice.

Stenikov’s comm vibrated. “An enforcer on Dal spotted one of Var’Len’s men. I can be there in a week.”

“No. Contact Ri’Nom. He’s already there.”

“He’s not GI7 anymore.”

“Ri’Nom will do this for Maggie. Besides, solving this case is in Dal’s best interest. They wish to open direct relations with Earth. They can’t do that with dalese criminals causing trouble on Earth.” Zirkov looked at his comm as an alert from one of the safehouses popped up. “Krike, this might be a bad situation. The witness has had trouble with the local Brotherhood, but we couldn’t move her without giving away her identity. Konnitch is on his way, but he may need backup.”

“I’ll go. You should be here when Marshal Walsh wakes.”

“If she wakes.”

“She will wake.”

Zirkov lifted his eyes to the warrior. “Did the doctors tell you something they didn’t tell me?”

“No, but she’s a strong female. I have faith, Commander. It’s often the strongest weapon we have.”

“Faith.” Zirkov drew a deep breath. “Go, Stenikov. Provide backup to Konnitch.”

Stenikov nodded. “When she wakes, go easy on her, Commander.”

“What the drekk does that mean?”

“She may not be ready to accept everything she’s done.”

“She’s innocent.”

“She killed two og’dals, maybe more. And leaked information.”

Zirkov ran his hand down his face. “None of that was her.”

“She may not see it that way.”

“The surgeon sent the implant to the DAA, and GI3 analyzed the video and specs we sent them. GI3 agreed with everything the tekklan scientist told them. The neurosphere can control a person’s actions but it requires a handler, someone to issue orders. No, Warrior. She bears no responsibility.”

“Will she see it that way? Or Earth Intelligence? We don’t know the full extent of her involvement, or even Var’Len’s plans. The humans found an unknown drug in her system. How did she get hold of it, why did she take it, and what effect has it had on her?”

The warrior had been slow acclimating to Earth, but his critical thinking and instincts should not be ignored. “All good questions, Stenikov. Earth Intelligence will scrutinize every part of her life and look for reasons to accuse her of being a traitor. I’ll send a sample of her blood to GI3 on the next outbound ship. The more I know, the better I can protect her.

Until we hear from GI3, we assume the drug's connected to the case."

"She's an Earth agent, one of their own. They may not assume the worst."

With his chin, Zirkov nodded toward the agent guarding her door. "They already have."

Zirkov caressed the back of her hand. Despite how hard he tried, he couldn't rid himself of the fear that once he let go, he'd lose her. He desperately wanted to lie down on the bed beside her and pull her in against his body so she'd know how much she meant to him. But he couldn't do more than sit beside her, with his back to the door. If Agent Morris turned around and saw him being intimate with her, he'd report it. Zirkov couldn't afford to have the DAA suspect him, too. If he lost his position and access to Earth, he wouldn't be able to protect Maggie.

"Trust no one beyond our own people right now, Warrior."

"Understood, Commander." The corners of Stenikov's mouth kicked up. "You haven't let go of her hand since the humans brought her in. Is she your heartmate?"

"No, so get that drekking idea out of your head." Zirkov still didn't know how to interpret what had happened between them. He had never used his mating cock before. It had risen for many women, but never once stayed hard for anyone long enough to enter a female. Until Maggie. She could be his heartmate... or his symptoms had changed... yet again. "We had a night together, nothing more. She's one of us which means it's my job to protect her." Even if she weren't under his command, he'd protect her. Every part of his being demanded it.

Og'dal slavers, coalition allies, had found a way to breach Earth's defenses. That made what Maggie knew of the highest importance to Earth Intelligence. Once she woke, the DAA would arrest her. And that was only the internal threat.

Var'Len. The male would surface soon, but Zirkov didn't know the og'dal's end game.

All of GI7's human witnesses were in danger as well as Zirkov's team... especially Maggie.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MAGGIE

“Once I get my hands on Var’Len, he’s dead,” Zirkov said in that decisive voice of his. “I just have to decide if I make it quick or long and painful for what he did to her.”

That wasn’t like Zirkov, Maggie reflected as she listened to him speak to another male nearby. The second voice sounded familiar. Stenikov.

Who were they discussing? Zirkov never spoke of revenge or making anyone suffer. It was beneath him.

“When do you think he put the device in her head?” Stenikov asked.

“What device?” Maggie’s words came out scratchy. She forced her eyes open to the sight of Zirkov leaning over her with that handsome and serious face, strained neck muscles, and tight jaw. For a split second, fear shot through her. He was in danger, and she didn’t know how she knew that.

“Nice to see you again, Magdalena. You’re safe.”

She rotated her head to see Stenikov. He greeted her with a wide smile. “You’re in L.A. Memorial, Marshal Walsh. How do you feel?”

When she considered the question, dozens of memories, flashes mostly, flooded her head. A naked Zirkov, her body pressed into a mattress, and a blue arm draped over her

breasts. She closed her eyes, forcing the memories away. Nothing made sense.

Zirkov brushed her hair away from her eyes, then placed a straw against her lips. “Drink. And don’t talk until you’re ready. You need rest.”

Slowly, she sipped the cool water. This time when she opened her eyes, she noticed monitors and white walls. A hospital.

“Marshal Walsh, do you recognize us?” Stenikov asked.

She nodded, which took effort, but it brought a glorious smile to Zirkov’s face.

“Rest, vasha.”

Vasha. He’d called her that before. When? She’d been crying because of him, but why? Why couldn’t she remember anything?

“My name’s Maggie. Not Vasha,” she struggled to say.

Zirkov’s hand cupped her cheek. “Vasha is an endearment.”

Huh. “Hospital,” she coughed out the word. “Why?”

Zirkov sat down in the chair beside her bed and rested his hand on her arm. That warm touch immediately calmed her. “You had an alien implant in your brain. The doctors removed it three days ago. We believe it caused your headaches.”

Maggie eased her head back into the pillow. She was starting to wonder if this was all a cruel nightmare.

“We’ve proved you’re the mole,” Stenikov added.

“Enough,” Zirkov roared.

“Not the mole,” she insisted though she knew Stenikov had no reason to lie.

Zirkov glared at the taller zyanthan. “Stenikov needs to learn restraint, but he is correct. You are the mole, Magdalena, but you are not responsible for your actions.”

Tears stung the corners of her eyes as she met his face. “I can’t be the mole.”

“Og’dals controlled you through a neural implant. Tekklan in design,” Stenikov added.

“I said enough, Warrior,” Zirkov roared, this time following up with a string of zyanthan words she didn’t know. But Stenikov’s horns dipped back far.

“My apologies, Commander.” Stenikov bowed his head. “I thought she should know we traced the neurosphere back to the Tekklan scientist who developed it.”

It seemed she was at the heart of all the trouble. “I’ve never met any tekklans.”

Zirkov caressed the side of her hand. “We do not need to discuss this now.”

“I need to know everything, Z.”

He inhaled long and slow as his horns tipped back. “An og’dal paid the tekklan to create the neurosphere customized for a human female’s brain. Drekking tekklans will develop anything for anyone if they’re paid enough.”

“This is good news, Marshal Walsh,” Stenikov added.

“I had some alien tech in my brain and that’s good news? Stenikov, you really need additional cultural training.”

“It accounts for your actions.” With another nod, he added, “I’m pleased you are recovering, Marshal, but I must see to another witness.” He left, easing the door shut behind him.

Zirkov leaned forward and lightly pressed his cheek against hers. His breath fanned her ear, sending a pleasant shiver through her body as he whispered, “You are safe, vasha. I promise you. No matter what happens, no matter what the DAA says or does, I won’t let anyone touch you. You, Magdalena, are mine to protect.”

The words and warmth of his cheek soothed and confused her. Why was Zirkov jumping to her defense so readily?

She closed her eyes, trying to push past the haze to process everything they'd just said. She didn't even remember what led to her being in a hospital. She'd been in her bedroom, talking to...

Her eyes snapped to Zirkov. He'd been there, holding a rose and offering her a hand off the floor. But it wasn't him. Two images blurred together. Zirkov's and an og'dals. The og'dal had ordered her to sleep with Zirkov and get information from him.

"You said this implant caused my headaches. Did it cause my blackouts too?"

The vein in the side of Zirkov's neck ticked. "You didn't tell us about those, but yes, blackouts would be a side effect. It would explain a lot, in fact. Why you don't remember leaking information, for one."

"Oh, God, I'm the mole." She reached over to fling the blanket off her and felt a tug on her arm. Tubes ran from her forearm to an IV stand. In the corner of her vision, she spotted someone standing outside her room. Was that an agent guarding her door?

She was the mole.

"Do they know? Sutherland? Nguyen?"

Zirkov moved to block her view of the agent in the hallway. "Everyone knows."

"Am I under arrest?"

"Not yet."

"There's a but there, I can hear it in what you're *not* saying."

"They're questioning the purpose of the neurosphere. The DAA won't accept the confession from the tekklan scientist."

"What other purpose could it have?"

"They think it's a communications device. A way for you to coordinate illicit activities with og'dal slavers. The DAA asserts that you volunteered to have the device implanted."

“I wouldn’t let anyone put anything in me!”

When she tried to sit up, he placed two hands on her shoulders. “Magdalena, do you trust me?”

“Yes,” she said without thinking, though she had so many damn questions.

“Then listen to what I’m saying. The DAA is not your ally right now. Regardless of what that device does or doesn’t do, it proves you had contact with an enemy agent, and that’s what the DAA’s focused on. Sutherland knows about the leaks in GI7. I’m not sure how, but I suspect he planted listening devices in our office and then later pulled them. Either way, the DAA needs someone to prosecute and unless we find the og’dal responsible, Sutherland will charge you. I used my position in Galactic Intelligence to gain us some time.”

“If they already have evidence—”

“You said you’d trust me. I won’t let them take you. We have to find the og’dal and hand him over.”

She didn’t know where to start.

“Do you remember anything that can help me?”

Images of meeting og’dals flashed in her head. She’d met the two og’dals in the photos Sutherland had shown her.

“I think I killed one. In an old warehouse.”

Zirkov didn’t look surprised. “Why did you kill him?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you recognize the name Var’Len?”

She massaged her forehead below the bandages. “It hurts to remember.”

“The implant used the pain center of your brain to inhibit select memories. The more you tried to remember, the more painful it became.”

“But my head still hurts.”

“You had surgery. On *Earth*,” he added, his dismay clear. “The doctors said you shouldn’t do anything taxing, even

reading. Apparently, my questions are hurting you.”

When he reached forward to take her hand, she pulled away. She’d done enough damage to him and his marshals. She’d endangered so many people. Kaci, Gabriella, Ri’Nom... countless others.

Zirkov laid a hand on her forearm, light and reassuring. Her eyes moved up his arm to his broad chest, strong face, and higher, to his horns. A new image, one of a very handsome zyanthan thrusting into her, settled in her head.

“Did we... Please tell me it was all a dream.”

His expression, the regret in his eyes gave her the answer. “It depends on what you’re remembering—”

“I warned you not to upset my patient, Marshal Kesk,” a doctor said as he entered the room. “Her heart rate is too high.”

Zirkov stepped aside as the doctor adjusted the drip on the IV. “Leave or I’ll have that agent outside arrest you.”

“He won’t arrest me and I’m not leaving.”

After checking her vitals, the older man with glasses slipped the call button into Maggie’s hand. “Press the button if you want me to send security in to remove him, Ms. Walsh.” The doctor glared at Zirkov as he left.

Zirkov paced for a moment, then stared out the window. She’d seen him mad in the past but never so disappointed. They’d had sex and she couldn’t even remember it. She pulled the blanket up to her chin. “Do you hate me, Z?”

“I could never hate you, but I should let you rest.”

Already, he was pulling away. She’d betrayed them all. She couldn’t blame him or any of her fellow agents if they never trusted her again.

“Do I still have a job?”

“The DAA fired you and confiscated your badge and weapons. Along with many of the personal items in your apartment. They haven’t decided if they’ll prosecute you.”

Her head dropped back against the pillows. So many years of hard work... destroyed. "I don't know what to do. I'm scared."

"I won't let them touch you, vasha. Similar to how a sholan protects his sholani."

More memories surfaced. They'd slept together, and he'd *marked* her. Everywhere. What few memories she had seemed surreal, distant as if she'd been on the outside looking in.

"I'm not your sholani," she said, trying to understand what had happened between them.

Zirkov's horns twisted at the tops. "No, you are not."

"Then why talk about heartmates? What did I do, Z? Did we marry or something?"

"No. Even if we had, it would not be binding. The person in bed with me was... not there, not fully." Zirkov swallowed hard. "I believe Var'Len ordered you to sleep with me."

She didn't remember anyone ordering her, but the things she did with Zirkov... His lips thinned and she could see the pain there. She'd hurt him.

"Everything that's happened, none of it was me, and yet it was." She turned her head away from him. If she had the strength, she'd leap from the bed and run so far she'd never have to face him, but her body felt like a truck ran her over.

Zirkov knelt beside the bed, placing his face level with hers. He was so handsome, his body a work of art, even with the scars on his neck and chest. She had so many questions about him, and now she couldn't ask any of them.

"Look at me, Magdalena."

"I deserve that."

"What?"

"Being called Magdalena."

"It is a beautiful name. One you should wear proudly."

“Proudly?” She lifted her head, no longer trying to hide her tears.

With the pad of his thumb, he wiped a fat drop from her cheek. “Why does your name bring you such sadness?”

“Because anytime I did something wrong as a child, my mother called me Magdalena.” She swiped at the tears leaking from her eyes. “She called me Magdalena *a lot*, Z. I was always screwing up, at least in her eyes. I didn’t have any self-worth for the longest time, not even enough to tell that man to stop.”

“What man?”

“Never mind. The point is the name makes me feel like a screw-up all over again, and I’ve worked too hard to get where I am. Fuck!” She threw her head back against the pillows. “I’ve screwed up again. I’m a traitor. No one will ever trust me again, including you.”

“You are not a traitor, Magdalena.”

She winced at hearing her name again.

“My apologies. I will try to call you Maggie from this point forward. Though I will still think of you as Magdalena, which reminds me of a very special and rare flower that blooms once every ten years on Zyan. It’s called a magdala. During the flower’s dormant period, the magdala’s petals remain tightly closed only revealing their underside, a deep blue that blends in with the grass and other foliage. There appears to be nothing special about the magdala until it blooms.”

“What happens then?”

“The petals peel back very slowly, over months, teasing those who wait to see the beauty inside. No two magdalas are the same. Inside, thousands of tiny filaments weave into intricate patterns. The flower’s beauty extends beyond these patterns to the individual filaments. They may display several colors or none at all. The color may change as the sun’s rays strike it, or when exposed to moonlight. Even sound causes changes, a pulsing of color that mimics the mathematics of

music, though without sound. No one knows why or how the filaments change. The magdala is the beauty of the universe condensed into one flower.

“That’s you, Magdalena. You are very complicated, and yet full of beautiful layers I have yet to discover. So when I call you by your full name, I hope you will think of the magdala, a true wonder much like yourself.”

Maggie swiped at her eyes again, except this time the tears came with the joy of having Zirkov by her side, treating her as if she were that very special flower. “I want to see this magdala flower one day, Z.”

“I would like to show you the magdala... Magdalena.”

For the first time in her life, she smiled at hearing her full name. “Thank you. For explaining... and for giving my name a worthy meaning.”

“You did not need me or knowledge of the magdala. You already give your name meaning. But I’m pleased learning of the magdala has cheered you. As for what’s happening in GI7, you are innocent. Like the many witnesses we’ve protected over the years.”

“You mean witnesses *you’ve* protected. Apparently, I’m who you’ve been protecting them from. The wolf in sheep’s clothing.”

“I would find you quite beautiful in any clothing, though the garments in these hospitals are dreary.”

She laughed. “Stop being funny.”

“I’m serious. It’s why I brought clothing from your apartment.” He pulled out her dark gray silk lace trim split nightgown from the hospital closet. She’d been saving the lingerie for a special occasion, like when she had someone special over. *Him*.

“I’d much rather see you in this dress.”

Damn, he was cute. “It’s not a dress.”

His brows pursed together. “Then what is it?”

She looked away. “It no longer matters.”

“Don’t do this. You’re too smart to give up. You’re not the first marshal to get caught in a lousy situation. We will resolve this, together.”

“But I betrayed you, Zirkov. All of GI7.”

“Someone used you. There is a difference. You do not have it in you to betray anyone, especially your people.”

“How do you know? I have fragments of memories, but worse. It’s like this haze has infected every memory, tainting them so I don’t know what I did willingly and what I didn’t.”

“You’re thinking of our mating.”

When she turned her head away, his large hand on her cheek stopped her. “Magdalena, I do not regret being with you. Only that you do not feel the same way. If it distresses you, then put it out of your mind and we will start over.”

“How?”

Zirkov stood tall, horns pointing straight up before he bowed his head ever-so-slightly. “Let me introduce myself, Marshal Walsh. I’m Commander Zirkov Kesk, head of GI7. While you are the liaison between our organizations, I will cooperate with your requests as long as they, and you, do not interfere with my work. Is that understood?”

She remembered the little speech he gave her two years ago. “I’m not a marshal anymore. Or the liaison officer.”

“I used your former title as a temporary designation until we settle on your new role.”

“New role?”

“Working for me, in GI7.”

He didn’t see the risks that entailed. Accepting her into GI7 would cast suspicion on the entire team.

“It’s a lovely gesture, Commander Kesk, but I can’t work for GI7. But if you agree, I’d like to hire you to help me find the bastard who used me.”

The edge of Zirkov's mouth hitched up into a seductive and beautiful grin that wrapped around her heart.

"Is that a yes, Commander?" she asked, fighting to keep her eyes open.

"On one condition."

"Anything." She needed his help, and she trusted him... more than she trusted herself. "Name your price."

"We will speak with one another as peers. Friends. I will call you Maggie and you will call me Zirkov. Or Z," he added with a warm smile.

Oh, how she loved his smile. It was almost worth being branded a traitor. "I accept. I guess that means you'll stop calling me Magdalena."

His brows and horns turned inward. Confusion?

"You may like my name, but we both know for two years you've been calling me Magdalena to aggravate me. You never respected me as a marshal and you never wanted me working with GI7."

"Partially correct. I always respected you, but I did not want you near."

"Why not?"

"You are a temptation, one I've struggled to resist since the day we met. I suspect we will work well together, Maggie. Better than in the past." Another grin, one that melted her heart.

She couldn't keep her eyes open. With that last image, of Zirkov smiling, she gave in to the need to sleep.

"Rest, Maggie. Regain your strength, then we will find Var'Len. Together."

As she drifted off, Zirkov leaned forward and kissed her forehead. "I've always wanted and respected you," he whispered. "I feared losing you."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MAGGIE

“I don’t recall this safehouse,” Maggie said as they climbed the five steps to the porch of a small but well-maintained house in the middle of Orange County. The landscaping in the five by ten-foot front yard consisted of concrete, dirt, rocks, and a lone-standing shrub that barely reached her waist.

“I couldn’t take you to a safehouse the DAA knows about,” Zirkov said.

“Because they don’t know you have me, do they?”

“You know?”

“I couldn’t miss the timing of the emergency down the hall and Agent Morris’s disappearance at that exact moment we left my hospital room. Or how you threw a doctor’s lab coat on me and snuck me down the back stairs. I was technically under arrest, and you broke me out of jail, Z, didn’t you?”

“Effectively, yes.”

“They’re going to find you. Us.”

“No, they won’t.”

She loved his confidence, but they both knew the DAA would eventually find them. At least the neighborhood he’d chosen was quiet and didn’t have much activity, or the stench of overflowing garbage cans and broken sewer lines.

Each house on the street stood out with its own identity. A row of pots lined the side of one house, while another sported colorful towels hanging out to dry. With most cars destroyed during the occupation, people turned their carports into mini recreation areas. In one carport, kids had drawn hopscotch lines using a red dye, while in another someone had set up chairs and a small table, creating a secondary porch. The neighborhood gave off a hopeful vibe. Maggie needed that right now.

Zirkov pulled a dark green nylon bag from the car he drove. An older model four-door sedan with its share of bullet holes, dents, scratches, and graffiti. She'd never seen that car before. Hell, she didn't even know he could drive until she got in the car today. The man had many hidden skills, but talking about himself wasn't one of them.

"I suppose the DAA took my car, too."

"They're scrutinizing every part of your life. While you were in recovery, the doctors wouldn't let me in to sit with you. I went to your apartment to look for clues to help me find the og'dal who did this to you. DAA agents were already there, pouring through every inch of your apartment. It couldn't have been more than an hour after the surgery ended. I knew the doctors had contacted them about the implant they found, but still, I never expected they'd converge on your apartment so fast. I said you'd need clothing for when you left the hospital. They begrudgingly allowed me to take your clothing, but nothing else."

"I had more clothing than one small bag's worth."

"This was all I found."

They were analyzing her clothing too, then. The bottom of her footwear for dirt samples. Loose hairs on her garments. Probably the only clothing in that bag were the newer items with the price tags still on. Last month, she treated herself to a shopping spree to find clothing that would catch Zirkov's eye. The DAA would investigate her financials and see that unexplained hike in spending as well as the seductive clothing.

Enough odd behavior they could spin against her if they wanted.

“Thank you,” she said, hiding her distress. Earth Intelligence had slipped a noose around her neck and now they needed a reason to push the chair out from under her feet.

Zirkov caught up to her at the door and with a single finger tipped her chin up. “This is only temporary. Once we find Var’Len, you will then have your apartment and your life back.”

“But not my job.”

He didn’t reply. They both knew the DAA would never trust her again. No government agency would. But that brought up the question about Zirkov. He offered her a job, which meant he trusted her. But how deeply did he trust her? What would happen the first time something went wrong? If he had any lingering doubts, even small ones, it could destroy them both.

“Let’s go in. I’m feeling exposed out here.” She drew a breath, waiting to see the inside of where she’d be stuck for a while. The home was quaint from the outside, but like all safehouses, it would be the bare minimum on the inside. But she wasn’t here for comfort.

With a curt nod, Zirkov unlocked the house and pushed the door open.

“They believe I’m a traitor, but you don’t.”

He carried her bag inside. “I never once thought of you as a traitor. The source of the leak, yes, but not a traitor.”

“How could you think one without the other?”

“For two years, I’ve watched you defend witnesses, marshals, and even criminals, including those who deserved to be shot where they stood. You insisted on justice and on following the rules, because you believe in your people and your world. You, Magdalena, are not a traitor.”

All that time, he’d been watching her, admiring her....

“You called me sholani, several times. Or am I imagining that? It’s hard to know which memories are real at this point.”

He inhaled then slowly released the breath. “You didn’t imagine that. But I misspoke.”

That troubled expression on his face made the hairs on her arms stand on end. “Skaggs told me zyanthan males know for sure when they meet their heartmate.”

“For most, yes, but I had a medical issue years back that left me different from other males.”

She pictured him naked. That sparked an onslaught of memories. Of him on top of her, behind her, *inside* her. An intense wave of being possessed and controlled struck her. She grabbed the doorframe to balance herself.

Zirkov’s hands cupped her cheek. Worry-filled silver eyes held her as securely as his hands.

“I’m okay, just a little overwhelmed.”

“Come inside and rest.”

She followed him into a comfortable-looking home. Two plush chairs and a wood cocktail table filled the small living room. Off to the right, stark white walls led to a kitchen with little pantry space and a dinette set that included two iron-backed, white padded chairs.

A holoivid projected from a tiny chip embedded in the living room wall added life to the meager furnishings. She’d seen this technology before, on Zirkov’s ship, but not the picture of five zyanthan males with arms around one another and their horns pointing back. Civilians, she guessed from how they dressed. Casual green or black pants with dark jackets. Crisp mountains jutted toward the sky in the background, which explained the heavier attire. They looked happy, though, like a bunch of buddies on a hunting trip.

Five shadow boxes surrounded the holoivid in a circle. Each displayed colorful flora she’d never seen before. The bright purple leaf in the bottom box reminded her of an ostrich feather. Inside another box, two black leaves practically blended into the black felt background, which made the

glowing silver veins stand out. The box that captivated her showcased a furry leaf that looked like a tiny human hand the size of a marble, pure white with eight fingers that even had fingernails! She peered closer to make sure the item was indeed botanical. Tiny roots sprouting from the bottom confirmed it. Definitely alien flora.

“Is this your home?”

“Yes. As I said, taking you to a safehouse was risky.”

“But your home isn’t?”

“No one knows about this place. Except Konnitch. I paid in credit chips and used another name on the title.”

“Whose?”

“That of a dead human with no relatives.”

“Illegal, but smart. You don’t trust many people do you, Z?”

“No.”

But he trusted her enough to bring her here, to his private sanctuary. She tried to hold back the tears but failed.

Zirkov brushed the tears away with his thumb. “What happened to you could have happened to anyone.”

“But it didn’t. I’m a trained agent, and it happened to me.”

“Maybe that’s why. Because you are a trained agent.”

“What are you saying?”

“I wasn’t going to tell you yet.” He picked up a datapad from the coffee table and handed it to her.

She read the file. “This is my dossier.”

“Read the section two and a half years ago, shortly after you joined Earth Intelligence.”

“You mean the reprimand for taking unauthorized leave? My mother got ill. I couldn’t wait for permission for time off. The doctors I spoke to said she wouldn’t live much longer. I returned to Montana and stayed with her. She died a few days

after I arrived. I stayed an extra week to take care of the funeral and deal with her property.”

“Look four months earlier, May third.”

“Leave of Absence granted: Family Death. Mother.”

“That’s wrong. My mother died four months later, in September.”

“Maggie, your mother died in May. You returned home for the burial, but everything you believe happened in September occurred four months earlier, in May.”

“That can’t be. I remember it so clearly. The leaves a spectacular array of golds and oranges. The temperature in the seventies during the day, dipping to the fifties at night.”

“The memories are false or taken from other times in your life. The og’dals invaded your brain, manipulated your memory. You need time to heal.”

He was consoling her, trying to keep her positive. That wasn’t exactly Zirkov’s style. He was more of a ‘here are the facts, deal with them’ kind of guy.

When he reached for her again, she batted his arm away. “You’re placating me. Why?”

“The doctors said upsetting you could slow your healing.”

“I don’t care. I need answers. Don’t keep my own life hidden from me, Zirkov. Please.”

He swiped through several documents on his datapad, then tapped the screen. “The date you disappeared from the DAA without notice—”

“You mean the day I left and then later called in when I finally found a phone.”

“Maggie, your memories—”

“I get it. They’ve gone through an og’dal grinder.” If she didn’t remember her own mother’s funeral correctly, then she couldn’t trust any part of her memory, including how she felt about Zirkov.

Right now, she wanted to sidle up to him and run her hands along his body. But was that something she truly wanted, or a desire the og'dals had planted in her?

“Are you listening?” he asked.

“Sorry, I’m distracted.”

“More proof that you are not ready to return to work.”

“Then it’s a good thing they fired me.” She leaned her cheek against the window pane and stared out at the quiet neighborhood. “I’m sorry. You don’t deserve any attitude from me. None of this is your fault. I appreciate everything you’ve done for me, Z, but I think I should leave.”

“No, we are stronger together,” he said, his voice resolute. “It was a concept we learned in warrior training. Stronger Together. It applies to marshals... and partners.”

“Partners in what? Crime? Misfortune? Sex? Whatever I touch seems to fail. I don’t want to drag you, Konnitch, and the other marshals down with me.”

“You won’t, because we won’t let you go down. Not without a fight.” He leaned against her back, his hands traveling up and down her arms, warming her. “Warriors fight to win.”

“You said you’re not a warrior.”

“I no longer have the title, but I’m still warrior-trained.”

She turned into him, placing her palms flat on his chest. “Won’t you tell me what happened?”

“It’s not important.”

“It is, to me. Besides, it will give me something to think about other than the mess I’m in. Those bastards opened up my head and whisked my brains like scrambled eggs. I’m mad, scared, and can’t trust my own memories.”

“You are as sharp as the day we met, but you need rest.”

She picked up the datapad. “You were analyzing a series of kidnappings around the time I left for Montana. How are they connected?”

“I think you were one of the women the og’dals kidnapped from Los Angeles. It explains why you never requested permission for a leave of absence. You merely disappeared.”

“I told you, I didn’t have time—”

He held up a hand. “I’ve never known you to break protocols. You would have called in to Earth Intelligence from any government or law enforcement office nearby or paid a messenger to deliver a note to them, but you didn’t. The og’dals took you, Maggie. It fits. And we have a potential witness. Stenikov read through the statements from women taken during that time and later rescued by GI5.

“Amanda Greyson returned to Earth a year ago but refused to enter witness protection or testify on Dal. But she made a statement. Konnitch remembered her and dug up the report. She said the og’dals kidnapped three dozen women in one week, including a blonde who fought back and killed several og’dals on board the ship. Ms. Greyson never saw the woman after the og’dals separated her from the other kidnapped women. She’d assumed the slavers killed the blonde.”

Zirkov petted her hair before cupping her cheek. “What if that blonde was you, Maggie? For a female from Earth to fight back and with such skill is rare given how the Coalition suppressed women during the occupation. They denied females more than an education. They instilled a fear that they cannot fight back, that they aren’t worthy.”

Flashes of her childhood returned. The male boarders at her mother’s house always spoke down to her, telling her she needed to be grateful when a male gave her attention.

A shudder ran through Maggie. “My mother never believed me about anything. Not the Coalition, nor the...”

“You saw beyond the lies.”

“I fought as hard as I could. I started sleeping with a knife under my pillow.”

“Maggie—”

“Forget it. Let’s stick to the subject. The og’dals who supposedly abducted me. “

“You have an incredible strength in you, Maggie. I wish you could see yourself as I do.”

“The og’dals, Z....”

“I think they interrogated you and discovered you were a marshal in Earth Intelligence. They saw you as a way to access and even control intel from Galactic Intelligence. Through you, they stayed ahead of those who hunted them.”



ZIRKOV

“No,” Maggie said, her voice barely a whisper. Tears filled her eyes as she shook her head, unable to accept his words.

He hated not only what the og’dals had done to her, but that he told her a truth she wasn’t ready to hear. He’d likely stirred memories about her kidnapping, and perhaps older memories, ones as traumatic—maybe more—than her abduction.

“I’m sorry, Magdalena, but you deserve the truth. All of it.” He rubbed his hands up and down her arms, hoping to comfort her.

As part of being head of GI7, he’d delivered bad news to people before. Families of fallen marshals and witnesses. He’d even had to accept the truth of his own situation, one he could blame on no one but himself. None of those hurt as much as seeing her face twist in confusion and fear.

Maggie buried her head against his chest and sobbed. His horns shot forward and his stomach twisted as she shook. Petting her hair and caressing her back helped calm her, but it wasn’t enough. He had to do better for her.

So soft, so fragile, this female. For all her bravado and determination, she was far from indestructible. If he couldn’t prove her innocence, he’d have to hide her from Earth Intelligence and Galactic Intelligence. That meant becoming a wanted man, hunted by his own people. Stenikov was right. That wasn’t any way to live. He couldn’t do that to her.

The air contained a hint of salt. Tears. His horns and insides twisted at the thought of any harm coming to her.

He wished she were his sholani. That would make any decision going forward easy. There'd be no choice. He'd do whatever it took to ensure her safety, despite the repercussions to him or GI7.

"Come, you need rest." The moment he lifted her into his arms, she curled against him. A swell of pride, relief, and peace filled him. This must be what it felt like to have a sholani.

"I can still walk. I'm not that helpless." She inhaled and released a shaky breath. "Though I guess I'm pretty pathetic right now."

"Not pathetic. Recovering."

Maggie's breath warmed his skin, making the thought of putting her down harder as he entered the bedroom. He'd hold on to her forever if she allowed it.

"When I became a marshal, it was the proudest day of my life. And now it has ended in disgrace."

He set her on his bed. "Every end is a beginning. A new path. New opportunities."

"Very poetic of you. But I need more than platitudes. I need an actionable plan, intel, and a gun."

"For what?"

"I don't know. My head's going in circles. I'm so lost right now."

She didn't see it. She wasn't lost, not with him there for her. But she needed something to ground her. He understood that. "I can get you a blaster."

"You'd trust me with one?"

"Will you shoot me?"

"That depends. Will you call me Magdalena again?" When he stopped to think about it, she slapped his arm. "I was joking. I would never shoot you."

“Good, because I like the name. It’s as beautiful as you.”

“Wow, no one ever said that before.”

“That your name is beautiful?”

“That I am.” She scooched close to the edge of the bed where he stood and tilted her head back. Sky-blue eyes pulled him in as she ran her hands over the planes of his chest, then under his vest to where his warrior tattoos had been.

He gripped her wrist, stopping her from touching the scars.

“Do they hurt?”

“No.”

“Then let me touch them. Let me know you better.”

They’d learned each other very well the other night. She hadn’t touched his scars then, though. But that hadn’t been Maggie, not really.

She didn’t remember much of that night. Not how he’d made love to her late into the morning and how he’d kissed every inch of her body, treasuring her.

He held both her wrists to keep her from touching him, even though his cocks came to life at the thought of tasting her sweet lips again. “What happened between us the other night was a mistake we can’t afford to repeat,” he said as gently as he could.

She sank into the pillows, but for once she didn’t argue with him.

“I’m sorry, Maggie,” he added, not sure why. He owed her no apologies, just the promise that he’d protect her. He took a pillow from the bed and the extra blankets stored in the bedroom closet and retreated to the living room.

As he settled on the floor, drawing a blanket over him, he heard the muffled cries of a female in his bedroom. Every part of him insisted—demanded—he return to her. Except she wasn’t his female. This affinity toward her was nothing more than an illusion created by a male whose past continued to haunt him, letting him fall for a woman he could never have.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ZIRKOV

Zirkov remained behind Maggie, surveilling the quiet neighborhood as she slammed the middle-aged man up against the front of her apartment building. He'd promised he would not interfere. She'd made it clear she would not be controlled or ordered around, by anyone, including him. Now that she'd been demoted to civilian, he had no authority over her, professionally or personally. Still, doing nothing in a situation where she could get hurt left him on edge.

"Where is he?" she demanded.

"I don't know who you're talking about," the man stuttered, his hands raised high and his locked on Maggie.

She had insisted on returning to her apartment to collect a few personal items and that meant they risked running into DAA agents. Now Zirkov had to worry about her attacking random people on the street.

The man winced when she wrapped her hand around his throat, fear filling his eyes.

"Let him go," Zirkov ordered.

"He has information."

"This was not what the doctor meant by resting." He never should have brought her here, no matter how compelling her argument that a familiar setting might stir memories vital to their case.

When her hands clenched on the man's jacket, Zirkov placed his hands over hers. "Maggie, this isn't necessary."

She faced him, confusion and desperation swirling in her face as she relaxed her grip. The human tore free of her hold and fled. Shaken, he ran into a bike chained to a light pole outside the building. The male picked himself up and stumbled the rest of the way down the street.

"I wasn't ready to let him go. But I don't know why."

"He triggered a memory."

"I think it was the red hair, but I've never seen that man before. And the way he's running, I suspect I never will again."

"He will avoid this neighborhood in the future. As we should."

"No more lectures, Z. I needed to come here." She climbed the stairs to her apartment on the second floor and pulled out her keys. The door stood open by a fraction of an inch, the yellow tape with "DO NOT ENTER BY ORDER OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ALIEN AFFAIRS" written across it still intact. Maggie tore the tape down with a vengeance, then reached for her gun in a holster that she wasn't even wearing.

Zirkov nudged her aside as he raised his blaster and entered the apartment. A quick search proved no one lurked inside, but someone in addition to DAA agents had searched the place. Furniture sat overturned and displaced, clothing lay shredded and strewn everywhere, and even the kitchen cabinets had been emptied of their contents, with food and broken dishes littering the wood floors. He'd been at crime scenes under DAA jurisdiction before, and while the agents always left a mess behind, they never destroyed a home's contents.

Maggie carefully stepped around broken dishes. "What the hell happened here?"

"When I was last here, DAA agents were cataloging and taking items they thought would be useful, but they hadn't destroyed anything."

Maggie's jaw clenched. "It's a warning."

"Against what?"

"Talking. Ratting out the og'dals."

"Og'dal slavers don't deliver messages. They kill and move on. Straightforward. Clean. Quick."

"Like the body at the warehouse," Maggie said.

"You've never admitted you were there."

"I didn't know what to make of it. I still don't, at least not fully. I woke up leaning over Bu'Tay's body. I don't remember how I got there."

"Did you kill him?"

She spun toward him, her mouth open and ready to object. "I don't know," she said, that lost look returning.

"The answer is no, Maggie. No matter who asks you, the answer is always no."

"But what if—"

Zirkov held up a hand. "The DAA is not your ally. You will not confess to anything, directly or indirectly. Understood?"

She nodded.

He'd never seen her look so overwhelmed. With the crunch of dishes beneath her boots, she headed to the kitchen counter and one of the few unbroken items in the apartment. A glass vase with six dead yellow roses and one fresh one with the usual note, 'Have a sweet day, Milady'.

"Who has been giving you these flowers?"

"Bruce. My neighbor across the hall. He's sweet on me. He's the one you paid to deliver a note to me."

Zirkov remembered the male. Scrawny, untrustworthy, and greedy. That was the impression the male had given when he bartered higher and higher to deliver that note to her. Zirkov had been so desperate to reach her, he would have paid any amount of money, and the greedy sartog had sensed that.

Maggie caressed the petals of the fresh flower with her fingers. “I love roses, especially yellow. They brighten the place.” She scanned what remained of her apartment. “They used to, that is.”

Zirkov wanted to find out more about her neighbor, but it was more important to get what they came for and leave. They could talk about the unworthy male later.

He righted the sofa. “When you return here, you can paint the walls yellow. Or draw large yellow roses on them.”

A slight smile lifted her eyes. “Are you a romantic, Z?”

“You said you like yellow.”

“Blue’s nice too.” She winked and the corners of her mouth lifted in a smile that traveled down to his coxks.

“If you’re not getting any useful memories here, we should leave.”

“I want to collect a few personal items first.”

“Tell me what you need, and I’ll help you. Then, we’ll take a few buses and check for tails, before returning to our safehouse.” He spoke louder than usual, especially considering they’d trespassed onto a closed crime scene.

“Safehouse? Don’t you mean—”

He tapped his right ear and then motioned toward the apartment. Listening devices. The DAA would have planted those in case she returned. He could see the initial shock in her eyes. She still considered herself a DAA agent, and the thought that they would spy on her hadn’t sunk in yet.

She met Zirkov’s eyes, that lost look returning. She wasn’t sure how to be on the other side of the law. That’s why he’d insisted on coming with her. To do more than protect her; to let her know she wasn’t alone in her fight.

“Yes, um, give me a minute to pick through what’s left. I want whatever clothing they didn’t destroy. And my family pictures. Then we can go.”

Except she didn't sift through the clothing on the floor. She stepped on and over several pictures, ignoring them as if they were trash, only to crawl under the bed.

His eyes fixated on that tight ass wiggling around, reminding him how much fun they'd had in that bed a week ago.

"Do you need help?" He struggled to keep the growing hunger for her out of his voice.

"Almost have it," she said as she squirmed out of the tight space. "I have a hiding spot beneath the floorboards where I keep my valuables."

"Jewelry?"

"I'm partial to silver." She held up a Glock he hadn't seen before, different from her DAA issue. "You don't know how hard it is to replace pre-occupation pieces."

With the click of a magazine being loaded into a gun, Maggie headed to the door. "Let's go, Z. We're burning daylight."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

MAGGIE

After changing buses three times, Maggie and Zirkov sat on a park bench watching the pigeons eat popcorn a child had dropped earlier. In the distance, seven boys played with a soccer ball. With the sun setting, the kids would leave soon, though Maggie wondered if she and Zirkov would. He appeared content sitting with her... and not talking. And she swore he'd been inching closer to her. When they first sat down, there'd been a foot between them. Now, only a few inches.

She had to admit, she liked having Zirkov with her. His presence had given her the strength she needed to wade through what remained of her apartment. She still couldn't believe agents she'd worked with in Earth Intelligence for years had planted listening devices in her apartment. Those were the people who should be fighting to prove her innocence. Instead, they'd turned on her. Only Zirkov remained steadfast, believing in her.

Maggie brushed the side of her hand against his. Thanking people for help had never been her strong suit. Years ago she'd sworn she'd never let anyone see her as weak.

Zirkov's bright silver eyes never left her face. "I think we can return home, Z. We would have seen a tail by now." All her peers in the L.A. office sucked at tailing, though not as badly as Stenikov. But she had to give him a pass. He had blue skin and horns that stood above a crowd.

“There’s no tail, but I needed to be sure. And daylight doesn’t burn.”

“Excuse me?”

“Candles, wood, paper, even people can burn. But not daylight. Back at your apartment, you said we were burning daylight.”

A laugh escaped her. “It means we were wasting time. Like what we’re doing sitting here. We need to find Var’Len.”

The corner of his mouth kicked up, then he returned to surveilling the area.

She swatted his arm. “You’re sly. Making me think you didn’t understand.”

“You were tense, and trapped in your thoughts, Magdalena. You haven’t laughed or smiled in days.”

“So?”

“You think clearer when you’re not burdened. Laughter seems to... free you.”

“Maybe so, but you can’t just make a person laugh and expect they’ll feel better.”

“I can try.” He spoke to her softer than usual as his pinkie hooked hers.

“Thank you.” The words came to her easily this time. And with it, a smile... for him.

“You are most welcome, Magdalena.”

“What now?”

“You’re deferring to me?” he asked. The shock on his face made her chuckle. He was right. Smiling and laughing helped center her. Or maybe his presence did.

“For now, Z. For now.”

“We wait to hear from Konnitch and Stenikov. If they discovered any connections between the Brotherhood and the dead og’dals, then we’ll start arresting members of the Brotherhood until we get the answers we need.”

“But you don’t believe the Brotherhood’s connected.”

“What makes you say that?”

“If you did, then you’d be with Konnitch and Stenikov, instead of me.”

“Someone needs to guard you.”

“No one needs to guard me. I’m a marshal.” She waved her hand in a circular motion. “You know what I mean. I’m not a marshal anymore, like you’re not a warrior, but those are only titles, right? I still have the knowledge and the skills, and now a weapon. I’m good to go.”

“You’re still healing. The doctors advised you to relax, to give your body the time it needs.”

“Doctors always say that.”

“That doesn’t mean they’re wrong. Your focus wanes at times and you attacked an innocent.”

“He ran off with his balls still attached.”

Zirkov raised both brows.

Maggie bit her lower lip. “You should see the expression on your face.”

“It would help to know if you’re serious.”

“You really think I’d castrate a guy?”

Thick eyebrows pursed. “I’m unsure.”

She thought about it and then shrugged. “If I’m running while shooting, or exceedingly pissed off, I guess anything could happen.”

“You’re a very unusual female. I don’t know why your people make insulting comments about blondes.”

“Ah, you’ve been reading old literature again. We need to find you some newer books, so you can see it’s not only blondes that human males paint as dimwits, but all women.”

“Is this sarcasm?”

“Call it frustration. I’ve been wondering why the DAA has to make an example of me. I’m the only female field agent in L.A.”

“You’re also the only agent working with my unit. This may be an attack on GI7 more than you. None of the DAA’s other cases have been affected by...” He halted himself from finishing the thought.

“From my betrayal?” She’d always been able to count on him telling her the facts of a situation, without sugar-coating them. Something had changed between them.

You’re a fucking mole, that’s what changed.

“You were not responsible for your actions, Magdalena.”

“Back to calling me Magdalena. That means things have turned serious.”

“They’ve been serious all along.”

“Maybe I’m not the only one who needs to loosen up.”

“I admit, I’m distracted.”

She glanced over her shoulder. Now that the kids had left the park, she rose and straddled Zirkov’s massive legs. In this position, wicked thoughts filled her mind. She only intended to tease him. Now, she had the urge to grab hold of his horns and ride him.

His hands hovered at her sides as if he was afraid to touch her.

“Am I distracting you?”

“Maggie...” The warning in his voice spurred her on. Just once, she wanted to see him lose control.

She stroked a horn. Zirkov’s face twisted as he struggled to maintain his composure. When her fingertips glided over the bumps at the base of his horn, a groan escaped him, making her insides sizzle with sheer ecstasy.

He might be able to restrain himself, but could she?

Maggie lifted off him. “You’re not the only one who ignored warning signs.”

He scrubbed his face but didn’t rise from the bench.

Her eyes fell to his crotch, and the bulge there. “Shall I finish what I started?”

“Are you trying to torture me?”

She wanted him to lash out at her and tell her why she was wrong... anything to make the world return to normal. He’d always been distant around her, but something had changed between them, and she needed to understand it. Allowing him to withdraw behind a mask of indifference would drag her back into that pit of despair she’d escaped years ago.

She needed this male.

“Whether I was a witting participant in the information leaks or not doesn’t matter. You’ll never see me as anything but the mole, and you’ll never trust me again.”

He rose, towering over her, his horns angling forward. “I could say the same about you. That night in your apartment, I failed to see it wasn’t you, not in spirit.”

“That wasn’t your fault. I trust you.”

“And I trust you.”

She bit her lip.

“You do not believe me.”

“It’s hard. No one’s ever truly believed in me.”

Two large arms wrapped around her and held her against a strong chest. Being surrounded by a wall of muscle gave her a sense of safety she needed right now.

Zirkov always looked out for his marshals. Perhaps he saw her as one of his team, after all. Though she doubted he hugged Konnitch, Ri’Nom, or Skaggs.

As they resumed walking, he didn’t meet her eyes, but his pinkie hooked hers. Her heart sailed at the contact.

“Take my hand, Magdalena,” he said a few heartbeats later. Not an order, but a request, said with confidence... in her.

Maggie slid her hand into his. Warmth and security wrapped around her and for the first time in for as long as she could remember, she didn't feel alone.

“You didn't do anything wrong, Z. You did everything right.”

“I ignored the suspicions of the other marshals who suspect you were leaking information. I made excuses for what they saw and refused to listen to them. I lost my objectivity.”

She hadn't known any of this. She stared into his face, trying to understand him. “Why would you do that?”

“Because they suspected *you*.”

She'd always thought she was little more than a thorn in his side. With a backhanded slap against his chest, she brushed off his words. “You don't have to worry about that anymore. I'm just Maggie Walsh, woman for hire.”

“Does that mean you will not work for me?”

She glanced at their hands locked together. How could she tell him she wanted him without him thinking she was using him again?

“That wouldn't work. You need the DAA to trust you, and that won't happen if I'm working for GI7. Maybe I should move East and start over there. With enough money, I can buy a new identity and a past to go with it.”

“You're talking like a criminal.”

“I'm thinking out loud. Don't misunderstand, Z. I want to clear my name, even if it's the last thing I do. I worked hard to be a marshal, and those fucking slavers swooped in and... and used me.”

And then she'd used Zirkov.

Zirkov cupped the back of her head. “If you must blame yourself, Maggie, blame me as well. And we will move forward together to solve this. Is that acceptable?”

Damn, she couldn’t believe he was taking even partial responsibility for *her* actions. This had nothing to do with him, even if GI7 was the target.

“Yes, it’s acceptable. Under one condition.”

“Proceed.”

“You hold me a little longer...”

CHAPTER TWENTY

ZIRKOV

Zirkov's eyes sprang open the moment his blanket lifted off him and a cool hand touched his ribs.

"You sleep naked," Maggie said, sounding amused as she settled beside him on the floor of his living room.

"Which is why you risk much sneaking into my bed. I may not be able to resist you, even if I wanted to."

"Hmm, warning noted. And I didn't sneak into your bed. I left your bed in the bedroom." She tapped a nail against the hardwood. "This is a floor with two blankets and a pillow. *Not* a bed."

"Must you argue about everything?"

"I know you appreciate accuracy."

"I do, but your hand is on my chest. Find another resting place. Lower."

"I didn't come for sex."

"Then why are you here?"

"It's two a.m. and I've been staring at the clock for hours. I thought having company might help me sleep. You know, a little talk, a little... whatever... a change of pace to tire me out, if nothing more."

"A little whatever? Female, you are torturously vague at times. If you plan to keep me up, we should move to my bed and be more comfortable."

“Can you contain yourself, Z?”

He couldn't read her expression, beyond a need that hovered in her eyes. She flirted with him, and yet she seemed to be asking for something beyond sex.

“I'm not the one moving her hands down my chest.”

“Ah, yes, well, as a marshal... former marshal... I learned to explore my surroundings. And I can't see in the dark, so... feeling my way around is necessary. Or I could use my tongue. Commander's choice.”

“Commander now? You've elevated me.”

“Which part of you?”

He gripped her upper arm when her fingertips moved passed his abdomen. “This is not like you.”

“And yet you didn't stop me that night we slept together.”

He'd felt a connection to her that night, but it had been one-sided. She hadn't been fully aware.

He had to keep his hands off of her. If he could convince her to do the same to him, they could focus on finding Var'Len. “Tell me about the code in your diary.”

She shrugged. “It's something I made up a while ago.”

“Konnitch hasn't broken the code yet, and DAA is looking at the diary closely. Give me the cipher key.”

“I don't want anyone knowing what's in it.”

“I'm not asking for them.”

“I don't want *you* to know what I wrote, okay?” When he stared at her, she laid her head on his chest. “They're my private thoughts,” she whispered. “About you.”

“I'm sorry,” he whispered in her ear. “But I need to learn everything I can about what's going on before the DAA does, so I can find the slavers and anticipate the DAA's next move. I'm doing this to protect you.”

“Find another way.”

“You're making my job difficult.”

“I’m still nothing more than a job to you, aren’t I?”

He threaded his fingers through her hair. “No, you’re much more. What did you write about me?”

“You’re getting nosy.”

He touched the bridge of her nose.

“An expression, Z. Don’t worry about the diary, okay?”

“Why must you fight me on everything?”

“A diary is *private*.”

“You’re being unreasonable.”

“If you trust me at all, then trust that I’m telling you, objectively, as a marshal, there’s nothing in there of importance to this case.”

“You’re not objective.” He didn’t know what he could say that would make her believe him. When he stopped speaking, she lifted her head and rested her chin on his chest.

“Let’s face it, before that night, we barely spoke, except for work. You avoided me.”

“Language, culture, weather patterns, history, politics... I studied everything before coming here, Maggie. But no matter how much I studied life on Earth, I was unprepared for you.”

“Because I followed the rules?”

“Not your position as liaison officer. You, Magdalena.”

Her eyes widened. “I thought you resented me because of my oversight, or because I wouldn’t look the other way when you broke the rules and reported you or your marshals.”

“I would never resent someone for doing her job. But you were a distraction. You still are.”

Her fingers moved back and forth across his abdominal muscles, awakening every cell in his body. Her scent, the feel of her against him, would soon overpower him, but he couldn’t give in to temptation. Not this time. If he touched her again, it could ruin the fragile peace they’d forged.

“When we slept together, did you think I’d suddenly changed my mind about you? Or that I was desperate for sex and you were the first one I could get my hands on?” she asked.

“I wasn’t thinking. That was the problem.”

“You weren’t objective.”

“No.”

“And yet you think you are now.”

“More than you.”

She sat up, holding a bedsheet around her naked torso. He didn’t have to fantasize about her body. He’d memorized every facet of her.

“I need to know more about that night, Z. I don’t remember much. Just flashes of being with you. Did I seduce you? Is that why we slept together?”

He’d broken every rule he’d made to keep his distance from her, because he’d wanted her, more than he’d ever wanted any female. “Yes.”

Maggie rose and turned, her short hair exposing the provocative curve of her neck as the back of the sheet dipped low, teasing the top of her ass.

Zirkov tied a sheet around his waist and stood up. He arched his neck slightly, trying to peer down the lovely backside he’d never forget.

The memory of driving into her from behind and running his tongue and his hands down her shapely back replayed in his head. That sheet wasn’t a barrier, but an enticement. Something to be ripped away to give him access to his female.

Krike. He shouldn’t think of her like that. No matter how much he wanted her, she could never be anything more than a pleasure mate to him.

As she turned, the sheet parted at the side, exposing one very shapely leg. When his eyes tracked to her upper thigh, he

noticed the fading bruises in the shape of fingerprints on her hip.

“I was rough with you. More than I should have been.”

Her eyes fell to where the sheet opened. “I was hoping those were from you and no one else.”

“You were with no another.”

“How do you know?”

He would have scented another male on her. And he would have hunted and beaten the male. Maybe killed him. Krike, why was he thinking like a sholan?

He remembered holding her thighs, keeping her still as he'd thrust into her. “Trust me. No one else touched you.”

She splayed her hand on his chest. “Thank you, Z. I'm glad I can rely on you. My memory is nothing but flashbacks right now. I don't even think they're in order. It's like someone's playing a slideshow in my head, but before they loaded the tray into the projector, they tossed the slides in a bag, then loaded them out of order, upside down, and with big black empty spaces between them.”

“I don't know what a slideshow is.”

She patted his chest. “It's an old way of showing pictures. Way before my time, but people here on Earth understand the reference usually.”

Gently, he gripped her arms, too aware of the bruises he'd left on her tender flesh. “I'd like to tell you to ignore those flashes, but those memories may contain information we need.”

Tears pooled in her eyes as she nodded.

“Magdalena, what we did...” How could he tell her what it meant to him without making her feel worse? “I will answer any questions you have. Perhaps that will make it easier to accept.”

“I'd rather pretend it didn't happen.”

Drekk. He hated the regret and the sorrow, in her voice. He'd do anything to undo the damage he'd caused. His instincts said to pull her to him, to comfort her, but that would likely complicate matters.

"I think you should know the evening was pleasurable. For both of us."

She swallowed hard. No verbal sparring, no playful look, no emotion at all. Seeing her so reserved gave him visions of killing the og'dals who did this to her.

"How do you know it was... pleasurable for me?"

"You reached your peak with me." With one finger, he nudged her chin up, keeping her from looking away. "Several times."

She chuckled. "I hate to tell you this, Z, but a woman can fake a lot."

She hadn't been faking. But her eyes hadn't sparkled then, not like now. He'd ignored so many red flags, all because he'd wanted her. This is why the gods took away his ability to find his sholani. He didn't deserve one.

"If I had known you hadn't come to me of your own will, I never would have touched you."

"None of this was your doing. And I'm not upset about the bruises. But every time I look at you now, this wave of embarrassment floods me. I've worked so hard to gain your respect and now you'll only see me as weak."

"I see a strong female who despite being used by slavers and fired by a government who never appreciated her is determined to keep her world safe. The og'dals didn't break you, not in the least. I'm proud to be your—" The word *sholan* almost escaped his lips.

"Your what? Friend? What are we to one another?"

Not Friends. He wanted much more with her. But how? Years ago, he'd accepted the fact that he would never have a sholani.

“Krike, what happened between us felt so drekking real, Magdalena.”

Her fingertips traced his jaw, stirring more than his cocks. His eyes immediately focused on her lips. The need to kiss her, to explore her mouth again as well as her entire body, exploded within him.

He gripped her wrist, harder than he intended. “Friends do not tempt one another.”

“I think we’re more than friends. Or maybe we aren’t. I don’t know what we are and that’s part of the problem. If we were a couple who broke up, I’d avoid you or exchange minimal pleasantries when we crossed paths. This is something totally different.

“I lied to you earlier. It’s not embarrassment that’s overwhelming me, but a compulsion to touch you, to *taste* you. You’re all I can think about. You’re like a drug my body cannot forget. And I don’t know if that’s me and my true feelings or if I’ve been conditioned by the og’dals to want you.”

“We start again as if we were newly introduced.”

“Do you think you can ignore what happened with me?”

“The female I made love to doesn’t exist. I will train myself to forget that night and the months that led to it.”

Her frown deepened. “Months? Are you sure? I recall so much of our past before that night. The good and the bad. We’ve had our rough patches working together, but we never distrusted one another. What if what I’m feeling, even a part of it, is real?”

He ran a hand through her hair. “How can I help you accept what’s happened?”

“I don’t know. I thought I could put it behind me, forget it, like other parts of my past, but the memories that are returning are so vivid. I enjoyed myself with you, very much, I know that now. But the og’dals are the reason I slept with you and that infuriates me. I’m having trouble separating my hatred for them from my feelings for you.”

She needed time to heal and rediscover who she was, including how she felt about him.

Zirkov rubbed the scruff on his face, debating if he should assign Konnitch to guard her so he could keep his distance while she... healed. She could forget about this so-called desire for him.

And give him the chance to do the same.

The longer he stood here with her alluring scent invading his lungs and remembering what lay beneath that sheet she'd wrapped around herself, the more he would lose his objectivity. Even now, he remembered her soft body writhing beneath him, matching his rhythm and bringing him to his peak.

"You said I was your sholani, and then you said you misspoke. What made you change your mind?"

That was not a question he expected. "We should both forget that night."

"You're avoiding the question. Please, Zirkov, I need answers."

As she advanced toward him, the sheet dipped lower in front, exposing the tops of those lovely breasts. What he wouldn't give for one last chance to drag his tongue across the perfect tips. That night, he'd sucked on each tip as she'd thrust her hands over his pleasure nodes, stroking and rubbing them. He'd lost himself in her delicate moans as she'd worked him into a frenzy. Then he'd driven into her like a wild animal.

"Stop, Maggie," he urged, struggling to keep his hands to himself.

His words stole some of the light in her eyes, but she kept her distance. "Skaggs said a zyanthan always knows when he finds his heartmate. Did that brain implant sabotage us?"

"There is no us." He tilted his head back, looking up at the plain white ceiling as he sought the words to make her understand... to make himself understand. "There never was and never can be an us, not permanently." Krike, this entire

situation was spiraling out of control. “A zyanthan male’s mating cock only rises for his heartmate.”

“I remember two cocks inside me,” she shot back. “Are we meant to be together, but you don’t want me because I’m broken?”

“Drekk, female,” he said as he gripped her face in his hands. He wanted nothing more than to kiss and show her how attracted he was to her, but she needed stability, not a warrior with a drekked-up past and uncertain future. “You are wounded but far from broken. You will heal, and be stronger than ever, but I am not your sholan.”

“Then why do I feel like I have a hole in my heart?”

“Because there’s a fire between us.” He ran his hand down her neck, wishing he could keep touching her.

Her eyes moved to the open bedroom door.

“Yes, I’d love to spend the night with you, but I won’t. We need to reset our relationship to where it was before.”

“You mean marshals lobbing friendly fire at each other?”

He’d never wanted that, but it had been the only way to ignore his attraction to her. He had considered a temporary pleasure mating with her, but she deserved more than a damaged male. And he wasn’t sure he’d be able to walk away from her if they mated again.

“We have no future together. Except perhaps as friends.” His heart sank the moment he said the words.

“You dip your left shoulder when you’re debating an action, your right hand rests on your blaster when you’re uneasy about a new person or situation, and while you’re proficient with a blaster and a knife, you prefer a blaster.”

He listened as she spouted off facts. “You know me quite well.”

She shook her head. “I know practically nothing about you outside of the job. You think we can go back to being whatever we were before. Friends, co-workers... I’m not even sure what we were. But friends share pieces of themselves.

You won't even tell me about the scars on your neck and chest. Face it, Z, we don't know much about one another. Perhaps if we did, then—"

"Then I would have seen that something was off with you much earlier and prevented you from losing your job."

"I lost more than my job. I lost who I am. Someone kidnapped and used me. I need to know where I fit in here on Earth. And with you."

"Marshal and witness. That's who we are. I'll find the answers and clear your name, so you can find another job. Private security would suit you."

She stepped up to him. "Stop being a marshal for one fucking second. Help me *understand*."

"There's nothing to understand beyond what we already know. The og'dals controlled you and I failed to see what was happening. After we capture Var'Len, we'll forget the incident."

"The incident..." She rubbed her temples. "You're still talking about the case as Commander of GI7. I want to understand how we fit together going forward. You and me, Z. The zyanthan male who doesn't trust the human female enough to share anything about his life. His personal life."

"My personal life will not help you."

She lifted her chin with a determined look in her eyes that was the Maggie he knew so well. Her spirit remained intact, even if she didn't see it.

"Let me in, you stubborn male. Tell me who you are. About the scars. About why you're no longer a warrior... everything. Give me something to hold on to. You keep saying you'll protect me, but I think you're the one who needs protection. That's why you won't let anyone in. You're protecting yourself in a way that cuts people out. If you really do trust me, then trust that I won't use your past against you."

"Why is my past so important to you?"

She shrugged. “Maybe I want to know you better. Maybe I’m hoping you had a good childhood and I can live in your memories for a while. Because quite frankly, my past sucked, and I feel like I’m falling, Z. I need something to hold on to. Someone to catch me.”

Her request cut deep, dredging up a past he’d rather forget, but for her, he would. Anything to give her what she needed. Anything to help her feel whole again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

MAGGIE

Zirkov's jaw tightened, and his horns remained pitched forward, a sign he was on edge. Over the past two years, he'd been arrogant, controlling, and frequently ignored DAA rules. And yet Maggie had always been drawn to him and knew she could trust him.

He motioned for her to sit on one of the plush chairs in his living room. She ran her hand along the velvety high back as she rounded the chair and sank into its thick cushions.

"This scar," he began, pointing to the long thin line that ran down the right side of his neck, "Is from a sword during training. My instructor taught me a lesson."

"He intentionally scarred you?"

"If I'd been paying attention while sparring, he never would have had the opening. That was the lesson."

"He should have pulled the strike," she said, horrified but not completely surprised that zyanthan warriors didn't use blunted weapons in practice.

"He did, which is why I have a scar and my life. But it was worth the lesson. I never let my guard down again. Until you."

She could read between the lines. He had trusted her, but never would again.

Then he flashed her a smile she hadn't seen before. Devilish. Not a look she associated with Zirkov, despite his massive horns. Her heart sped up.

“You should smile more. It suits you.”

“It is not in my nature.” The smile disappeared.

“Maybe you need a reason to smile.” She waggled her brows, then glanced up at his horns. Sure enough, the tops twisted.

Silver eyes darkened, stirring her lower region. “Do you wish to end up in bed again?”

Yes! her body screamed, then she reined in her desire. If she slept with him again, it would be because she truly wanted it. The doctors assured her there would be no lingering effects from the implant, but they’d never encountered the device before. She wanted to luxuriate and remember every dirty and wonderful detail of sleeping with Zirkov, not question the reason behind it.

“I want my memories back, Z. I feel robbed. I *was* robbed. Good or bad, those memories belong to me, and I’m incomplete without them.”

He leaned forward and kissed her forehead. “The memories will return. Give yourself time to heal. Now, is there anything else concerning you?”

Those silver eyes of his held a confidence she hoped to regain. Maybe she just had to trust in him for a while.

“I’ll be fine if I start thinking in terms of what I can control, not what I can’t.”

His eyes narrowed. “Why do I suspect you are planning something I would not approve of?”

She patted his chest. “I don’t have any plans yet. I’ll let you know when I do. Until then, tell me about those missing tattoos. I want to know how a guy can become the commander of GI7 after getting kicked out of warrior training.”

“I completed my training. Or I would never have received my tattoos.”

“I didn’t realize. It sucks to have your dreams die, doesn’t it? Even worse, to have something you love taken from you.”

He cupped her cheek. “If I could undo what the og’dals did to you, I would.”

She stepped away, breaking contact with his hand. “No way. You’re not turning this around. We’re talking about you now, not me. The tattoos. Spill.”

He cocked his head.

“Please, Zirkov. I need to focus on something else for a while. Okay?”

“Understood.” He pointed to a holovid that protruded from the wall. She had walked around it earlier, inspecting the five zyanthan males in the image from all angles. All wore dark black short-cropped sleeveless tops that hugged their chests. A wide black fabric, a band of sorts, covered their abdomens, and they all wore loose-fitting pants, some beige, others gray. The four broad-shouldered, thick-chested males could almost pass for quadruplets, but their horns varied in lengths and thicknesses. It was the fifth male that stood out, by how much thinner he was, though he had a few inches on the other males both in height and length of his horns. Between his build and the smile in the holovid, she almost didn’t recognize the lanky young male. Zirkov.

“You’re taller than your brothers. Are you the youngest?”

“I was seventeen there. Tazzov, my oldest brother, was twenty-seven when my brother recorded this. Aragez, Keiz, and Vadiron were twenty-one, twenty-three, and twenty-five.”

“Every two years, except for you. Your mom took a break after four kids, huh?”

“Peli was born before me, but she died a week after she turned six. I was only four, too young to remember her. Nor do I have any holovids of her. My mother could not bear to see any reminders of Peli, so our father packed them away.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss. I can’t imagine what any of you went through, though having other siblings to support you probably helped.”

“My brothers and I have always been close. They left their families and off-world assignments to return home to convince

me not to go to warrior training.”

“But you said they are all warriors.”

He tapped on his image in the vid, interrupting the signal until it grew fuzzy and disappeared. “My father, uncles, grandfathers, great grandfathers... Every male in my family is a warrior. When I came of age to enter formal training, I’d already mastered many of the skills required to be a warrior. But I did not have the physical strength to compete against other males, and even the few females. The warriors’ council would have rejected me immediately, without considering my skills or intelligence. Tazzov advised me to enter engineering or medicine. I remember his words quite clearly. ‘Zyan will not be served by your death, little brother.’”

“He really said that?”

As Zirkov stared at the picture, his shoulders tightened. “None of my brothers believed I would survive as a warrior, but I never considered another path.”

Maggie reached out and gripped his hand. “If this is too hard, you can stop. I shouldn’t have pushed you. I know better. When people don’t want to talk about their past, it’s usually because there’s something traumatic they’d rather not remember.”

“I agreed to tell you,” he said with a rough voice as he stood straighter. “A friend offered me a drug developed on Tunzen. For seven months, I added the powder to my morning meal. My strength increased and the next year, I qualified for warrior training. I continued taking the drug to ensure my body remained strong during training.”

Maggie wrapped her hand around one of his biceps and gently squeezed. “All this is from drugs?”

“Not quite,” he chuckled. “The drug accelerated my natural growth, giving me the strength I needed to enter and train in Izoran within the year. I took the drug until my body achieved its full potential, but there was a side effect I didn’t know about until after warrior training. My mating cock rose for someone it should not have. A mated woman.

“I pursued her, thinking she’d entered into a pleasure mating with the male, and she’d dissolve the relationship once I confronted her and told her she was my sholani. She informed me I was mistaken. I did not believe her, but I would not force her to leave him. One does not control a sholani, but a warrior doesn’t give up either. I continued to follow her until the male confronted me. That’s when I learned the female carried his youngling. He was her sholan. I still didn’t believe it. I accused him of lying, but then the female spoke with me. When I saw the pity in her eyes, I knew she told the truth.

“I still remember the shock and the confusion in that moment. I did not understand what had happened, as my mating cock had risen for her. For days, I entertained the idea I had imagined it. Then it happened again. My mating cock rose for another female, one with a newborn youngling in the park.

“I consulted doctors and discovered the First Lead of medicine banned the drug on Zyan decades before because of the damage it did to several males. It caused a false rising of the mating cock.”

“How old were you when you experienced this, um, side effect?”

“Twenty-two. A zyanthan’s mating cock doesn’t rise for other women, Magdalena. Ever. Only for his sholani.”

“Not even, when you’re... ah... home alone and need a release?”

“That is what the pleasure cock is for. The mating cock is to conceive younglings. Only one’s sholani can cause it to rise. By her mere presence.”

“You and I... I mean... we had sex, Z. Using both of your cocks.”

“My mating cock rises often, for many females. That is the problem. I will never know which female is my sholani. I can eliminate the mated females, but the rest...” Zirkov shook his head. “The gods only give us one heartmate and a mating cock that signals when we’ve found her.”

“This side effect doesn’t have to be a bad thing, Z. Since your mating cock rises easily, you’re not limited. You could have any woman you want, similar to human men.”

“You don’t understand.” With the back of two fingers, he traced along her jaw. “My mating cock rose for you the day I met you, Magdalena, but that’s happened with many females over the years. It is not my soul reacting to yours, but to a drug I stopped taking over a decade ago. How am I to know which female is my sholani, if my mating cock rises for every female?”

His fingers brushed through her hair and down the back of her neck. “If I were to mate the female not destined to be my sholani and then I meet my true heartmate, what happens? I may not recognize her as my sholani, but what if I do? Do I leave the one I pledged myself to or ignore the one I was destined to be with? No, Magdalena, I am not fated to have a sholani. The gods are punishing me for breaking the most sacred rule for a zyanthan warrior. To have honor above all else.”

“Don’t talk like that. You have plenty of honor. More than anyone I know. There has to be something you can do. Maybe talk to the doctors on Tunzen, since the drug came from there.”

“There is nothing more to be done. Only accept. I am a content male. I have my work and my friends.”

He said he was content, but she saw the longing on his face. He wanted more out of life.

“I don’t walk away from the people I care about, Z. Granted, I’ll get dragged out of here by my heels when the DAA arrests me, but I’ll still be with you in spirit.”

“I will not let them take you.”

“You’re the Commander of GI7. You can’t stand in their way without risking your position. Don’t worry, Z. I don’t plan to go down without a fight.”

“You would make a fine warrior on Zyan.”

“Like you?”

He began to walk away, but she grabbed his upper arm. “Every zyanthan I’ve met says you were an excellent warrior. Did the Council of Warriors strip you of your title because of the drug?”

“When they learned of the drug, the council said I hadn’t earned my tattoos, that I’d cheated. I ignored them because they were wrong. I had earned my tattoos and my title. And the gods were already punishing me in their own way. Then I saw the disappointment on my father’s face. He didn’t say a word, but he didn’t need to. At that moment, I knew enduring the gods’ punishment wouldn’t restore my honor. The next day, the inker removed my tattoos, and I left Izoran.”

She cupped his face in his hands. “I’m sorry for your loss. My opinion may not count for much these days, but I think you’re full of honor, Z.”

“Thank you, Magdalena. It means a lot that you don’t hold my past against me.”

“Of course I wouldn’t! Is that what happened with your father? Did he disown you?” When Zirkov’s face didn’t ease, she added, “Never mind, don’t answer. I know what it’s like to have a parent who doesn’t like you.”

He removed her hand from his cheek and kissed the inside of her palm. “Your mother was a fool to not recognize the treasure she had in you.”

Treasure?

“My father did not disown me. As a warrior, he was offended by what I’d done and needed to come to terms with my actions. He realized he’d failed in his duty as a father. It has taken time to repair our relationship, but we have. In recent years, I’ve heard him boast about me.”

“Because you’re the Commander of GI7?”

“Because I did not give up. A warrior never gives up.”

“I’m starting to learn that.” Maggie leaned her head against his arm. “That’s a lot to go through. Illegal drug or not, you worked hard to become a warrior. But I’m glad everything worked out with your father. The right support from family

can make all the difference in a person's life. I see it with many of the women who return to Earth.”

“Life rarely goes as planned, but every experience provides an opportunity to make us stronger. After I lost my title, I enlisted in the military as a soldier, not a warrior. I've never known anything as boring, but I found honor there, so I could not complain.”

Zirkov never complained. That was one of many things that always impressed her about him.

“It doesn't sound like you were happy.”

“I found it difficult following the orders of third and second leads with insufficient knowledge of strategy, weapons, or even hand-to-hand combat. I prefer making my own rules.”

She'd noticed that about him, too. He tolerated working with the DAA, mostly because he needed their permission to remain on Earth. Earth offered a new haven for scientists and others fleeing the Coalition. People such as Dekar who'd been instrumental in the Coalition's downfall.

“I come from a powerful and wealthy family. Despite my father's displeasure with me, he introduced me to a councilman in Galactic Intelligence who said he would keep me and my history in mind. I left that meeting convinced he'd only met me as a favor to my father.

“When Galactic Intelligence saw the need to protect people who could weaken the Coalition, Galactic Intelligence created several specialized sectors, including GI7. They did not have a pool of warriors from which to choose since Zyan Defense Command assigns active warriors to various posts and positions. Galactic Intelligence sought candidates from retired warriors and males who failed to become warriors.”

“Even if they lost their warrior status through, say, committing a crime?”

“Each candidate was assessed based on skill and history. I was nothing more than a fourth lead in the military. The military could spare me and Galactic Intelligence needed me.

Their council appointed me Commander of GI7 and gave me free rein to choose my marshals.”

“It sounds like taking those drugs was part of a larger destiny. You’re excellent at what you do.”

“You speak of my taking the drug as a good thing because that indirectly led to my position with Galactic Intelligence.”

“I’m saying having a bunch of tattoos doesn’t add to your worth, as a commander or a person. Galactic Intelligence wouldn’t have given you command of GI7 if they didn’t believe in you.” She laid her hand on his chest. “Keep talking, Z. I want to hear everything.”

“It is admirable that you see the goodness in people, Magdalena, but you fail to see the consequences. As a result of my selfishness, I will never know who my sholani is.”

“Maybe you have to find her another way. Until then, let people get to know you. Like me, maybe?”

His eyes narrowed.

“I guess the concept is foreign to you, but humans rely on faith that we’ll meet the right person one day.”

“The idea of choosing a mate without knowing she is your heartmate is fraught with risk. If you bind yourself to the wrong person, you will grow apart, even come to hate one another.”

“Or you might fall deeply in love.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

ZIRKOV

Zirkov checked the time on his comm. Three a.m. He had a full day ahead of him. Hacking into the DAA and seeing what they planned to do about Maggie was at the top of his list. If they caught him, he risked his position as Commander of GI7 as well as Galactic Intelligence's accord with Earth. But he had to do everything he could to protect her.

With his hand on the small of her back, Zirkov led Maggie to his bedroom. "Sleep."

"One-word orders, Z? I can see none of what's happened between us has affected you."

"What do you mean?"

She dismissed him with a casual wave of her hand. "You're ordering me around like I'm a child."

His eyes dragged down her lovely form. That thin sheet hid little. She most definitely was not a youngling. Despite his words to her earlier, he'd never forget the night they shared. Every time he smelled flowers, or her hand brushed his arm in an innocent gesture, he'd remember her wet heat wrapped around him, nestling him as if he belonged there. He could never forget that feeling of being one with her, of finally finding where he was destined to be.

"I cannot give you orders. You are no longer a marshal."

“Technically, you couldn’t give me orders when I was. I didn’t serve under you. We were equals, even if you only saw me as just another woman.”

“Women are equals on Zyan. If I’d ever said anything disrespectful to a female on Zyan, my mother, father, and four brothers would have cuffed me upside my horns.”

The corners of her mouth lifted into a smile. “I guess I never fully understood you before. All the time we worked together, I thought you looked down on me.”

“On the DAA procedures and protocols you pushed on me, yes. On you, no.”

With a tentative smile, she wandered across the room, her hand gliding along the edge of the bed before raising her eyes to him. “You said every end is a beginning. What did you mean by that?”

Her question made his horns twist. She was still so lost, and he wasn’t sure how to help her find her way... or if she’d let him.

“It is what we are taught as warriors. When a warrior reaches the end of a path, he must find another. Perhaps the path is not clear. It may be hidden by dirt and leaves, obscured by bushes and trees, or a thick fog. But the path is always there. He must uncover it, even if that means turning over every leaf one by one, getting on his hands and knees to blow away the dirt, or tearing the bushes out by the roots. If he seeks, he will find. But if he waits for the path to show itself, more leaves will blow in, covering both the path and the warrior until one day he cannot see his hand before his face.”

“And then he dies?”

“A warrior never gives up, vasha. He may no longer have the ability to see, but that does not mean he can give up. He must confront his fears, especially the fear of failing. It begins with one step forward, even if he’s surrounded by a void so endless that it threatens to trap him forever. That’s when he must fight, harder than ever. That first step requires the most courage and faith in himself and the gods, but he forces

himself to take it. Then he takes another step. Then another, and another. Each step comes more easily, faster, and takes him farther than the last until he discovers—”

“That he’s found his path,” she guessed.

“That he’s *created* his path. Where no path exists, a warrior will create one. That is what it means to be a warrior. To never give up. And you, my female, are a warrior as strong of heart as any I’ve ever known.”

Her fingers glided over the mementos of home he’d hung on the bedroom wall before stopping on the throwing knife he’d had as a youngling. The one he’d trained with for hours and hours until it embedded in the target two inches deep. Then her eyes returned to him. For the first time since he’d seen her lying in the hospital bed, wondering if she’d wake, he saw a vulnerability in Maggie.

His fingers itched to touch her, to stroke her soft skin, but that wasn’t something partners or even friends did. Pleasure mates, yes, but he had no right to touch her, especially after what she’d been through.

“I feel like I’m a little girl again, causing trouble for everyone around me,” she said, struggling to get the words out as she walked past each of the items on the wall. “My mother... never wanted me. Everything I did angered her. It was during Coalition rule, and she lived in fear of everything. We were alone, just the two of us. Well, not alone, exactly. We lived in my grandparents’ house. Six bedrooms and a huge kitchen, and all of it in good shape. Far enough from the city that it didn’t get bombed or blown up during the invasion.

“My mom rented out the spare bedrooms to whoever had the money to pay. We cooked and cleaned and I did everything she said. I earned my keep in chores and hated everything about that house, especially waiting on the men who stayed there. I wanted more out of life. The only freedom I had was going to school, which was required by law. My teachers showed me a world of possibilities, Z. Futures that didn’t include being stuck in that horrible house. Then the Coalition

took over, destroying everything I dreamed about. I wanted to continue learning so badly. To escape.”

“The Coalition?” he asked.

“No, becoming my mother. Bitter, scared... hopeless. I knew the risk of defying the Coalition, but not learning seemed worse than getting caught. I snuck out of the house whenever I could and hid in the bushes beneath the windows of the local school, spying on the teachers and the boys inside. I learned math, science, history. I was limited by the classes taught on the first floor. After that, I traded food money for books.

“My mom beat me, said we couldn’t eat books, and that learning was wrong for girls. Not merely against the law, but wrong.” Maggie stared at the knife. “What if one of the boarders sees you reading a book, you rotten child?”

“Maggie...” Zirkov used every ounce of restraint not to pull her against his chest and hold her, to stroke her hair and reassure her she was safe.

“I’m fine, Z. I said I wanted to keep my memories, good or bad, right? I don’t think I’ll ever forget that look on my mother’s face as she pointed her kitchen knife at me. I never asked her what she was thinking, but I know. Deep down, I’ve always known.”

“What?” he asked, dreading the answer.

“That I wasn’t worth the risk of keeping around. Everything I did put her in danger. I had no value to anyone, including her.”

Tear-clouded eyes found him. “My mother was wrong about me. I had value, even if she and the Coalition constantly said otherwise.”

The need to comfort Maggie finally won out as Zirkov pulled her into his arms. “You have value. Everyone does. Is this why you became a marshal? To prove yourself to your mother?”

“No. Learning the skills required by law enforcement guaranteed she’d never hurt me again. That no one would.”

Zirkov had never understood Maggie until this moment. Those under Coalition rule always suffered, but the females usually the most. Maggie hadn't been sold off to be a sexual slave, but she'd been assaulted, emotionally, maybe even physically, by her mother and the males they took in. That would make trusting anyone difficult. But he was determined to earn her trust, which meant not touching her or doing anything to make her question his motives.

“No one will hurt you.”

“You can't guarantee that.”

“Yes, I can. I will not let any harm come to you. You have my word.”



MAGGIE

ZIRKOV CLASSIFIED their relationship as friends. That cut as deeply as the surgeon's knife that removed the og'dal implant. But she hadn't given up on him. He believed in her... had for a long time.

But friends might be how they ended up. Nothing more.

Despite Zirkov's grand and well-intentioned promise, reality would separate them once they located Var'Len. He'd continue as commander of GI7, flitting between planets to protect witnesses, and she wouldn't be a part of his life anymore.

She'd find a job, maybe start her own security firm because not many males would hire a woman, especially with the taint of being an og'dal mole. No one would trust her with anything important, let alone their lives.

“I don't like the path opening up for me, Z.”

He tipped her chin up. “Perhaps you weren't listening to me, vasha. A warrior makes his own path when necessary. This is what you will do when you are ready.”

“You’re still speaking as a warrior. When will you admit you *are* a warrior?”

He said nothing as he walked past her, pulled back the covers, and motioned for her to lie down. “Sleep, Magdalena. We can continue this conversation in the morning if we must.”

Zirkov wouldn’t give up on proving her innocence. His reputation had to be on the line with the DAA and Galactic Intelligence. Exonerating her meant maintaining his good name, his job, and his status.

She’d been a fool to think he was helping because of deeper feelings for her. He’d said it quite plainly. She couldn’t be his heartmate, not that she believed in such things for humans. Still, the idea of someone loving her so completely, as she’d seen the love between the other marshals and their mates, pulled at her.

“Will you tell me about the code in your diary?”

She faked a yawn. “I think you’re right. We should table this discussion until the morning.”

As she turned away from him, his hand wrapped around her upper arm. “No more games. You will trust me.”

Normally, she’d punch a guy for grabbing her like that, but she longed for his touch, even one born from impatience. Zirkov fought with everything he had to help those under his protection and she’d become the most recent in a long line of innocents who needed his help.

“I’ve been having blackouts for months,” she began, not sure how much to tell him, only that it was time to trust him. “I’d wake up in strange places, fully dressed, my gun in its holster, sometimes in my hand. I never knew how I got there or why I was there.”

Silver eyes focused on her with such intensity she hesitated. Then his thumb stroked her arm, absent-mindedly, lovingly, where he still held her. She had to tell him everything.

“At first, I thought I was sleepwalking, but that’s rare. I checked the surveillance footage around my apartment and the

places I'd woken up."

He quirked a brow.

"Yes, I investigated my own movements."

"You suspected you were under another's control?"

"That never occurred to me, but I knew something wasn't right. Especially when I didn't see myself on any surveillance. I know where the cameras are and how to avoid them, but I don't believe that's knowledge a sleepwalker would access or use. Something more was happening to me."

"You should have told me. Or Konnitch, Ri'Nom, or even those in the DAA, if you did not trust me."

"I trusted you," she said without hesitation. "I still do."

"Then why didn't you ask for help? We are stronger together. That is the warrior motto, one I live by, even though I am no longer a warrior. You, Magdalena, must learn to work as part of a team."

"I've been on many ops. With both DAA agents and GI7 marshals."

"But have you ever asked them for help when you needed it?"

"No."

"Perhaps that is the problem you need to focus on while I find Var'Len."

"I'm not stepping away from this mission, Z. I can't. Because if I do, I'll be the one to pay the price. More than losing my job."

"Being a part of a team means individuals each have a function. They work as one, with no one person or role less important than the others. For you, currently, that means resting until you have recovered. Then you will rejoin the fight. Until then, I will find Var'Len. Can you trust me to do that?"

"I trust you. Can you say the same about me?"

“Yes.”

She watched his horns closely. No movement. He trusted her... huh. That surprised—and worried—her.

“Maybe you shouldn’t,” she said. “I still feel... off. I know that sounds crazy, but—”

“You are no different from a soldier who’s been through a battle. Healing takes time.” The pad of his thumb wiped a tear that escaped her. “If you cannot trust yourself, then rely on me. I will not fail you, sho— Maggie.”

Her eyes snapped to his at the slip. “What were you about to say?”

His jaw tightened. “Nothing.”

“Liar. You were going to call me sholani.”

“English is not my native language. I make mistakes.”

No, Zirkov, I’m not letting you off the hook that easily.

There was only one way to break through that stoic wall he’d built between them and discover the truth. Maggie tipped up on her toes and pressed her lips to his...

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

MAGGIE

Zirkov's tongue sent a fire through Maggie that she hadn't expected, not from a kiss. His fingers wove through her hair, drawing her deeper into his spell.

She had kissed him to prove a point. Now she couldn't pull away.

Not that she wanted to.

Her hand trailed down hard chest muscles over the spectacular six-pack. When she reached the hardness tenting the sheet hanging low on his hips, she hesitated. "Are you sure about us, Z?"

"I want you. But I shouldn't take you."

"What if I'm offering?" she whispered as she kissed beneath his ear. "One night, so the few memories I have will no longer leave me wondering what it's like to be with you. I have this hunger inside of me, Z, and I don't see it going away anytime soon."

He gripped her face hard, silver eyes locking with hers. "I cannot promise I'll be gentle."

"Neither can I," the words slammed forth. She'd fuck him into oblivion if he let her.

Damn, he brought out her naughty side so easily.

Zirkov pushed her down onto the bed and tore the sheet away, exposing her. His eyes feasted on her incredibly slowly.

Her zyanthan warrior said nothing, but she didn't need words. Her nipples hardened and her lower region clenched and unclenched, eager for his touch, his possession. Her body remembered him, even though she did not.

On her knees, Maggie inched to the edge of the bed where Zirkov stood. Her eyes never left his face as she unknotted the sheet around his hips. The fabric floated to the floor, revealing two hard cocks, one stacked a few inches above the other, jutting out from between massive thighs. Powerful thighs that she remembered moving beneath her hands as the male thrust for hours without tiring.

The thought of being with him again sent delicious shivers through her. "I want it all, Zirkov. No holding back."

His eyes darkened. "You will take both cocks inside you, as before."

Two. She still had to get used to the idea, though it intrigued her. And she'd try anything, as long as it was with him.

"Do you alternate between them, to have time to recover, or do you use them together?"

"Together. Both holes, the way nature intended."

"Um, maybe nature built zyanthan females differently?"

"They have horns."

That wasn't what she'd meant.

"I've only been in a relationship with one man at a time. No opportunities for, um, double."

"There will only be one male. Me. And you already took both my cocks at the same time." His hand curved over her ass and then slid to her pussy. "Both cocks together, Magdalena."

The fire in his eyes confirmed what he'd said earlier, that he wouldn't be gentle. But that didn't scare her. Nothing about him did, except losing him. This attraction to him felt so real, not something the og'dals had fabricated with that damn implant. She knew that now, from how her stomach fluttered

and every cell in her body vibrated with anticipation and the need to be touched, held... loved by this gorgeous male.

Beautifully large biceps flexed as he wrapped one massive hand along his upper cock and pumped. Her mouth watered as a bead of liquid formed at the tip.

When she placed her hand over his, her soul sang with a connection that snapped into place.

Mine!

His hand stopped moving, though those alluring silver eyes looked at her as if she was the only woman in the universe. She wanted to be the only one for him, even if she wasn't his sholani.

With her other hand, she gripped his lower cock, the one with black nodes along the top. "Care for some help?"

His hand fell away. "Show me, Magdalena."

"How humans make love?"

"Show me who you are."

A challenge, or a dare? She wasn't sure when it came to Zirkov, only that he'd given her free rein to proceed as she wanted, something he rarely did.

As she circled one of the black nodes with her thumb, a clear substance coated her finger soothing her like hand cream applied to dry cracked skin. "It tingles."

"Frem relaxes the muscles here." One large hand gripped her ass and pulled her forward against his chest. His cock remained in her hand, trapped between their bodies.

She inched her hand up to the massive upper cock. "And this one? What does it do?"

A salacious grin crossed his face. "The mating cock is for intense fucking."

"Subtlety isn't your thing, is it?"

"I assure you, I will leave you breathless. You will beg for more."

That heat spread to her core, along with a sudden sense that this was really happening. After dreaming about him for so long, she'd finally be with him... and this time she'd remember.

He traced the length of her throat. "I'll fit here quite nicely."

"You speak as if we haven't—"

"I haven't fucked your mouth with my pleasure cock. Only with my mating cock. The frem relaxes the throat muscles, allowing a male to go quite deep."

It would be a first then, for both of them. The very thought of sharing a first sounded perfect. Except being together hadn't been his idea. She'd seduced him. For a second time.

"Are you sure you want this with me?" she asked.

His hand wrapped around her throat to the back of her head with a slight pressure, guiding her down toward his cocks. "Take me in your mouth. Make me yours, and then I will make you mine."

Mine. That word stirred her as much as touching his cock had moments ago.

She ran her hands along both cocks, before licking the tip of his mating cock. He tasted slightly salty, but sweet, reminding her of salt water taffy. Blue raspberry... her favorite! All hesitation melted away as she took him into her mouth, amazed by how perfect it felt, despite his width.

She pictured a blue popsicle as she wrapped her tongue around him, sliding on and off. A deep masculine moan filled her soul, but she didn't recognize it.

His hands sifted through her hair before he gripped her head and eased her mouth off him. "You stopped moving. What's wrong?"

She angled her mouth to take his lower cock, but he rotated his hips, denying her. With a single finger beneath her chin, he tipped her head up. "Talk to me."

"I want to remember being with you, Z, but it's blank."

“Drekk.” It was the only word Zirkov said as he yanked the sheet from the floor and wrapped it around his waist. “I knew this was too soon.”

“You were enjoying it.”

“But you’re not ready.”

“I’m fine. I’m not dizzy, winded, or—”

“Drekk, female, I’m not talking about your physical condition. Victims need time to understand and process trauma.”

She launched herself off the bed. “I’m not a victim. If you’d ask me how I felt, then you’d know that.”

“I’ve worked with a lot of victims. They often don’t recognize the impact of the trauma they endured.”

“Stop using that word. I’m. Not. A. Victim.”

His horns stood tall and his spine straightened to his full height. “Then what are you?”

“I’m a survivor who gets to decide who she sleeps with and when.” Maggie grabbed her clothing from the chair. “Yes, I’ve been through a lot, but I never considered myself a victim, not until you made me feel like one.”

She pushed past him into the living room, slamming the bedroom door shut behind her. “You can sleep in the bed. Alone,” she shouted through the thin door.

He saw her as a victim. Maybe she was, maybe she wasn’t, but what happened to her didn’t define her. It was time she showed Zirkov exactly who she was.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

ZIRKOV

Zirkov's bedroom filled with pre-dawn light as he finished another set of push-ups. Muscles burned with each additional set, the pain of pushing himself a welcome distraction from the gorgeous female who worried and frustrated him.

He stared down at his comm, waiting for Konnitch to respond to any of the ten messages he'd left over the past two hours. The male had all night to hack into the DAA's servers. The keenta wasn't as adept with hacking as Ri'Nom, but still, he should have checked in by now.

Konnitch's face finally filled the screen. "It's the middle of the night, Zirkov."

"It's morning."

"Not even six a.m."

"Did you hack into their servers?"

A female's hand appeared on Konnitch's shoulder, pulling him away from the comm. The view shook for a moment before an industrial ceiling appeared on the screen. That was *not* Konnitch's apartment at the Keentan Embassy.

"I'm busy, Zirkov," Konnitch's voice strained, then a guttural moan filled the air.

"I need a report. Now."

“Will. Comm. You,” Konnitch’s words came out with the force of a male thrusting into a female.

Zirkov didn’t need to hear Konnitch and Kaci fucking. Especially when he had a beautiful female in the next room. One who occupied his thoughts and kept his cocks so drekking hard he’d been up most of the night seeking relief with his hands instead of her heat. The relief was temporary, insufficient, degrading. He needed his female.

“Claim. Your. Female,” Konnitch roared into the comm.

Zirkov’s eyes narrowed. “What is that swaying behind you?”

“Rope,” Kaci said between heavy breaths and a lofty giggle.

“Don’t worry,” Konnitch said, also breathless. “We’re not in public.”

“You’re in a gym.”

“Needed... rope.”

“Oh, God... Oh, God,” Kaci’s voice carried. “Right there. Yes, Yes, Yes!”

Zirkov thumped his finger down on the comm, ending the transmission. It had taken him three hours to calm his cocks after Maggie stormed out of his bedroom.

He shoved his face into the bedding, breathing in Maggie’s scent. He’d been a fool to let her entice him. A weak fool. He’d promised to help her, and instead, he’d caved to her allure the moment she touched him. She had a strength he lacked. One that had led her through many dangerous missions without stealing her smile.

Then Var’Len had used her, leaving her in danger, shaken, and lost. Zirkov punched his pillow over and over. He’d kill the male for what he did to his female.

His female?

“Drekk! She’s not my female!” he shouted at the ceiling in Zyanthan.

A male would put his sholani first, and he'd been putting his desires before Maggie's needs. That proved he wasn't her sholan, and he was a drekker for not turning her down the moment she touched him.

And yet she was all he could think about. Her soft touch. The way she teased him with a sly look that both challenged and promised so much.

Konnitch had the right of it. He should claim her. But he couldn't. Could he? She wasn't his sholani, but could they still be a couple?

Krike! He was doing it again. Letting his mind wander to a future that wasn't his destiny. He had a job to do. Protect his witness, a fellow marshal who'd been kidnapped and used. He had to find Var'Len. Zirkov's gut said the key was that diary and the unbreakable code.

He glanced at his comm again. Five forty-five a.m. She'd had four hours of sleep.

Zirkov pulled his pants on and headed into the living room. No more games, no more resisting and impeding his investigation. She would give him the answers he needed. Now.

"Magdalena, no excuses," he called out into the dark, intending to wake her. "Give me the key so I can decipher your diary."

No response.

He flicked the light on.

The living room, kitchen, and bathroom were empty. The linens had been neatly folded and placed on one of the chairs, with a note on top.

Thanks for the place to crash, Z, but I have work to do. It's time I fix this mess. I'm doing this alone so no one else gets hurt. Your work is too important. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine.

Yours,
Maggie

Zirkov raced outside. The cool air struck his bare chest, sending a shiver up his horns. Maggie was nowhere in sight and he had no idea where she went.

He never considered she'd hunt Var'Len on her own. Maggie had always followed the rules. The first rule, the most important one, stated an agent should always take backup.

The painful reality set in. She thought he doubted her loyalty. Krike! He should have explained himself better!

Zirkov sent a quick message to Konnitch. He needed everyone looking for her. If Var'Len found Maggie before he did...

Zirkov punched the door of his house, leaving a sizeable dent in the wood. He'd really drecked up. This time, it would cost more than his title and the respect of his fellow warriors, it would cost Maggie her life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

MAGGIE

As Maggie climbed the stairs to her apartment, she questioned if she should return for Zirkov. Entering a potentially dangerous situation without backup went against her training. On the other hand, her apartment would be empty.

She'd finally figured out what had been bothering her. Sure, someone had trashed her apartment. That could have been the DAA, robbers... anyone. But the vase on the counter had held one fresh yellow rose and six dead ones. There'd only been six in that vase before her life had blown up.

Bruce didn't have keys to her apartment. If he'd come by while the DAA was investigating, they would have barred him from entering. That meant Bruce dropped the rose off after the place had been trashed... or he was the one who trashed it.

She turned onto the third-floor landing, to head to his apartment, but something compelled her to keep climbing. The image of the steps, the sensation of going higher and higher, filled her every thought, pushing out the delicious ones she'd been having about the well-built, broody zyanthan she'd left back at the house. He'd be furious when he woke and found her note. He had every reason to be. She wasn't behaving like a marshal, but a witness who took unnecessary risks.

She needed answers, and she refused to put Zirkov in further danger. He didn't realize how many times she'd massaged the facts to cover for him and his team, or the

number of nights she'd stayed up late writing reports on his behalf, all to keep him compliant. Ignoring DAA procedures was one thing, but breaking into systems and doctoring evidence all to protect her? They'd catch him. Not only could the DAA expel him from Earth, but he could also lose command of GI7. Zirkov kept those witnesses safe and watched over his marshals. GI7 was too important to risk because of her.

Maggie passed the third and fourth floors and continued climbing until finally, she pushed against the crash bar on the door to the roof.

The door flung open, causing her to lose her balance and stumble forward. Before she could reach for her gun, a man slammed her against the rooftop air conditioner unit. Two hands clamped around her wrists, pinning her to the metal wall while two other arms ran down her torso, searching for weapons. He removed the Glock tucked in the back of her jeans.

Four hands.

"No other weapons," the og'dal announced as he released her. The blond-haired male then tucked his two lower arms inside his oversized leather coat, demonstrating how easily og'dals passed for humans and the reason the military could never find those who slipped through Earth's defenses.

"Tur'Hez, check the stairs to make sure no one followed her," another og'dal ten feet off to her right ordered. This male had dark hair, graying at the temples, and appeared ten years older than the guy who'd frisked her.

The younger male handed her Glock to the og'dal with the cold brown eyes. When the older male gripped her gun with a gloved hand, a memory stirred.

"Var'Len," the name fell from Maggie's lips.

"You remember me. That will make this conversation easier. I wasn't sure how much memory you'd retain after the humans removed the neurosphere."

Her stomach turned. This was the guy behind everything. “I don’t remember much, but I’m sure we’ve met.”

His lower set of arms swept wide. “On this very roof. Many times. You’ve been a good soldier, human.”

“What do you want from me and how did you know I’d be here? I didn’t get a message.”

His lower right hand withdrew a yellow rose from inside his coat.

“The roses... That’s how you got me to do your bidding?”

Var’Len brought the flower to his nose and inhaled. “A marvelous creation, one of very few on this horrid planet. The other are the females. On my first assignment here, I discovered how roses easily gain the attention of human females.”

“So you used them. And me.”

“The roses triggered you to come up here for your assignments. The neurosphere ensured you followed my orders.”

“Bruce. I’m going to kill him.”

“He is not your concern.”

“Killing me will only ensure your death. GI7 will hunt you down.”

“You misunderstand your purpose, my little soldier. I don’t wish to kill you. You’ve been an incredible asset. Come, Marshal Walsh. We have work to do.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“You haven’t even heard what the job is.” He snapped his fingers at Tur’Hez. “My human needs a weapon.”

“Sounds good to me,” Maggie said. “Return my Glock.”

“And there’s that sense of humor I’ve enjoyed in our meetings.” His grin disappeared, replaced with a cold, hard expression as Tur’Hez strode toward her with a long thin metal device four inches long. One end held a glass bulb with

a dark red worm-like creature slithering around in a pale green solution. She didn't know what the hell it was, only that she couldn't let it near her.

“Ah, so you remember Sartog's Sin? It's been a while since you've had any,” Var'Len said.

Both males had weapons and there were only two ways off this roof. The stairs, which Var'Len blocked. And the sides of the building.

“You no longer control me, Var'Len.”

“This is true, but I can make all the evidence against you disappear. One last job, human, and then you can be free of me.”

“Whatever you have planned, GI7 will stop you. Like every time you used me to leak information. You didn't kidnap or kill a single witness.”

“Those were distractions we created to keep GI7 busy.”

“Who's we?”

“Bu'Tay and Pe'Dez, among a few others. I assume you remember them.”

“The og'dals I killed.”

Var'Len laughed. “You think too highly of your skills. I couldn't chance you'd fail to eliminate them so I killed them. You only took the blame.”

She'd been convinced she'd killed them in cold blood.

“I came to this wretched planet to dispose of a few associates who've been careless in their acquisitions.”

All at once, the pieces clicked into place. “You've been slipping through the defense shield and kidnapping women!”

He slowly clapped both sets of hands, patronizing her. “You're brighter than most of the females we take. Yes, we've been returning to Earth for inventory. When the Coalition left Earth, it choked our supply line.”

“How have you been getting in?”

He smirked. “I won’t give away all my secrets, even to my faithful little soldier.”

She hated how he spoke down to her, but she had to rein in her anger and keep him talking. “Why kill the people who work for you?”

“I’m being paid incredibly well by a consortium of interested parties to ensure the owners of select ships are dealt with before Galactic Intelligence catches them. These owners have been lax in their operations and that endangers all of us. Bu’Tay, Pe’Dez, and others needed to be dealt with, to protect our identities, our clients, and the locations of our routes and markets.”

“How many og’dals are involved?”

“That, you don’t need to know.” He motioned the other og’dal closer. “This is Tur’Hez. He’s been on Earth for nearly two years, coordinating the kidnappings and export of several dozen women, including you. Once we discovered your position in Earth Intelligence and placed the neurosphere in your head, Tur’Hez served as your handler, giving you orders.”

In a gloved hand, Var’Len raised her gun and pointed the weapon at Tur’Hez.

“No!” Maggie shouted, too late as Var’Len fired.

The bullet struck Tur’Hez between his eyes. The og’dal fell straight back, the strange worm tube still in his hand and a shocked expression on his face.

Maggie’s hand went to her side, reaching for the gun that wasn’t there. Her brain raced through all the scenarios for escape. Each ended with her death. Her eyes returned to Var’Len, waiting for an opening.

“Ah, what a shame,” Var’Len said as he callously motioned toward the body. “It appears you’ve killed another og’dal slaver. This time on the roof of your apartment building.”

“GI7 will figure it out.”

Cold dark eyes met hers. “There’s no room for errors in my field. Now they’ll have proof that you killed him and assume you killed the others. You’ll either cooperate with me, or you’ll be arrested for murder and treason.”

“Why kill your partner?”

“Dear human, you don’t understand og’dal businessmen. I liked Tur’Hez, but he allowed your people to remove the neurosphere from your brain.” Var’Len picked up the worm tube and held it up high to peer inside. “I’ll have to finish his task for him. Now, human, let me tell you about your assignment...”



ZIRKOV

“THE MALE IS DEAD,” Konnitch reported as he left the apartment across from Maggie’s. “Broken neck and no evidence who did it. DAA, Brotherhood, a random robbery gone bad. Could have been anyone.”

Zirkov hated what he was going to ask, but he had to know. “Could Maggie—”

“Doubtful. It takes a lot of power to snap the neck of a male that large. And he’s taller than her. Though she’s a trained marshal, so it’s possible.”

“It’s not Maggie. Forget I asked.”

“You had to. Any marshal would. The DAA will as well. Before you commed me to meet you here, I skimmed the latest evidence they have on her. Besides the footage of her meeting the murdered og’dals, her ID was used to access information on cases not assigned to her. Cases where men of the Brotherhood escaped capture due to leaked information. She looks guilty.”

“We have the neurosphere.”

“Not any longer. There’s no trace of it in the DAA files or their lab. The device, the doctor’s reports, the evidence log

sheet... all of it, gone. That's why I was late meeting you."

Zirkov's horns shot straight up. "Krike!"

"That's a strong reaction coming from a male who's not her sholan." The corner of Konnitch's mouth kicked up.

"Drekk you. Why are you pushing me to be with Maggie?"

"Because you're not thinking or seeing straight when it comes to her. I recognize the signs. Kaci and I resisted for a long time."

"Drop it, Konnitch. I'm not Maggie's sholan. And she's the one not thinking straight. She's trying to prove herself to me, us... drekk, maybe herself."

Konnitch checked his comm and then pointed up. "She's still here. One of the floors above us."

The sound of a gunshot sent Zirkov running to the stairs, with Konnitch not far behind him. When Zirkov reached the top step, he inched the door to the roof open.

His heart nearly stopped when he saw a body by the HVAC unit, dark blood pooling around short blonde hair.

"Zirkov," Konnitch yelled out from the other side of the HVAC unit. "She's over here."

Zirkov rolled the body over. Male, four arms. Og'dal, with a bullet to the head. Relief swept through him. After checking for a pulse to confirm the og'dal no longer posed a threat, he joined Konnitch. Maggie sat against the HVAC, her forehead bruised and bloody, but otherwise fine.

"Hi, Z," she said with a genuine, though pained smile. "What took you so long to find me?" Her eyes scrunched together. "Scratch that. *How* did you find me?"

"It's a long story." He couldn't manage more than a few words without yelling at her for coming here without backup. He still hadn't calmed down from seeing that body and thinking she was dead.

"Not a long story at all," Konnitch said as he examined her wound. "I put a tracker in your right boot before you left the

hospital. On Zirkov's orders."

Maggie didn't get upset with Konnitch's revelation. She barely blinked. Zirkov knelt beside her and pushed the blonde bangs off her forehead. She winced as he touched the fresh scrape. "You're injured."

"You're so observant, Sherlock."

"It's Zirkov. Similar cadence, but a different name. We should find a doctor to check you for a concussion."

"It was a joke," she said, straining to smile. "And I'm not mad that you put a tracker in my boot."

"That convinces me to take you to the hospital."

"I'm too tired to be mad, okay? Where's the og'dal?"

"Dead."

She lifted her hand and stared at the gun in her hand. The faint smell of gunpowder lingered. "I shot him?"

"Yes. Unless there was someone else up here."

With her empty hand, she reached to the scrape on her head and then held her hands out to examine them. No scrapes or bruises indicating a fight.

"Just the og'dal and me."

"If the DAA questions you, you tell them it was self-defense. You have an injury, he doesn't."

She rotated her gun, inspecting it from all sides. "I don't remember firing."

"One shot. To his head. Did he follow you up here?"

Her hand went to her head again. "Someone slammed me into a wall when I opened the door to the roof. I guess he was already here." Her answers came slowly as if she was struggling to form the words.

"Why were you up here, Maggie?" Konnitch asked as Zirkov helped her to her feet.

She looked up at Konnitch, then him. "I don't know..."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

MAGGIE

“**S**top insisting I go to the hospital.” Maggie pushed out in front of both males who had sandwiched her between them as they walked down the street. Horns raised, and hands on their blasters, her self-appointed alien bodyguards scowled at every human in sight, prompting most to jump out of their way.

Ever since they left her apartment building, Zirkov placed himself between her and any perceived danger. She kept her distance, as much as he allowed, even though she wanted to sink against him and feel his hard body against hers.

He increased his stride, easily catching up to her. “Let me walk with you. You have a head wound.”

“I don’t have amnesia, I don’t have a concussion, and I don’t need your help, so back off.” She stepped into the empty street, to get some breathing space. Zirkov’s presence distracted her. She had trouble taking her eyes off him and thinking about that kiss yesterday would consume her thoughts if she didn’t focus.

She wanted to remember her conversation with the dead og’dal on the roof. She had talked to him, but the details evaded her. And once they’d finished talking... There was another gap in her memory.

Zirkov jogged ahead of her until she once again stood between the two marshals.

“Overprotective, Z? This is my neighborhood. I know the people who live here.”

“You think you know them.”

She tried to edge her way past Zirkov, but he sidestepped, blocking her. “Trust no one.”

“Not even you?”

“Do you talk this much when you’re protecting a witness?”

“I’m not a witness.”

“You’re in protective custody. Mine.”

“Which is unnecessary.”

“You can’t remember why you were on the roof or why you shot the og’dal. Or do you shoot all og’dals on sight?”

“You’re an ass.”

“I’ve been told this before.”

“By who?”

“You. At first, I thought it was an insult. I’ve heard humans use this term with people they don’t like. But I’ve caught you staring at my backside on numerous occasions.”

“I’ve *never* stared at your backside.”

Zirkov glanced back, a grin on his face. “You’re staring now.”

Fuck, she was. Maybe if he didn’t insist on walking in front of her, she wouldn’t stare at his rather shapely ass. She forced herself to watch her surroundings instead of Zirkov. Everyone was staring at her, the short woman walking single file between two huge aliens. So much for keeping a low profile.

The DAA would find out she was here. Then they’d discover the body and... And nothing. That answer popped into her head and it didn’t make any sense but she knew that’s what would happen.

“I think the DAA’s covering something up,” Maggie said.

Zirkov slammed to a halt so abruptly, she nearly ran into him. “Covering up what?”

“I’m not sure.” She rubbed her head, trying to get the buzzing to stop. “Maybe I should go to the hospital after all.”

“The DAA has access to footage there. I want to keep you hidden. If your condition worsens, I’ll find someone to take you to. Someone discreet.” Zirkov handed her gun to Konnitch. “Find a lab not associated with the DAA and run her weapon for DNA.”

Konnitch inhaled sharply. “The second I make the request, they’ll contact the DAA. I’ll have to get Kaci involved. They won’t question another human.”

“Fine, do that. And no more public sex!” Zirkov yelled as Konnitch turned down a side street.

“Public sex? I’m hanging out with the wrong alien.”

The way Zirkov spun toward her sent shivers down her back. “Easy. It was a joke. I don’t exactly get out much, and certainly not with married men. The last date I had was... I guess that was with you, if you can call that a date.”

He growled, then continued walking.

“Oh, so now you’re mad at me?” she said, chasing after him. “I’m sorry I left without you.”

“Your note said you didn’t want anyone else to get hurt. I’m not *anyone else*. I’m a trained warrior, the commander of GI7, and I’m responsible for you.”

“You’re not responsible for me.”

“The drekk I’m not. You’re my—”

“Your what? That’s twice you’ve stopped yourself. What am I to you, Zirkov? And don’t give me any bull about only being friends.”

“Do you care about me, Maggie?”

The question blindsided her. “Yes. Very much.”

“We don’t leave our people behind. You left me behind.”

“That saying is for when you leave someone in danger, Z. I left you in your own house, in your own damn bed, where you’d be safe.”

“You *left*.”

“Is that why your horns are all twisted up like a pretzel?”

He ran a hand along the top of one of his horns, where it had twisted. “Krike.”

“I screwed up, okay?”

“It’s not okay. You left without talking to me and without securing backup.”

“I’m a civilian, now, which means I don’t answer to anyone.”

“You’re so worried about proving yourself to everyone, you’re not seeing the danger you’re putting yourself in.”

“Not everyone. You!” The words spilled out before she could think through what she was saying, what she was admitting. She lowered her voice. “I want to prove myself to *you*.”

“I’ve already acknowledged your skills. But you still don’t listen to me.”

She no longer had the luxury of keeping Zirkov out of her fight. She’d gone off on her own and now another slaver was dead, an og’dal they needed alive. He was right; they had to stick together to solve this.

Maggie reached up and caressed the base of one horn. “I want to *matter* to you. As more than a colleague or friend.”

He gripped her wrists and drew them away from his horn. “You matter. Very much. It’s why I’m trying to keep you alive. Did you even think about the danger you were in?”

That hurt look on his face made her stomach flip. He really did care.

“I guess I wasn’t thinking clearly. I was still mad. I couldn’t sleep after our fight. And the image of the roses in the vase on my kitchen counter haunted me. Sort of like all those

memories of... of being with you. But I couldn't act on those, could I? You'd locked yourself away in your bedroom."

"You shouted at me to not come out."

"I know." She shrugged. "I thought you'd come out after a few minutes."

His eyes closed as her fingers ran over the bumps. "You are a confusing and difficult female, Magdalena."

"Keep calling me Magdalena and you'll find out how difficult I can be." She circled the bumps, faster than before, mesmerized by how quickly his face relaxed.

His eyes snapped open like he suddenly remembered they were standing in the middle of a street. After a cursory look around, checking for danger no doubt, he focused on her.

"I like the name Magdalena. It's smart, sophisticated, complicated... like you."

"Ooh, Z, you're being extra sweet today. Is this because I just killed an og'dal and you're dying to ask me questions but you think you have to butter me up first?"

He stopped. "You will tell me everything."

"You're very confident. Arrogantly so. Unless you have a way to make me talk." She ran her tongue over her lower lip, not sure what had gotten into her except she was tired of hiding her feelings for him.

"Even a warrior has limits, Magdalena. Do not push me further."

"But you're no longer a warrior, are you?"

With one hand, she circled the nodes at the base of a horn, trying to destroy his resolve.

"Do you want me to fuck you right here?"

"No public sex, Commander. One of your rules, not mine."

He pulled her through the open doorway of a bombed-out building that had no roof and only two walls, one facing the

street and an alley. She found herself pinned against the wall, his hand cushioning the back of her head.

“You are tempting me again, Magdalena.”

“No, I was flirting with you. This is tempting you.” Maggie slammed her mouth to his. Almost instantly, his tongue twined with hers, then slowly took over, dominating as his other hand trailed down her side and under her shirt...

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

ZIRKOV

Zirkov let his guard down around Maggie, and she kissed him after stimulating the pleasure nodes on his horns.

His warrior training demanded he pull away, as she was under his protection, but he couldn't stop touching her.

His horns slid back and away from her while his tongue danced with hers, determined to control her, to capture and make her his. Both cocks raged against his pants. Even as he slid his hand free from cushioning the back of her head, her hands moved to his pants, unlatching the buckle, pushing them down, and freeing him.

His hips pressed forward against hers, blocked by those cursed jeans humans loved so much. He needed to be inside her. Now. But undressing her...

With a mere flex of his wrists, the claws behind his knuckles extended. Carefully, he sliced down and across her jeans, leaving nothing but cuffs along the tops of her boots.

"What the fuck?" she said as she broke the kiss in time to see the shredded fabric landing beside her.

He cut her panties away next and dropped to his knees. When he plastered his mouth to her pussy, she moaned.

"That's... fuck, that's good. What are you doing, Z?"

"Making you come with my mouth, female."

He'd waited too long to taste her again, to run his mouth through her slick folds and drink her in.

“Oh my god, that’s good,” she said as she gripped his shoulders for balance.

It didn’t take him long to find her pleasure nub and draw it into his mouth. Once his claws receded, he parted her ass. Her hands moved to the base of his horns and she dug her fingers in, pressing on the pleasure nodes while thrusting her pussy against his face.

No more words filled the open air. Only the distant squeal of a bus’s brakes and the lovely sound of his female moaning.

“Fuck me, Z. Please. I can’t take this any longer.”

He lifted his eyes to see his half-dressed female looking at him longingly. This was the Maggie he’d never seen that night. The one with more than lust in her eyes.

He could not take his mouth from her, not yet, not until he had her squirming and begging, like that night. He fucked her with two, then three fingers, creating a rhythm that soon had her rocking against his hand.

His cocks pulsed demanding to be inside her. Her core clamped down on his fingers and he nearly shot his seed into the rubble. She cried out, struggling to keep her voice down.

The sound of her reaching her climax overwhelmed him. He stood up and sliced through her blouse and bra with his claws, then lifted her until she wrapped her legs around his waist and her boots dug into his ass.

The frem worked quickly on her back hole, making his entry easy. When he slid his mating cock into her pussy, he lost all control and fucked her hard and fast.

“Yes!” she shouted. Passersby would hear, but there was no stopping him. The need to dominate, to claim and make her his drove him now.

“Oh, God, I’m gonna come again.”

“You will wait.”

“Can’t...”

Her walls squeezed his mating cock, throwing him into the most exquisite release he'd ever experienced in his life. His only regret was not marking her with his cum now that she was fully aware. For as much as he wanted to mark her again, the rubble of a war zone was no place to mark a female, but he would have if he could be sure she was his sholani...



MAGGIE

MAGGIE DIDN'T KNOW what had come over Zirkov, but he'd fucked her like he couldn't get enough of her. And he wasn't done.

With the sun high in the sky, they'd gone at it like wild animals in a corner of a collapsed building. Only one wall stood between them and people walking by. She'd heard the murmurs beyond the wall, the whispers, the shocked voices. People could hear them screwing. And she didn't fucking care.

Zirkov ripped what remained of her blouse and bra off and tied them to two pieces of rebar jutting out from the concrete above her. Then he placed her hands on the fabric and tied her to the bars. A moment of panic seized her, thinking he'd leave her like this, naked with her hands tied above her and the tips of her toes barely touching the ground.

One look at his face and she knew he was only getting started. Sex with him went beyond a quick fuck. He threw his heart into it like he did everything else.

Zirkov lifted her until she sat on his shoulders and buried his face in her pussy. Now she understood the reason for tying her hands to the bars, to give her something to hold on to and ensure she didn't slip.

"Take your pleasure," he ordered a second before he dragged his tongue through her folds. Oh, the glorious feel of his tongue, his lips, even the scruff along his jaw rubbing against her, bringing her to new heights. Her body begged for more.

The sun's rays warmed her bare back as she ground against his face. She swore she heard him moan, even though she wasn't touching either of his cocks. Her hands clenched the padded rebar and her back arched as another orgasm struck. His tongue never stopped moving inside her, intensifying the pleasure.

A moment later, claws extended from his knuckles and Zirkov shredded her restraints. Slowly, he slid her down his body, his tongue dragging along her skin until he captured her lips. She could lose herself in this male. Fuck, she already had.

When their lips parted, he set her down on her hands and knees and nudged her legs apart. One thick finger spread from against her back hole. "You don't know what you do to me, Magdalena."

Her heart raced when one cock settled against her pussy and the other dragged across her ass cheeks, as he prepared to enter her.

His hands moved up and down her back, warming her as he waited for her to relax. Her mind floated, not thinking, not caring, just enjoying and acting on instinct as she wiggled her ass. His hands settled on her cheeks, spreading her. Then he slammed both cocks into her, filling her front and back simultaneously.

His thrusts came shockingly fast and deep. The sensations built quickly, everywhere. It was all she could do to breathe, let alone speak. Her body clamped down on his cocks, holding him, milking him, taking what belonged to her.

Zirkov roared.

Nothing separated them, not even time or space. Maggie no longer felt alone in the universe.

Then he withdrew, slowly. Emptiness captured her and held her hostage until a warm liquid struck her back. His hand massaged it into her skin, over the knots of her spine to her hard nipples in front, then over her ribs, hips, and finally her ass. Her body relaxed, an innate sense of destiny and belonging settling in her soul.

A warm hand pressed firmly between her shoulder blades.
“Open for me.”

“What?”

“I’m not done.”

“What else is there?”

His tongue found her again, licking her, cleaning her... loving her. Everywhere but her back. He left his cum there.

Marked.

She’d heard of males who marked their mates, their sholanis. “Am I yours, Zirkov?” she whispered as he wrapped his shirt around her and lifted her in his arms.

“I don’t know how we could be together, Magdalena, but I will find a way...”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

ZIRKOV

Zirkov watched Maggie sleeping in his bed, looking so peaceful and perfect on his pillow, under his sheets.

He'd carried her five miles to his house, avoiding buses and any contact with other humans along the way. She hadn't said anything about how he'd taken her in a bombed-out building during the day with people passing by, but her cheeks darkened three shades as they'd left with only his shirt wrapped around her naked torso.

Minutes later, his exhausted female had fallen asleep in his arms. He'd make a terrible sholan. He hadn't been thinking about her when he'd taken her, or when he'd marked her. How would he explain everything he'd done if she asked? He'd marked her on instinct. His father had told him many times marking his heartmate would seal the bond between them.

Except there could be no bond with Maggie. A true bond only formed with a heartmate. The gods had already decided his destiny; he'd never have a heartmate.

Maggie's eyes fluttered open. "Why are you standing there?"

"My apologies. I was checking in on you and my focus wandered."

"Thinking of me?" she said, waggling her brows.

Always. "Thinking about home."

“Oh.” Her smile disappeared for a brief second before returning. “Anything interesting?”

Getting more involved in each other’s lives served no purpose. This was not a relationship they could continue. But he would not walk away from her.

“I’m heading out to meet Konnitch. Can I trust that you will remain here, where you’re safe?”

“What time is it?”

“Four p.m.”

“I slept the afternoon away. I guess great sex will do that to a person.” Her eyes raked down his body. “Okay, maybe to a human. You don’t look the least bit tired.”

“I’m not. I had a full night’s sleep. I carried you home yesterday afternoon. You’ve been sleeping ever since.”

A flash of confusion crossed her face before she lifted the sheet and realized she was naked. “Crap. I’m a mess.” Her head slammed back to the pillow. “I can’t believe my first time with you was in a pile of rubble, outdoors where everyone could hear. Quite romantic.”

He wrapped the top of the sheet around his fingers and drew it down her naked body. Yes, she was dirty, but that didn’t detract from her beauty. He’d take her again now, if she didn’t look so upset.

“Your first time with me was in your bed, your sofa, and your kitchen.”

She yanked the sheet up to cover herself. “I don’t think I’ll ever remember our firsts together. I have to accept that. You have to accept this can never happen again. ”

“I don’t understand.”

“I can’t keep doing this. I have feelings for you, but you’ve already told me you’ll never get involved with me. I need more than sex.”

“And you think I don’t?”

She scrunched her eyes. “I’m not sure what you need.”

I need you.

“You suffer from the side effects of a drug you took. It disrupts the normal way you’d find your mate, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t another way. You’re not one to give up, to be told he can’t do something. Your sholani is out there, Z. You can find her, even if you must use another method.”

“We only have one way of identifying our heartmate. The male’s mating cock rises for her. The gods built us this way so we would never question our destiny, so the bond with our mate will not break, not even in death. But I’ve lost this ability, this privilege. Destroyed it through my selfish needs. I will never know for sure who my sholani is. I will never be able to bond with a female in a way that leaves no doubt.”

“You’ve been conditioned by hundreds of years of culture and biology to think that’s the only way a zyanthan male can recognize his sholani. Humans don’t have a definitive biological indicator. We have to go with our instincts and chemistry. There is no guarantee, but we make it work. If we were to cave to the fear of being wrong, then we’d all live very lonely existences. Maybe you have to learn to trust your heart to find your sholani. I mean the term sholani stands for heartmate, doesn’t it?”

“It does but relying on one’s heart leaves too much room for error.”

“You don’t like risk, do you?”

“No.”

“Then maybe we aren’t destined to be together. Because I’m willing to take a chance on you. I only wish you’d look at who I am and how you feel about me and give that as much weight as some body part rising.”

“When a male’s mating cock tells him he’s found his sholani, there is no question. It’s why there is no divorce or unwanted younglings on my world.”

“Except the eeshone.”

“Yes, except the eeshone.”

“What does it say about a society that reveres a sholan and sholani, but rejects an eeshone born to them? If your gods destine that mating, then why aren’t their children considered sacred, even if the child’s skin, hair, eye, and horn colors do not match other zyanthans?”

“I cannot explain it. I have only known one eeshone. Havok. He fights for our people as hard as any other warrior. I do not see a difference, other than those you stated.”

“Maybe there is more than one way for a sholan to find a sholani. Maybe a mating cock that rises for more than one woman means he has more choices. Skaggs told me about one of his crewmates, Melikk, who mated a human, Lucy. They’ve had a child together, so clearly, their union is more than a pleasure mating. Melikk’s first sholani was pregnant with their youngling when she was killed in the war. Melikk’s had two sholanis. Do you believe that was a fluke, an oddity of nature, and that there is only one sholani for each sholan? That if one heartmate dies, the other will never know love?”

Maggie had many valid points, but how could he commit to her without being sure? Maggie stirred more than his cocks. She stirred his soul.

“I do not know this male you speak of, but if he found another sholani, it’s because the gods blessed him. Finding a second sholani in life only happens to worthy males.”

“And you don’t feel you’re worthy? For even one sholani?”

“I believe I’m worthy, but I don’t believe I’ll ever have the honor. I defied the gods, by taking a drug to change what they created. I destroyed what they gave me, and now I must live with the consequences.”

Still holding the sheet in front of her, Maggie walked on her knees to the edge of the bed, to look him straight in his eyes. “I may not remember our first time together, but I remember yesterday clearly. You had two very hard cocks inside me. Your mating cock did more than rise.”

“Maggie...”

“Ah, okay. I understand now. That’s not the first time you’ve used it with a woman, then. Nothing sets me apart from the others you’ve been with.”

He’d never used his mating cock before. The doctors had warned him not to even try for he’d fail spectacularly and word would spread of his impairment. Truthfully, he had never wanted to use his mating cock.... not until Maggie.

He now knew the doctors had been wrong. He could stay hard inside a female and release inside her. He could sire younglings, but would it be right to have them with a female who may not be his sholani?

He cupped her cheek. “Since my mating cock can perform for any female, I will never know who my sholani is. Being with the right woman, with the female the gods intend for me, is more important than anything.”

She bit her bottom lip and clutched the sheet tighter against her chest. Drekk, the words had not come out right. They’d sounded better in his head. He didn’t want to hurt her, but he’d done just that. That was part of the problem. No matter what he did, he risked hurting her.

“There has to be research on it. Or we can find someone to research it.”

He would never understand how the female who grew up during coalition rule could remain so positive, so determined, and certain that anything was possible. Zirkov smoothed back the blonde bangs that covered her expressive eyes.

“You need to forget about this, about me, and move on with your life. I must do the same.”

Maggie wrapped her arms around him and kissed him. Languidly, her tongue slid across his lips, giving him one last chance to taste her. When her lips left him, she didn’t pull away. Instead, Maggie leaned her forehead against his. If only she knew the significance of that simple act reserved for family.

“I don’t think I can forget,” she said, their foreheads still touching. “Nor do I want to. Everything else that’s happened

to me lately, yes, but not you.”

He hadn't pressed foreheads to another person since he'd visited two of his brothers four years ago. He'd almost forgotten the depth of emotion the ritual held, especially with one's...

No, she was not his sholani.

She lifted her head at last, leaving him breathless as she broke the connection. “I need to shower before we leave.”

“Certainly.”

She wiggled her way off the bed.

Did she say, ‘before *we* leave’? Drek, this female held a spell over him, making it easy to give in to whatever she said. He had to remember the danger of her situation.

“You're staying here, Magdalena.”

She halted halfway to the bathroom. “Don't pull rank on me again. You have no say over me, from a work or personal standpoint. You just admitted I mean nothing to you.”

His horns twisted at the bite of her words, stunned that she'd believe that. And yet he had to let her believe it. “I can still care about you as I would any other DAA agent. I'm charged with protecting GI7's allies as well as our witnesses.”

She stepped up to him, close enough to kiss, but the hard look on her face made him wonder if she would punch him. “Listen to me and what I'm about to say, *ally*. The second you walk out that door without me, I'll be on your tail.”

“I don't have a tail. You're thinking of Sinnadians.”

“You know what I mean.”

He did, but he was at a loss for how to get her to stay at his house, short of tying her up. He'd never leave her vulnerable like that. “I could have Stenikov guard you.”

“Do you want me to humiliate him by slipping out while he's guarding me?”

She'd do it. And then he'd have to discipline not only her for putting herself at risk—again—but Stenikov for failing to keep her here.

“I'm not a prisoner. And you said we're stronger together. Prove it, lover boy.”

He scrubbed his face. “This fondness for titles that do not belong to me must end. Call me Marshal, Commander, Zirkov, or even Kesk.”

With her hips swaying enticingly, she sauntered back to him. The sheet dipped at the side, making it exceedingly hard to keep his eyes on her face alone. She poked him in the chest with a single finger. Hard.

“You're trying to annoy me, female.”

“Is it working?”

Surprisingly, this time it wasn't. It made him want to throw her down on his bed and claim her all over again.

“You're the one who is always stressing protocols and citing how important they are. That I don't follow the rules. Should I quote some of the DAA's rules to you, Magdalena? You put yourself in danger when you left here by yourself and now you're threatening to do so again.”

“Every time we go out there, we're at risk. Any one of us could get killed. But I'm not one of your witnesses, Z. I have the training and experience. I'm an asset to you, and you know it.”

She was, but the idea of her getting hurt, or worse, scared the drekk out of him.

She put her palm on his chest. “I told you I'd follow your lead. Trust me, Z. Please.”

This wasn't about trust. It never had been. He couldn't imagine never seeing her again.

“You're not fully healed. Your memory is still faulty.”

“I remember everything since the doctors removed the neurosphere.”

“Except why you were on the roof.”

“There was a fresh rose in my apartment. That didn’t make sense to me. That’s what drew me back there. I went to speak with Bruce, my neighbor, but he wasn’t home.”

“Konritch and I found him in his apartment. Dead.”

Her face paled. “He didn’t answer when I knocked. I assumed he wasn’t there. How did you get in?”

“Shot the door lock. What did you suspect him of doing?”

“He gave me a yellow rose when the og’dals wanted to speak with me. It was a signal to go up to the roof. I didn’t figure that part out until I was in the stairwell and had a memory, a flash of climbing the stairs to the roof. I never expected to encounter an og’dal up there.”

She sank back onto the bed and touched the scrape at her temple. As he reached for her, she waved him off. “I’m just lightheaded from standing up too fast.”

“You should eat.” He darted into the kitchen and prepared a tray of all the foods he knew she liked. He’d had Stenikov deliver them yesterday while she was sleeping.

When he set the tray down on the nightstand in the bedroom, he noticed the sheet lying on the floor and heard the shower running.

“Maggie?”

No answer.

He barged into the bathroom, hoping she hadn’t tricked him, and left. To his relief, she was precisely where she said she’d be. Showering.

Frosted glass didn’t hide her figure as she threw her head back under the water. Long limbs and a toned body moved in a graceful dance as she washed.

“Hey, a little privacy! Unless you’re offering to soap up all those hard-to-reach places.”

If he got any closer, he wouldn’t be able to restrain himself. He turned his back to give her privacy.

“I’ve been thinking. You said earlier that you’d do anything to protect me. What if you can’t protect me without violating the law? I mean a crime that endangers the DAA or Galactic Intelligence.”

“I will do what I learned as a warrior.”

The water shut off. “And what is that?”

The shower door creaked open.

Don’t picture her naked. Wet. Water sluicing down her breasts. Don’t—

“Zirkov?” She stood in front of him, with a towel wrapped around her. “Maybe you’re the one who should stay behind and catch up on some sleep. I asked what you learned as a warrior.”

“To protect, at any cost.”

“But I’m not one of your witnesses. If you can’t see us as equals, then we have a bigger problem. Don’t we?”

“If we were mated, you would understand.”

“And I’d have an equal right and obligation to protect *you* at any cost, wouldn’t I?”

“Yes,” he conceded.

“Which means I’d have the right to walk away from you and tackle this case on my own if I thought that was the only way to protect you.”

His horns pitched forward before he gained control of them. “Using convoluted logic will not deter me.”

“What will?”

“Nothing.”

“Well, then I agree to your terms.”

“I didn’t give you any terms.”

“Then make some up, so I can agree to them.”

“What game are you playing, Magdalena? ”

“I told you once before, that I don’t play games.” With that, she turned her back to him and dropped the towel as she exited the bathroom.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

MAGGIE

Maggie had to think like Zirkov if she was going to get out of his house without him sticking Stenikov on her or doing anything else to impede her. She understood he was trying to protect her, but Zirkov needed to treat her as an equal, mate or not. He kept forgetting she was a marshal. *Was*. Fuck. He technically outranked her now, not that he used that against her. He could have, but he didn't.

Once she dressed in a pair of jeans and a yellow blouse she found in the clothing he'd brought from her apartment days ago, he motioned to the tray of food he'd set down on the nightstand. A tuna fish sandwich, a powdered sugar donut, and three dried apricots. He'd brought her favorite foods.

While she ate, Zirkov loaded up on throwing knives and talked with Stenikov in zyanthan over his comm. Maggie followed him with her eyes until he noticed and stopped talking. "Do you understand zyanthan?" he asked.

"Doesn't everyone?"

"You're teasing me."

"You make it easy."

A brow raised as he ended the call. "I was reprimanding Stenikov. I saw no need to embarrass the warrior by making the discussion public."

"I didn't ask what you were saying."

“Female, you have a way of asking and commenting without opening your mouth.”

“What I’m hearing you say is that you prefer me to use my mouth in place of any other part of me.” She ran her tongue along her lower lip and then stepped forward and patted his chest. “That could be a lot of fun.”

He growled, but she only laughed. Seeing any expression on his face always warmed her heart but hearing him growl and moan... those masculine sounds rooted themselves in her soul, quickly becoming part of her.

She squeezed his left biceps. “Don’t worry. I know how to keep it professional... when I want to.”

“You will defer to my lead?”

“I’ve never been opposed to following your lead. Just some of your tactics. The ones that break protocol, mainly. Rules exist for a reason.”

“I will be meeting someone from the DAA to discuss your situation.”

“Who?”

“Assistant Director Sutherland.”

Maggie dropped the rest of the donut she was polishing off. “Sutherland?”

“You don’t remember him?”

“Of course I do. I get called into his office often enough. Why my boss? He doesn’t exactly care for me. Or you. Last week he asked me to watch you. He thinks you’re the mole. Or rather he did. Before it turned out to be me. Ironic, right?”

Zirkov’s horns pitched forward. “I know Sutherland and I don’t get along, but what made him think I was involved?”

“I can’t recall.” Maggie pushed the tray aside, her appetite long gone. “Will my memory ever return to normal?”

“If you are patient.”

“That’s not my strong suit.”

“I know.” He added a grin, which instantly put her at ease. “I’m meeting Sutherland to discuss your situation. Which is why you should stay here.”

“I keep thinking we should sit down together, all of us, and go over the facts.”

“He doesn’t know I’ve been hiding you. If you come, then we lose that advantage. And he could arrest you.”

“Or both of us. Harboring a fugitive is one thing, though technically I haven’t been tried yet. At this point, I’m more concerned he might still want to blame this on you. You could be walking into the lion’s den?”

“I called the meeting, not him. And there will be no lions. Only humans.”

“Lions might be safer.” She exhaled a deep breath, thinking it through. “If you insist on meeting him, do it somewhere outside the DAA.”

“You suspect something?”

“I suspect everything and everyone at this point.”

“Wise.”

“Whatever you decide, Z, don’t meet him inside the DAA. Outside, he’ll bring twenty agents, most will hide out of sight, but you still have a chance to escape if things go south. It’s better than being trapped in an entire building of agents who will do whatever he says, including locking the building down to trap you inside.”

Silver eyes grew wide in a face that no longer looked so hard and unyielding to her. “You worry about me, vasha?”

“Of course I do!”

The corners of his mouth hitched up. “Your observations have merit. I’ll change the location.”

“Good. When do we leave?”

“I haven’t said yes to your request to attend.”

“You haven’t said no either. Which by default is a yes.”

“Your convoluted logic will get you in trouble one of these days.”

“Could I possibly be in more trouble than I already am?”

His horns twisted and untwisted before he forced them back. “You may come. Konnitch and Stenikov will watch for other DAA agents.”

“Try not to start a war with the DAA, not over me, okay? They’re good people. I don’t want anyone to get hurt.”

“This is no longer only about you passing information to Var’Len. Five weeks ago, GI5 spotted him on a trajectory to Earth. Last week, he was on Dal, and now he’s returned to Earth. I must find out what he’s doing, how he’s getting through Earth’s defenses, why he’s using you to kill other og’dals, and if there are any other moles on Earth.”

“You suspect others? Never mind. If I were a slaver with access to that neurosphere technology, I’d use it on more than one person.”

“The scientist said he only created the one device, but there are too many unanswered questions to trust the tekklan at this point.”

“A mole in the military could explain how the og’dals are getting through the shield.”

“Agreed,” Zirkov said. “Either there or someone who works at the shield generator. The DAA is my starting point. Konnitch searched the DAA’s servers and couldn’t find any trace of the neurosphere. Then he checked the evidence logs. Everything related to that implant is gone, including the hospital’s copies detailing your surgery.”

“Maybe I should go instead of you. My head’s already on the chopping block.”

Zirkov’s eyes narrowed. “You know more than you’re saying.”

“That’s just it. I don’t know anything. It’s a feeling. I want nothing more than to find Var’Len and to regain everything

I've lost, but I won't do it at your expense. What you do here on Earth is too important. *You're* important, Z."

He gripped her face in his hands. "It is because of you that I will gladly risk myself."

Maggie couldn't shake the impending sense of doom. "How about Konnitch? He can handle himself. He knows the players."

"Zyanthans can see when a human is lying. By very subtle changes in skin tone. Konnitch does not have this ability. And while Stenikov does, he's not familiar enough with the humans and operations here."

"So, you can tell when I'm lying?"

"Yes."

"Is that why you suspected I was the mole?"

"Your skin tone did not change as it would with someone who knowingly lies. That doesn't mean you spoke facts, only the truth as you saw it. You had no memories of your actions, but I noticed changes in your behavior."

"First your claws, and now this. What else don't I know about you?"

He ran a finger along her jaw. "There isn't much else to tell. I'm a simple male who knows what is worth fighting for. You."

"Tattoos or not, you're still a warrior, Z."

He kissed beneath her ear. "You make me feel like a warrior. And I don't mean only when I'm inside you."

She searched his face. "You're worried."

"Sutherland has what he needs to arrest you, Maggie. He's held off, and I'm not sure why." Zirkov drew a deep breath and then slowly released it. "Come with me, if you wish."

"I do," she said, suddenly struck by how she'd never say those words for anything other than working with him. He cared about her, but he'd never be with her more than the few glorious moments they'd shared.

Maggie grabbed a knife from Zirkov's cache in his closet, slipped it into her boot, and headed out the door with Zirkov at her side.

CHAPTER THIRTY

MAGGIE

The war left the road in the northern part of Terminal Island in ruin. Zirkov parked his car as close as he could get to the condemned area of warehouses on the edge of the East Basin Channel.

“We’ll walk from here.”

Maggie followed in Zirkov’s larger footsteps, letting him tamp down the tall grass bordering what remained of the road. When they reached an intact section of the road, she walked at his side, eager to reach for his hand. Her need to touch him grew stronger the more time she spent with him, but she kept her hand and her thoughts to herself. Zirkov’s horns pointed forward, reflecting how focused he was on their mission.

THIS PLAN TO get Sutherland’s support seemed out of place for him. Simply put, Zirkov didn’t respect the Assistant Director. He never asked Sutherland for anything. A-N-Y-T-H-I-N-G.

The only reason Zirkov accepted her as a liaison between GI7 and Earth Intelligence was so he could avoid Sutherland. Perhaps Zirkov planned to suck up to the Assistant Director. After all, Sutherland had access to every system in the DAA. If anyone could clear her name, it was him.

Zirkov pointed to her blouse. “I haven’t seen you wear yellow before. It suits your personality.”

“Stop it, I’m blushing.”

His eyes narrowed as he examined her face. “You are not. No change in coloring.”

“I was joking. We really need to go over Earth humor when this is done.”

“I will include your presentation in my orientation for new marshals.”

“I hope you’re not serious.”

He grinned. “Zyanthans have humor, too.”

Why did they have to meet Sutherland now? She’d much rather hang out with Zirkov and explore this casual side he’d kept hidden for two years.

“Explain why you dress like the males at the DAA.”

“DAA rules state agents have to wear white, navy, gray, or black for work. Pants and blazers, unless undercover. When I’m off duty, I go for bright colors. This was the best of the clothing you brought from my apartment. I don’t think Sutherland would take me seriously if I wore a tight pink blouse with a low-cut front.”

“Showing off your figure could distract him. You will wear low-cut clothing and the dress you called a slip for me, not Sutherland.”

“Commander, are you flirting with me?”

“I don’t flirt.”

“Then what was that?”

He growled and muttered in Zyanthan while not looking at her. “I’m trying to find a balance here, Magdalena, between what I want and what the gods have told me I cannot have. I made a suggestion, nothing more. I’m merely saying I could learn more about human culture by seeing you in the clothing you described. And out of it.”

“Cough your words however you want, Z, but you are definitely flirting.”

“I’m being clear about my preferences,” he said as he took one final look around the area before heading into the

warehouse. The desolate area reminded Maggie of a graveyard.

The perfect place for a discreet meeting.

The warehouse looked familiar, but Maggie couldn't place it. Stale air carrying the slight scent of chemicals made her nose scrunch as she entered. Piles of banged-up, worn-out farm equipment including old generators leaking machine oil and fuel filled the warehouse in a haphazard maze of twists and turns.

"Do you recognize the place?" Zirkov asked, motioning her to venture further in. Having him with her helped her ignore the gnawing sense of foreboding.

She edged past the machinery to the center of the warehouse, where a ray of sunshine lit a pile of broken mufflers. The sun warmed her face. It had been sunny that day too. But the air had been cool. The way a stiff salty breeze hits off the Pacific Ocean in the Early morning, before eight a.m.

"I've been here before," she whispered.

"The day Bu'Tay was murdered?"

"You think I killed him."

"Did you?" he asked with the casual indifference she'd first experienced from him two years ago. She thought they'd become friends—more than friends—since then. The way they'd made love the other night convinced her they had a real chance at a future together. But seeing that stony expression on his face now, she knew the truth.

"This was a setup. You're not meeting Sutherland. You brought me here to see my reaction."

"Answer the question, Ms. Walsh," Zirkov said.

She glared at him. "Why should I?"

"Because you were here! I smelled your scent near the dead og'dal. And in all the days that followed, you never once told me you'd been here. Explain why you failed to notify me, or anyone at the DAA that you were with the og'dal when he died."

“Zirkov, please don’t push me on this.”

“If the og’dal attacked you, then it’s self-defense.”

Her hands clenched. “I don’t remember!”

He grabbed her upper arms. “Focus! You have the memories. Why didn’t you tell anyone you were here?”

“I thought I killed him!” Anger colored her cheeks. “Why are you doing this to me?”

“I need to know what happened, Maggie,” he said, softer as he rubbed his hands up and down her arms. “All of it, in your own words.”

Maggie jerked free of his hold. “How dare you pretend to like me just to get information! You could have asked me. Marshal to marshal. I would have told you everything I remembered.”

“You’ve avoided my questions and lied to me. Tell me why you killed an unarmed og’dal!”

“How dare you accuse me of killing in cold blood?”

“I’m giving you a chance to convince me of your innocence. Do not squander it.”

“Squander it?” She huffed as she marched past the row of dismantled forklifts and headed straight for the door. When she placed her hand on the handle, she spun around to face him.

“When I woke up standing over the og’dal’s body, I thought I’d killed him. I was holding a bloody knife that matched his wounds. I couldn’t remember why I was here or how I got here. Now I know. Whoever put that damn device in my head forced me to come here that night. But I didn’t kill Bu’Tay!”

“How can you be sure?”

Tears flooded her eyes. “Do you really think I’m capable of killing someone in cold blood?” Her heart sank when he didn’t answer.

“You woke up standing over Bu’Tay’s body. What woke you?”

“I don’t know! I went to sleep the night before, after doing a spot check on one of our witnesses. Then I woke up, fully dressed, standing over Bu’Tay with a knife in my hand. Nothing made sense. I had seconds to assess my situation, then you called my name.”

“You ran.”

“Yes, I ran! I didn’t know what was happening. Wait... Why were you here? Were you following me? That time you had Stenikov follow me... I thought that was a training exercise.”

“It was not.”

All this time, he’d known she’d been with Bu’Tay in the warehouse and he never asked her about it. Never once mentioned it.

“That night, we caught an og’dal on surveillance and combed the area looking for him. We had no idea you were involved until I scented your presence, Ms. Walsh.”

Her lower lip trembled, then she swiped at the tears and straightened her back. “Has everything between us been nothing more than strategy? A way to get information? Do you have any feelings for me at all, Zirkov?”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Walsh,” he said, his voice as void of emotion as the day she’d met him. “I don’t get involved with co-workers. I needed to assess you, to learn of your role in what’s been happening. You are the source of the leaks. The question is whether you were a willing participant. Tell me everything and I’ll recommend the DAA keep you out of prison.”

“Why are you doing this to me?”

“As Commander of GI7, and for the safety of those I protect, I have to root out the mole and secure my unit.”

Nothing mattered more to Zirkov than protecting his people, but she’d never been one of the team. Only an

outsider.

Maggie began shaking. The man she'd fallen for had been using her, no different than the og'dals who shoved that device in her head.

A part of her wanted to crawl off somewhere and never see him again, but the rest of her, the woman who loved him, couldn't believe he'd do this. Zirkov stood for honor and justice.

"Tell me this is all a bad dream," she pleaded.

Zirkov didn't move. Barely blinked.

The sound of slow, derisive clapping echoed through the warehouse. "You put on an entertaining show, Commander Kesk," a male said as he stepped out of the shadows. "Is this the so-called proof you have?"

Maggie knew that voice all too well. "Assistant Director Sutherland. You're part of this?"

"Commander Kesk said he could prove your innocence. But this little demonstration only proves he has a relationship with you. That alone makes me question his judgment and objectivity."

Cold silver eyes focused on Sutherland. "Og'dal slavers controlled her. She has lapses in her memory. My marshals provided the implant the doctors removed from her brain as well as documentation from the tekklan scientist who developed the neurosphere."

"That might lower the charges from Treason and Murder in the First Degree to Involuntary Manslaughter *if* you could prove your assertion. We have no such device logged into our evidence. Only a doctor's statement saying they performed brain surgery and removed a device of alien design. My experts theorize the device enabled Ms. Walsh to communicate with the og'dal slavers."

"The evidence that could clear her went missing in the DAA, a department under your control, Sutherland."

"Are you accusing me of being corrupt, Kesk?"

Maggie's eyes bounced back and forth between the two males. Zirkov hadn't been setting her up. He'd been trying to get an honest reaction from her, one that Sutherland would witness and believe. With the neurosphere missing, Zirkov sought an alternate way to make Sutherland believe in her innocence. He'd risked his reputation and freedom in the process.

"You're either involved directly or your incompetent leadership has enabled whoever is responsible to frame Maggie. Which means you haven't caught the mole, only an innocent, and the danger to Earth's security remains."

A memory of being in Sutherland's office exploded in Maggie's head, nearly bringing her to her knees. She'd told him *everything* going on in GI7.

The exit routes Gabriella would use from the courthouse. Ri'Nom bringing the raakesh to Dal. The safehouse Konnitch and Kaci hid in to escape the Brotherhood.

All of it. Every damn piece of information GI7 hadn't shared with Earth Intelligence.

Maggie's eyes snapped to Sutherland. "You're working with the og'dals."

The smile fell from his face. "False accusations won't save you."

"That's why you came here, you asshole. To see what evidence Zirkov had against you. You're who I've been giving the intel to. You're the traitor, Sutherland."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

ZIRKOV

Sutherland grabbed Maggie and held her in front of him as a shield, but Zirkov's brave female whipped her head back and slammed into his face.

"You bitch!" Sutherland grabbed his bloody nose, giving Maggie the opening she needed.

She swung behind Sutherland and kicked the back of his knee, forcing her boss to the ground.

"No one will believe you. Either of you," Sutherland screamed as she handcuffed his hands behind him.

She searched his pockets until she found the key, then threw them as far as she could in the warehouse. "I'm remembering a lot of details, Sutherland. Like how you assigned me as the liaison officer to GI7 *after* they gave Dekar a new identity. You demanded GI7 tell you his location, but Zirkov refused. That was the start of all your problems, wasn't it? GI7 didn't record the names or locations of witnesses into the DAA's servers and you didn't have access to Galactic Intelligence's. That's why you needed me. Someone on the inside of GI7. You used me from the very beginning. No wonder Zirkov never trusted me." Maggie lifted her head to look at Zirkov. "Why he'll never trust me again."

"Maggie," Zirkov said, not sure how he could convince her he believed in her and always had. Doubt and hurt lingered in her eyes after what he'd put her through. He'd been desperate to prove her innocence and ended up wounding her.

To his surprise, she smiled at him. “You look like you’re going to a funeral, Z. I’m fine, really.”

“I didn’t want to put you through that,” he said softly.

“You made the right call. This confrontation yielded results, even if not the way you expected. Somehow you got past all the barriers in my head, helping me remember Sutherland’s involvement.”

“You can’t prove anything,” Sutherland spat. “You have no evidence. Only the word of your alien lover.”

Maggie kicked him between his shoulder blades, knocking Sutherland flat on his face. When he cursed from the pain, Maggie didn’t smile. Instead, she stared at the male lying on the concrete floor.

“Magdalena, whatever you’re planning, don’t be rash. We’ll prove Sutherland’s working with the og’dals.”

She turned to him, eyes wide and hopeful. “You believe me now?”

“I never stopped believing in you. When you insisted on coming here, I knew Sutherland would arrest you unless I made him see that you had no memory of any crimes.”

“You didn’t know he was the person who did this to me?” She rubbed her temple.

“I suspected another human in Earth Intelligence. Shaunda Cole.”

“Shaunda’s a friend. Why would you accuse her?”

“She’s an analyst with top clearance to all the systems. And you are always talking about her baking. Maggie, I thought she’d been drugging you.”

“Walsh, I have agents all over the place, with orders to shoot if you leave here in anything but my handcuffs,” Sutherland said as he rolled onto his side.

“I’m sure they’ll reconsider when I tell them all about your debriefings, *former* Assistant Director. One in particular. One that brought the Grud back to Earth. Zirkov never read me in

on anything about the tekklan scientist he had in witness protection, but I followed Ri'Nom and found Dekar's location. You didn't know where they hid the tekklan, not until I reported back to you. Days later, the Grud arrived, and GI7 scrambled to extract him to a secondary location off Earth. It's a good thing they never told me which planet they took him to, or he'd be dead by now. I wonder how many other debriefings I'll remember in time. Even if I remember nothing else, that one incident is enough to hang you."

Sutherland paled four shades. She had him.

"And all those women..." Maggie began.

"Women?" Zirkov asked.

"The slave trade never ended, Z. The og'dals you found murdered have been kidnapping and exporting women like they're cattle. And Sutherland's the reason they could sneak on and off Earth, even after Planetary Defense activated the defense shield."

"We can make a deal, Walsh. I'll destroy the evidence against you and give you ten percent."

"You think I want to make money off what you did? Unbelievable. You don't even see how you've betrayed more than the people you swore to protect, but all of humanity. And for money! There's no word for a bastard like you."

"It was a few women no one will miss."

Maggie paced back and forth, agitated. Finally, she knelt beside Sutherland. "What are the names of the slavers? Their ships? How many women?"

"A few dozen from large cities. Places where women disappear all the time because they're too foolish to take precautions. A few disappear here, a few there... No one ever notices."

Maggie lifted her hand to strike Sutherland, but Zirkov grabbed her around by the waist and pulled her away from the Assistant Director. "This isn't you, Maggie."

"He sold women and made me a part of it!"

“Beating him won’t change anything,” Zirkov whispered to her, barely containing his anger. He wanted to rip Sutherland into pieces for what he’d put Maggie through.

Zirkov hoisted the male up by his suit jacket. “Contacts. Landing sites. Ship schedules. Everything, Sutherland.”

“The slavers are all dead. She killed them.”

“Stop saying that!” Maggie yelled as she paced.

“Not all the og’dals are dead. We identified the bodies in the morgue. Bu’Tay, Pe’Dez, and An’Gow. I want Var’Len.”

“Never heard of him.”

Zirkov shoved a blade against Sutherland’s throat. “The lab said Marshal Walsh’s gun killed Bu’Tay, but it had your fingerprints on it along with residue from a powerful and rare mind-control drug, one that Var’Len sells. I can tie you to Var’Len in multiple ways.”

“I wore gloves when I gave her gun to Var’Len to kill Bu’Tay. My fingerprints can’t be on there.”

“You’re right. They’re not.” Zirkov tapped his comm. “But I recorded your confession. That should be enough for any court.”

“Fucking alien!”

“You mean I didn’t kill the og’dal?” Maggie’s eyes, wide and full of surprise, found Zirkov. “I didn’t kill anyone.”

He wanted to go to her, to hold her and tell her he’d known that all along even before he had any evidence. But he needed information from Sutherland while he was willing to talk.

“Why is Var’Len killing his associates?”

“Dal’s been cracking down on the slavers, executing any they capture. Var’Len’s eliminating any og’dals who put the other slavers and clients at risk.”

“Give me Var’Len and I’ll see if I can keep your people from shipping you to Dal as an accomplice to the slavers. They can do that, under the treaty with Galactic Intelligence.”

“I’m not dealing. Not without a guarantee from the U.S. District Attorney’s office that I go free.”

Zirkov looked at Maggie for her advice.

“They’ll give him what he wants if he has enough information on the slavers, especially how they’ve been getting through the defense shield. I don’t think Sutherland or anyone in the DAA has access to the shield’s codes or hardware. The Department of Defense and DAA use different dedicated systems. And we still have a lot of women that we need to locate and rescue, Zirkov. Sutherland knows too much for them to ignore.”

Zirkov pressed his knife against Sutherland’s throat. “I have a better offer. He talks, now, telling me everything, starting with where to find Var’Len. Or he dies.”

“If you kill me, my people will hunt you and your entire team and arrest you.”

“I will find a way to explain your death. You won’t be alive to contradict me.” Zirkov cut a thin line into Sutherland’s neck.

“I’ll tell you everything. You can find his ship hidden in ___”

The popping of gunfire filled the air as bullets shattered windows and ricocheted off nearby engine parts. Zirkov grabbed Maggie and dove for cover behind discarded packing machinery. Sutherland slumped on his side down to the concrete, the back of his head missing.

Maggie pulled a gun from an ankle holster he didn’t know she had and fired off several rounds. No one returned fire as an eerie silence settled over the warehouse.

“One shooter. Where did you get that gun?”

“My apartment the other day, when you weren’t looking.” Crouched beside him, Maggie raised her head enough to see through a gap between the machinery. “What about Konnitch and Stenikov?”

Zirkov tapped his comm. “They’re not responding. Probably occupied with DAA agents.”

“I don’t think a DAA agent shot Sutherland.”

“Why is that?”

She pointed to the elongated shadow on the ground... the one with four arms.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

MAGGIE

“Little human,” Var’Len called out. Move away from the zyanthan. He’s my target, not you.

Zirkov motioned for Maggie to circle to her right while he went left. She got away without any issue, but the moment Zirkov moved, gunfire rained down on him. Var’Len had him pinned.

“Cease,” Zirkov shouted.

“Marshal, you’ve been nothing but trouble since Galactic Intelligence gave you command of GI7.”

“We never pursued you. Not until you abducted and used an Earth marshal against us.”

“You’ve made a lot of my peers very nervous. That’s why they sent me to Earth. To clean up our operation here. Do you admire my work, Kesk? The female followed my orders so well. As did Sutherland, though I didn’t need to control him the same way. He took credits. A simple business transaction. I’m merely a businessman protecting his own interests.”

Maggie moved as quietly as she could along the debris-riddled floor. With each step, she risked breaking glass beneath her feet and attracting Var’Len’s attention.

“Even if you kill me, it will not end GI7’s operations here on Earth.” Zirkov kept Var’Len talking to distract him while Maggie got into position.

“I don’t need to end GI7s operations. Only control them. You, I can’t control. Your replacement... I will find a way. I always do.”

In the corner of her vision, Maggie spotted movement. Var’Len hadn’t come alone.

“Behind you!” she yelled to Zirkov.

He dove as four knives sailed through the air. Zirkov came out of the roll firing his blaster. Two og’dals crumpled to the oil-stained cement floor.

Maggie spotted Var’Len as he disappeared into the maze of abandoned machinery. She chased after him. The male moved fast. In the distance, grunts and the shuffling of feet filled the air. It sounded like Zirkov was engaged in hand-to-hand combat with an og’dal, maybe two. If she reversed direction to provide backup, she’d lose her only chance of catching Var’Len.

A pained scream echoed through the warehouse. There was no choice now. Maggie raced to where she’d left Zirkov. He and the og’dals he’d shot were gone.

Where the hell did they go?

“You don’t need the marshal, little human,” Var’Len taunted as he appeared in front of her, holding a gun at his side.

“Zirkov?” she called out as she pointed her Glock at Var’Len.

“The Marshal left to save himself. That’s how little you mean to him. Which proves what I said earlier. Kesk cares about nothing but his job. That makes him dangerous.”

“You don’t know him.”

“Ah, but I do, through you. When Sutherland debriefed you, he learned more than the location and movements of GI7’s witnesses. You provided insight into Kesk as well as your desire for him. But he has no interest in you. If he returns, it will not be for you. No, human, Kesk’s only goal is

to capture me... at any cost. He won't hesitate to sacrifice you."

"He hasn't left," Maggie insisted.

"Call for him again. He won't answer because he's not here."

She wouldn't listen to Var'Len's lies any longer. Her fingers itched to shoot him, but she couldn't, not in cold blood. And he was the key to finding those kidnapped women.

"What do you want from me?"

"One last job. First, I have to get rid of Kesk. Have a sweet day, milady."

When Var'Len aimed his gun at her, she tried to fire, but her hand wouldn't respond. Her legs wouldn't move either!

"You can't kill me," Var'Len taunted.

A knife whooshed by and lodged in the trigger of Var'Len's gun, preventing him from firing. Zirkov charged out of nowhere and body-slammed Var'Len into a forklift.

The two males rolled in a tangle of six arms, horns, and legs. Var'Len pinned Zirkov to the ground, pressing his knee into Zirkov's chest. Two hands gripped Zirkov's throat while two others delivered rapid punches to his middle. Zirkov struggled to breathe as he tried to break Var'Len's grip on his throat but each punch to his stomach weakened his ability to push Var'Len off.

Sharp claws emerged from behind Zirkov's knuckles on both hands. Like a boxer's uppercut, he sliced the hands choking him. Var'Len leapt off as Zirkov slashed at him a second time.

Both men pulled to their feet, Zirkov with his claws extended and Var'Len wielding four knives.

"Enough!" Breathing heavily, Zirkov drew his blaster.

The corner of Var'Len's mouth lifted. "Ke'Riz!"

A muzzle flashed from the catwalks above. A bullet struck Zirkov's blaster, knocking it from his hand. Maggie snapped

out of whatever had frozen her in place and unloaded eight bullets into the dark rafters above. An og'dal fell and landed with a thud. She reached for her pocket... empty! She didn't have an extra magazine with her.

“Drekking slaver,” Zirkov cursed as Var'Len charged him. Zirkov swept the og'dal's legs, but Var'Len broke his fall with two hands and slashed a knife across Zirkov's left thigh with another.

Maggie kicked the blaster out of Var'Len's reach, then trained her Glock on him. “Freeze or I'll shoot.” Var'Len held his hands up.

“Are you injured?” Zirkov asked even though he was the one with the leg wound.

“A few bruises, nothing more. Get up, Var'Len.”

With a smug expression, Var'Len rose. “Have a sweet day, milady.”

She knew those words. She'd heard them so many times before.

“Maggie,” Var'Len addressed her. “Shoot Commander Kesk.”

The tightness in her brain demanded she obey.

“Shoot him, Maggie.”

God help her, she pointed her gun at Zirkov. She had no control over what she did!

“Maggie...” Her name spilled from Zirkov's lips, the disbelief in his voice clear. He extended his hand, palm up, demanding her gun.

She wanted to listen to him, not Var'Len, but her brain wouldn't allow it. Maggie depressed the trigger of her Glock. A simple pull now, and the gun would fire. At this range, she couldn't miss.

“Milady, kill Commander Kesk.

Sweat gathered on her brow as she fought the order to shoot Zirkov. “Don't do this,” she begged. “Don't make me

kill him. I'll do anything else for you. Anything.”

“Shoot him!” Var’Len ordered.

When Maggie didn’t obey, the pain in her head intensified to an unbearable level. She grabbed her head with one hand.

“It’s okay, Magdalena,” Zirkov said as he slowly reached for her gun.

Maggie snapped to attention, gripping her gun with both hands. “Don’t.”

“I want to help you, Maggie,” Zirkov said in a soothing voice. “You don’t have to do anything. Just stand there. Focus on not moving.”

Her finger glided up and down the trigger as she fought the command to fire. “I don’t want to kill you.”

“You can fight this. Think of something you like to do. Reading.” He was so close now. Only a few more inches.

A surge of pain rocketed through her. She had to shoot.

“I’m sorry,” she said, as she turned the gun on herself.

“Maggie, no!” Zirkov yelled. “I’m the target. Not you. You need to obey, right? Shoot me.”

Her hand shook uncontrollably. If she didn’t obey Var’Len’s order, the pain would fry her from the inside.

Maggie retrained the gun on Zirkov. Immediately, the pain faded and she could breathe again.

“That’s it, vasha. Focus on killing me.”

“Stop saying that!” She tried pointing the gun at Var’Len, whose smug expression should have made it easy. Anytime her thoughts strayed away from killing Zirkov, the pain intensified. She fell to her knees, her gun still pointed at the male who would sacrifice everything for her, including his life.

“It’s okay, Maggie. You can shoot me. The pain will end.”

Her eyes filled with tears. “I can’t shoot you. I love you.”

“Shoot me, Maggie!”

“No!”

“Do it!”

“Shut up!

“Shoot me! Now. Pull the trigger. One squeeze.”

She couldn't see or think through the pain.

“Now! Magdalena, you're in danger. Shoot!”

She squeezed the gun and fired multiple rounds until the clicking of an empty gun was all she heard.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

ZIRKOV

The force of the bullets knocked Zirkov off his feet and stole his breath as he struck the ground. The pain spreading through his chest reminded him of the time he'd been trapped beneath the rubble of a building in Avan, Zyan's capital. Terrorists had planted bombs and brought down three buildings. His only concern had been getting out alive. He'd had no one else to worry about. Now, all he could think about was Maggie. After emptying her gun into his chest, she had dropped her gun and ran.

With that smug expression of his, Var'Len leaned over him and set a knife against his throat. "You're mine now, you drekking visca."

With a flick of his wrist, Zirkov's claws extended and impaled Var'Len's shoulder. The og'dal dropped the knife and roared out in pain.

"What did you give her?" Zirkov demanded as he flexed his claws, digging them farther into Var'Len's flesh.

"Sartog's Sin! You drekker. Release me!"

"If she dies, you die, understand? Tell me about the drug and the antidote."

"There is no antidote. Only time. Sartog's Sin is more effective than the neurosphere, but it's unstable, that's why I didn't use it until you drekkers removed the neurosphere."

Zirkov resisted the temptation of killing the male. “All this time you’ve been using her to get to me. Why didn’t you just kill me?”

“We’re being hunted like sartogs. I needed intel from Galactic Intelligence to avoid capture. The human was an easier target. No backup, no partner.”

Zirkov winced. He’d never once thought to give Maggie a permanent partner when she wasn’t on an op. He’d left her unprotected.

“How did Sutherland fit into your plans?” Zirkov demanded.

“It’s hard keeping our lower arms hidden in the warmer months. We needed a human who could move about freely, not stand out. Sutherland collected the information and passed it on to me.” After several pained breaths, Var’Len added, “We can reach a deal, Commander. Release me, and I’ll leave Earth to you.”

Zirkov rose, pulling Var’Len up with him by the claws still embedded in his flesh.

“You should be dead. She shot you,” Var’Len spat as he bit down from the pain.

“That female you’ve been using is smarter than you realize.” Zirkov pointed to the bulletproof vest beneath his shirt.

“You took a risk that she wouldn’t shoot you in the head.”

“A risk I was prepared for.”

A smile crept onto Var’Len’s face. “You care about her. Let me go or she dies.”

“You’re not in the position to threaten her.”

“You don’t know how Sartog’s Sin will affect her, or how long you have before it kills her.”

Zirkov slammed Var’Len against a tractor. “You said she’d be fine in time.”

The og'dal grinned as wide as possible. "I lied. And wasted time talking. How long do you have to reach her, Commander? That's right, you don't know."

"I'll find her," Zirkov roared.

"Even if you do, you won't know how to save her. She'll die unless she fulfills the last commands I gave her."

Zirkov yanked his claws free, raised his hand to slice along Var'Len's neck and end him.

Konnitch caught his hand. "We may still need him."

Stenikov yanked the og'dal's arms behind him and slapped a set of mag-cuffs on him.

"As much as I hate to order this, Stenikov..." Zirkov said as he wiped his bloody claws on Var'Len. "...keep him alive." Zirkov ripped off the bulletproof vest as he turned to Konnitch. "Status?"

"We have a group of five og'dals in custody," Konnitch reported.

"We need to find Maggie."

"If it is Sartog's Sin, then we don't have much time," the keenta warned.

Zirkov had heard of the drug, but never encountered it. "Tell me everything you know."

"A person under the influence of Sartog's Sin becomes highly irrational if they can't complete their mission. The brain fixates on the last command. They hallucinate and can't process logic or even a new command unless given by the person who administered the drug. That's why we need him alive, to overwrite the command with another, even a simple one. Until he does, she'll be a danger to herself and everyone around her."

"How long until the drug wears off?"

"No idea. Everyone who takes it ends up dead."

"The drekker ordered her to kill me. She shot me and must have thought she killed me because she ran. She'll be okay

then. She followed the command.”

Var’Len laughed. “Are you sure that was the only command? I gave her the drug several days ago, on the roof of her apartment building. I spent a long time with her. Almost as much time as you, though not in bed. Hmm, maybe that will be tonight’s activity. But that won’t be possible if she’s dead.”

When Zirkov charged over to him with his blaster raised, Stenikov inserted himself between the males. “Commander, we need him. I’ll work on him, get him to agree to remove the last command, if you can find her.”

“Yes, *Commander*,” Var’Len mocked. “You need me to counter the commands. Don’t threaten me either, or I’ll give her another order you’ll regret.” Dark eyes narrowed. “Unless I’m on my ship when you bring her to me, I’ll order her to kill herself. Take me to my ship, then I’ll remove the commands... if you find her in time.”

Zirkov had to shove every feeling aside and think strategically, like the commander he was. “The tracker.”

Konnitch tapped his comm. “Searching.”

This was taking too long. “Stenikov, step away from the prisoner.”

“She disabled the tracker,” Konnitch reported.

Absolute fear sliced through Zirkov. They had no time to waste. “Stenikov, don’t make me order you a second time.”

Stenikov’s horns twisted at the tops. “Killing him won’t help her. And our orders are to return him to Dal. Alive, if possible.”

“Your orders are to do whatever I say. You will not prevent me from finding my female.”

“Do it, Sten,” Konnitch said.

The second Stenikov stepped away from Var’Len, Zirkov punched the og’dal so hard that the male spun and landed flat on his face, unconscious.

“Stenikov, secure him to a beam and then search north of the warehouse. Konnitch, go east. I’ll head south.” Water lay to the west. Between the three of them, if they moved fast, they could cover the island. “Whoever finds her, bring her back here and do whatever it takes to force the drekker to counter the last command.”

Within minutes of leaving the warehouse, Zirkov found a set of boot prints in a patch of grass. They were too fresh and small to be anyone’s but Maggie’s. He followed the boot prints, which disappeared in a series of puddles one street over.

Zirkov climbed on top of an old truck on its side in the middle of the crater-filled street. There was no sign of her anywhere. She must have backtracked.

As Zirkov climbed off the truck, he spotted bright yellow among all the drab grays and browns in the distance. “Maggie.”

With her bright yellow blouse flapping in the wind, Maggie stood on the bridge connecting Terminal Island with San Pedro. She had climbed the fencing along the pedestrian walkway and hovered over the water.

A fall from that height would kill her.

Zirkov raced to his car. He could be on the bridge in minutes.

But when he reached his vehicle, all four tires had been slashed. Var’Len or one of his men. Or even Sutherland.

Zirkov should have hidden the car. He’d been a fool about so many things, most of all Maggie. Now he might never have the chance to tell her how he truly felt about her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

MAGGIE

As Maggie peered at the swimming pool, her brain replayed that horrific scene at the warehouse over and over. Zirkov's body lay on the ground, five large bullet holes in his chest.

She had killed Zirkov, the only person she ever loved.

The reality of what she'd done threatened to suffocate her. She couldn't breathe or think, only run. With the hot sun pounding down on her, she'd run until she couldn't run anymore.

Her hand wrapped around the metal pole by the pool. She desperately wanted to cool off and forget everything, especially what she'd done.

Maggie wondered if she should strip or dive in fully dressed. This was her favorite blouse. Silk wouldn't hold up to the chlorine, but that would give her the excuse to change into the pink top Zirkov wanted to see on her. The one with the low-cut front.

Zirkov... She'd killed him. Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! The explosion of each bullet leaving her gun echoed through her head louder than the soft thuds of the bullets striking flesh.

She'd *killed* Zirkov!

Did she ever tell him she loved him? She couldn't remember!

She'd never see his stoic face again, the one that offered a rare smile, usually when he thought she wasn't looking. He had always been a bit arrogant, bossy, and usually right, but she'd seen the person inside. The person he fought so hard to hide from everyone.

Tears mixed with her sweat-stained yellow blouse. She might as well dive into the pool now. Maggie tried kicking off her flats, but the damn things seemed glued to her feet. She looked down and nearly lost her balance.

"No! Don't jump!" a man yelled at her in the distance.

"I need to get my shoes off first," she yelled back. *Huh. Not shoes. Boots. Agency-issued work boots. Those certainly don't go with this blouse. I should have worn a bathing suit. I wonder if Zirkov would notice me in one.*

No, he's dead. You killed him.

That couldn't be true!

A memory flashed in her mind. She'd wrapped her hands around her gun and trained it on Zirkov. He'd said something, and then she'd fired.

And kept firing.

"Maggie, get down from there!"

A tall guy wearing a hat with horns ran toward her. He'd painted his skin blue. He had to be high on something.

"Please, don't jump. You'll hurt yourself," he said, getting closer.

"I'm hot. The pool will cool me off."

"You'll kill yourself if you jump."

"I can't get hurt in eight feet of water."

"Listen to me, Magdalena. That's not a pool. It's the harbor. You won't survive the fall."

"I'm not taking orders from you anymore, Edward. You're a druggie and a rapist. I don't care what my mother says or how much money you have. You will leave here. Today. The

Coalition's gone. Women can do anything they want now. And that includes charging you with assault. Leave or I'll make you regret ever touching me."

"Maggie, it's me. Zirkov. Not Edward."

When she turned her head to face him, she lost her footing and quickly grabbed hold of the pole. The man was right. He wasn't Edward. That sleaze wasn't blue.

"Did you hear me, Magdalena? I'm Zirkov."

"I killed Zirkov," she cried out, the tears flowing so hard, she could barely see. "I fought the pain, and I still shot him."

"Listen to me. I'm not dead. I had a bulletproof vest on. Your protocol, Maggie. Do you remember? You said never go into an unknown situation without wearing a vest."

Maggie remembered that conversation. It had been at a restaurant, her first social outing with Zirkov. She'd been excited to meet him until he'd started asking questions about a dead og'dal.

She squinted her eyes, trying to determine what was so familiar about the male in front of her, but the tears clouded her vision.

"I promise you, Maggie. Zirkov's not dead. I'm him. You tried to kill me, but I'm alive. You need to finish the job." He placed a gun on the ground. Her gun. How did he get hold of —

Her brain flared as she finally recognized the male. Zirkov. She hadn't killed him!

Unless she was dreaming. "Zirkov?"

"Yes!"

The sudden need to grab the gun and shoot him returned. She would kill him if he stayed there. Hell, she already had!

"Get away from me. I don't want to kill you!"

"You won't." He inched closer.

"But I have to!" Tears streamed down her face.

He took three steps closer. “Maggie, take my hand, please. You’re on a bridge. If you jump, you’ll kill yourself.”

Yes, kill myself. To save him.

“If I jump, I can’t hurt you.”

“No!”

“I have to, Z. I can’t stop the thoughts. I’ll hurt you.”

“We will fix this. Together. I promise.”

“How?”

“Marry me.”

His words stunned her. Before she could react, Zirkov grabbed her around her waist and pulled her off the ledge. Massive arms locked her in a cage of muscle, crushing her against his chest. Never had anything felt so perfect.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

MAGGIE

“I don’t understand,” Stenikov said as he walked beside Maggie. “Commander Kesik proposed to take you as his mate and you said no. Is this because you’re not his sholani?”

“He’s suffering from drug abuse side effects which prevent him from knowing who his sholani is. But that was never something that bothered me. We belong together. I know it down to my soul, Stenikov, but he doesn’t.”

“I’ve never heard of such a condition, but I accept your words on the matter. I still do not understand why you refuse to see him. It has been a month since he rescued you from the bridge and the doctors gave you the antidote for Sartog’s Sin. The tekklan officials who provided the necessary information clearly stated you would suffer no side effects from either the implant or Sartog’s Sin.”

“I can’t see him.”

“But you can. You’re no longer a threat to him, and he wishes to see you. I am certain of this.”

“It’s... complicated.”

“He doesn’t blame you for what you did while under the og’dal’s control.”

“Sten, it’s sweet of you to help, but a mating with Zirkov wasn’t meant to be. He only proposed as a means to distract me on that bridge.”

They walked in silence past several storefronts before Stenikov stopped. “Perhaps I should escort you home and then proceed on my own, Marshal... I mean Ms. Walsh.”

Maggie tapped the gun resting on her waist. “I’ll be fine, Sten. You should have backup. And stop calling me Ms. Walsh. Just Maggie will do.”

“I should not have asked you to accompany me but you are the only friend I have here on Earth and you appear... depressed. I do not think sitting in your apartment alone suits you.”

“I thought you needed my help.”

“It was an excuse to entice you from your apartment.”

“You don’t have to meet the informant?”

“I do, but I could go alone. Marshal... I mean Maggie, if you were one of my sisters, I would tell you to stop sulking and find your path.”

“Find my path... Zirkov said something similar to me once.” She inhaled a long breath. “To be honest, I’m a little lost without Zirkov.”

“Then meet with him.”

She shrugged. “I’m not sure it’s the right time. The DAA doesn’t trust me enough to hire me back, even though the information Var’Len gave Earth Intelligence cleared me. And while Zirkov never blamed me for what happened, I... I worry he doesn’t think I’m right for him.”

“It is not my place to say if you two are meant to be, but he told me—” Stenikov stopped while he thought through what he wanted to say. The male had a lot to learn about humans, but he definitely had heart. He would do well as a marshal. “If anything happens to you while you’re under my protection, Commander Kesk will hang me up by my horns.”

“Really? Is that a thing?”

“I’ve never seen it done, but I do not believe the commander would jest, especially concerning your safety.”

He's still angry that he did not kill Var'Len for what he did to you."

Stenikov stopped in front of a three-story building with peeling red paint. The windows on the bottom level had been boarded over and displayed anti-alien graffiti. "This is the address my informant gave."

"Not the type of building I'd enter alone either. Why do you trust me to be your backup?"

"Tekklans do not make mistakes when it comes to science. They said you are free of the og'dals' control. I need no other reassurance."

She smiled at Stenikov's honesty and his ability to trust her so absolutely. She only wished Zirkov were here with her. There was so much she wanted to say to him, mostly that she missed him. Even if he never loved her, he had put his life on the line for her, several times.

"How many people are you meeting?" Maggie asked.

"One. On the second floor."

"I need you to be honest with me, Sten. Why am I here, when you could have asked Konnitch or Zirkov?"

"Zirkov ordered me to go alone. As a warrior, I am trained to handle any situation by myself."

"Then why did you bring me?"

"The informant said he had information about you. I thought it would be wise for you to be here, to ask your questions, but only since you are a marshal and can handle yourself."

"Technically, I'm a citizen now. But you were right to bring a partner. Backup should be required for warriors and marshals. I learned that the hard way."

"Loss of your title does not change who you are. Your skills remain. Zirkov is no longer a warrior in title, but very much in skill. Yes?"

"I didn't realize you knew Zirkov before coming to Earth."

“All warriors on Zyan know of Zirkov. He gave up his title of warrior willingly and asked the Warrior Council to remove his tattoos.”

“He asked? I thought they’d taken his title as a punishment.” Before Stenikov could respond, she grabbed his arm, stopping him from entering. “There’s movement in two windows above. You said one informant.”

“I will proceed without you.”

“Forget it.” Maggie drew her gun. “Ready?”

Stenikov slid a knife from his boot. “Ready.”

She ran her eyes over him. Jacket, pants, knives in various sheaths including his boots, but no other weapons. “Where’s your blaster?”

“I lost it.”

“How do you lose a blaster?”

His face drew tight. “Zirkov took it from me. To teach me a lesson.”

She laughed, wondering what circumstance led to that. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t laugh, but...lessons... He’s big on those. And making his own rules. Okay, since I have the firepower, stay behind me.”

Stenikov nudged the main door open. “All I need are my knives,” he said as he slid into the shadows ahead of her.

“Damn warriors must take a course on how to be cocky,” she mumbled as she followed him into the building.

Graffiti, dirt, garbage, and dried blood splatter covered the floor, walls, and doors of the three first-floor apartments. On the stairs, mud and grime coated the dark wood, except where boot prints had disturbed the dirt.

Gun raised, Maggie followed the warrior up the stairs. The condition on the second floor matched the ground floor, except for apartment 2A. Someone had removed the wood slats nailed to the door, and the door lay open an inch.

Stenikov waited as she positioned herself to the door's right. Slowly, he pushed the door open allowing her to enter first. The moment she stepped inside, alarms went off in her head. The interior wasn't the bombed-out, rat-infested hovel she expected, but clean and furnished. There was a sofa, chairs, a table and a kitchen. Perfectly clean, but without any indication someone lived there. The apartment remained barren of personal items such as pictures and knickknacks.

She motioned Stenikov to check the bathroom while she searched the bedroom. As she entered the plush room, a hand clamped down on her gun and tore it from her grip. Before she could scream, lips crushed against hers and a massive body pinned her against the wall, with one hand holding both her wrists above her.

The taste of Zirkov's lips and tongue woke her entire body as if she'd been asleep for a thousand years. His hands moved down her arms to hold her head steady as he slanted his mouth and took her deeper.

She didn't realize how much she missed him until this moment. His rich masculine musk, the feel of his solid muscles pressing against her, but mostly being one with him. When Zirkov broke the kiss, he leaned his forehead against hers.

He didn't speak, but she didn't need words. Touching him, feeling his skin touching hers, calmed the anxiety she'd been living with for weeks.

"I missed you, Z. More than you could know."

"I thought I'd never see you again, vasha." His rapid breathing matched her racing heart.

"You concocted this ruse just to see me?"

"You've avoided me, ignored my messages, refused my requests to meet."

"I needed time. I think we both did."

"Maggie, are you all right in there?" Stenikov called from the living room.

“He doesn’t know you’re here?” Maggie whispered.

“That is a problem. One of many.”

When Zirkov opened the bedroom door, Stenikov’s brows pinched together. “Was this a test, Commander?”

“I told you to come alone. This is not the first time you’ve failed to follow orders, Warrior.”

“You told me the informant had intel about Ms. Walsh.”

“And I specifically told you not to bring her.”

“I thought—”

“You’re a warrior, Stenikov. I’m sure your reasons for bringing her were sound, but your inability to follow orders concerns me. You have one last chance to show me you can adapt to this world or I will reassign you to another planet. I’m sending you to the eastern part of this continent. New York City. Ten days to prove yourself, Warrior. You will have no other marshals nearby for support or to pull your ass out of trouble again.”

“Again?” Maggie asked.

“An incident that was avoidable, I’m told,” Stenikov said.

Zirkov tapped a few times on his comm. “I’ve sent you the details. Do not disappoint me, Warrior.”

Stenikov nodded to Zirkov, then Maggie, before leaving the apartment.

“You were rather harsh on him.”

“That was not harsh. Nothing like the instructors at the training center in Izoran.”

“Were you testing me too?”

“I could think of no other way to get you to listen to me. I knew Stenikov would be tempted to seek you out and that you would not refuse him.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You tricked the poor guy.”

“Yes. Being a warrior is about knowing when to take orders and when to ignore them. He’s a strong warrior, but he

hasn't taken to Earth as quickly as I'd expected. I believe he needs to be on his own for a while, to truly test if he can acclimate."

"And here I thought you didn't like him."

"My personal feelings are irrelevant. It's my duty to ensure he and those under his protection survive. Stenikov has the right attitude. It's not within him to abandon someone in need. Like you, Magdalena. It's a quality I want in my marshals... and my mate."

"Mate?"

He caressed her cheek with the back of his fingers. "I nearly lost you, Magdalena. Twice. These past few weeks without you have left me unable to focus on anything. I can't sleep, eat, or think. When I fall asleep, I dream of you. When I wake, I reach over in bed only to realize you're not there. Then I can't breathe because I don't know where you are, if you're safe, if you're sad or happy. I never realized how important you are to me until I lost you."

"I guess I've become a full-time job for you."

"There will be no joking. Not about this. No avoiding the subject, no veiled desires or secrets. We will talk, the two of us, until we find a way to resolve this."

"Resolve what, precisely?"

"I need you in my life, but you don't want me."

Could it be he really cared about her? Or... loved her?

No, love wasn't something Zirkov sought. If anything, he avoided it, because a stupid mistake stripped him of the certainty other zyanthans took for granted. But she loved him, with all her heart. Would that be enough?

"Whose apartment is this?" she asked, breaking away from him to walk around and admire the furnishings. Then she spotted a holovid on the wall. It was a video of an elephant bathing its baby. A second holovid showed a lion protecting its pride. Below that, a giraffe grazed on a tree. "The person who

lives here is living the life I've always dreamed of. Seeing the world, for one.”

“This is your apartment,” Zirkov announced.

She spun around. “I don't understand.”

“The DAA destroyed your last apartment and all your possessions. Then they took your job and car, which they never returned even after they cleared you of all charges. You're living in a tiny space not fit for a sartog. I made Director Nguyen agree to give you another home, in another building. You should not have to relive all the terrible memories of your former apartment... and the roof.”

She placed her hand on his chest. “Not all the memories are bad. I remember some of our first time together.”

He kissed her palm. “You will only have excellent memories from now on. I will see to it.”

“You can't promise that.”

“Yes, I can. This is your home now. The DAA signed over this building to you. Konnitch and I worked all week adding extra security. We left the ground level alone to discourage attention.”

“Like your safehouses.”

“Yes. But there are traps and security measures which he will go over with you in detail. I will not leave you vulnerable again.”

“Does that mean you don't want to marry me?”

“It means this is your home, whether you accept me or not.”

Maggie surveyed the apartment again, wondering what it would be like to live there. Despite the beautiful renovation, the apartment lacked one vital element. Zirkov.

The warmth of his breath washed over her ear as he whispered. “I want you, Magdalena. More than life itself. I wish I could make you understand what you mean to me, how empty I am without you.”

She bit her lip and shook her head. “I love you, Z, but I can’t be with you. You have to want me for me and not be thinking that your sholani is still out there. That someday you’ll meet her. I can’t be a consolation prize or a temporary mate until your heartmate shows up.”

“But my heartmate did show up. You.” He held her face in both hands. “I see that now. You make more than my mating cock rise. You give me purpose and hope. I wake up every morning, eager to see you, even if it’s only a glimpse across the street. You are the air I breathe, the earth that keeps me steady, and the wind that turns me in the direction I need to go. You help me see beyond my stubbornness. I need you in my bed and my life.”

“Are you sure?”

“You’re in my heart, Magdalena. It’s a lonely place there without you. I love you, sholani, more than I ever thought possible to love another.”

“Sholani? You don’t know what you’re saying, Z.”

“*You* are my sholani. You were right before. I had to look within myself to know the truth, to recognize that you are my heartmate.”

“There’s a risk, you know. If I’m not your true shola—”

He sealed his lips to hers, stopping her from saying more. When he ended the kiss, his expression said everything. He truly loved her. She didn’t need his cock to rise to tell her what she’d known for a long time. He belonged to her, and she belonged to him.

When she didn’t respond, his horns twisted and untwisted. “I did not mean to pressure you. This place is yours, even if you never speak to me again. And with Stenikov heading to New York, I’m short a marshal. The position is yours, if you want it. If you can stand working under me.”

Maggie grabbed him by his shirt and pulled him down onto the bed, on top of her. “I love being under you, Z, but this is not work.” She yanked his shirt out from his pants. “This is pleasure.”

Shredded clothing sailed in all directions. After several hours of passionate love, Maggie ran her fingers over his chest muscles and stared into the eyes of her brave warrior. “Z, when we were on the bridge, I thought I was at the edge of a refreshing swimming pool. But you told me what I wanted to hear. Offered to marry me.”

“I needed to distract you long enough to pull you from the edge. But I did not lie. I wanted you. Then and now.”

“What if one day your mating cock rises for another woman and you see something in her that tells you for sure *she’s* your sholani?”

“Magdalena, I’ve suspected... I’ve *known*... for some time, that you are my sholani. My mating cock not only rose for you, but I pleased you with it to completion. That startled and confused me. Finishing inside you with my mating cock means there can be younglings between us. That is ultimately the point of a mating cock, to sire younglings.

“Before I touched you, I couldn’t allow myself to accept what my heart was saying. All males grow up relying on their mating cock, and without this ability, I... saw no path for me. I once told you a warrior must forge a path where none exists. While I still believe this, I looked at my future with a narrowed vision. Thanks to you, I now understand. There is often more than one path in life, especially to finding the truth. I no longer doubt that you are my sholani. Even if my cock rises for another female, it could not possibly tear us apart.” He held her face in his hands. “Maggie, you told me that if I listened to my heart, I’d find my sholani one day. I found her. You.”

“Zirkov—”

“No, you will let me finish. You once asked me what happens to a sholan if his sholani dies, if that loss would prevent him from ever knowing the love of a heartmate. I’ve heard of males who found a second sholani, but I didn’t truly understand the question until I lost you. Accepting that a male can find a second sholani, means the gods are more generous, more giving than we realize. It’s ironic how we search for our

heartmate, but no one trusts their heart in finding her. You made me believe in myself and the gods again when I lost you. They were not punishing me, but testing me, much as I tested Stenikov. I needed him to find his way. And I, like Stenikov, needed to find mine. You, Magdalena, are mine and always will be. You *are* my sholani. I know this because I feel it not only in my mating cock, but in my soul.”

Maggie swiped at the tears running down her face but couldn’t find the words to express her feelings.

“Will you be mine, Maggie? Or is this our last time together?”

“I’ve been debating leaving Los Angeles, putting space between us so you could work at GI7 without anyone questioning your loyalty because of your association with me.”

When he opened his mouth to speak, she placed a finger over his lips. “I know you don’t worry about these things, but I do. I won’t be the cause of you losing something you love.”

“But I love *you*, Magdalena.”

She looked around the grand bedroom. “I can’t stay here.”

He nodded. “I won’t give up on you. You are a part of me. The best part.”

She sat up and grabbed hold of his horns. Silver eyes filled with doubt and concern waited for her to speak. She’d never seen him look so... lost.

“You misunderstand, Z. I can’t stay in this building. For as grand as it is, it’s not that house you call home. That’s where I want to be. With you, in that small, under-furnished place that you love so much.”

His hands slid up her back. “I love when you correct me.”

“Liar. You hate it.”

“In this case, I love it, Because it means I get to take you home to be mine.”

“Sorry to disappoint again, Z. But I’m already yours. Have been for a long time. You just weren’t ready to see it.”

“My stubborn Magdalena, I will defer to you on this matter.”

“Until the next issue, right?” she asked before kissing him.

“Drekk, you’re a difficult female.” His horns tilted as far back as she’d ever seen. Then, his lips pressed against her neck. “Difficult or not, you are mine, and I’m never letting go.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, Z. Yours. Always, and forevermore...”

EPILOGUE

MAGGIE

“**Y**ou are tense,” Zirkov said as he and Maggie walked through the woods surrounding the cabins and lake rented for the DAA’s annual retreat.

“The last time I came to one of these, I was a marshal. Now I’m...”

He kissed her forehead. “You’re the same person you were before. And if anyone says or does anything to insult you, I will gladly correct them.”

“How, precisely? You’re not one to negotiate. In fact, why did you even want to come to this? You never came in the past.”

“The new Assistant Director said I should come to meet his candidates for liaison. I told him you are the only liaison I will accept. He said he’d consider hiring you as a civilian liaison if I came to the retreat.”

“Really? That’s why we’re here?” Zirkov would sacrifice anything for her, including his privacy. He didn’t socialize with humans, and this retreat was a social event.

“I want you back as my liaison, Magdalena.”

“Don’t you see enough of me when you come home at night?”

“I could never have enough of you.”

Maggie trailed her hand down his chest. “I never told you how much it means to me that you believe I’m your sholani, despite what the doctors told you.”

He pulled her against his chest. “Once I listened to your advice and trusted my heart, I knew the truth. You, and only you, are mine. Forever.”

“I hope that means you won’t get upset when I tell you what I did.”

He dawned that stoic look she hadn’t seen since they’d married. “Tell me.”

“I contacted your doctors on Zyan and told them about us. I wanted to know if they’d made any progress in healing you.”

“Why would you do this? Do you not believe we are heartmates?”

“I believe it. I have for a long time, but I want you to be sure, Z. For you to have peace of mind.”

“I have everything I need. You. Whatever the doctors told you, forget it. We are heartmates. I have nothing more to say on the subject.”

He took her hand, and they continued walking until she planted her feet in the dirt. “Maybe you don’t have anything to add, but I do.”

“Sholani—”

She held up her hand, silencing him. “When you’re unsettled, it’s my job to help you, just as you helped me. We’re more than heartmates, we’re a team, partners, in every sense of the word. I know you love me, that you’re committed to me, and that nothing can tear us apart. But I know deep inside there’s still a part of you that aches to know the truth. Not being able to ease that ache hurts, Z. I had to at least try. That’s why I contacted the doctors on Zyan. You deserve to not question yourself... or us. But we’ve been speculating based on theories, not science. I want to put your mind at ease, my sholan.”

Large hands cupped her head. “I’ve stopped questioning. I am fully committed to you, sholani.”

“I know. And it’s because you love me that you will listen to what they said.”

After a moment, he nodded.

“I told them everything we’ve been through and that we’d mated. They were shocked to hear you’d fully claimed me. They said no other male with this same condition has ever stayed hard for a female long enough to mate. *Ever*. They said it’s impossible.”

Zirkov’s eyebrows pinched together. “Do they think it’s because the effects of the drug have reversed or worn off?”

“No, the damage from the drugs is permanent. But they also said there is only one way you could fuck with your mating cock... if you are with your sholani.”

Silver eyes grew impossibly wide, matched only by the smile on Zirkov’s face. Then he shut down, looking casual. “See, Magdalena, I told you we are heartmates. If you’d only trusted your heart all along, then we would have mated much sooner.”

She slapped his arm. “Asshole.”

Zirkov swung her to him, then curved his hand over her ass. “Is that an invitation to take you? With *both* my cocks, sholani?”

“Out here? No way.” She pressed her hips against his. Sure enough, both cocks were hard for her. “That’s another reason I shouldn’t return as Earth Intelligence’s liaison to GI7. We’d never get any work done.”

“Indeed. But we have so few marshals and I wish to spend more time with you.”

With Stenikov gone, Konnitch and Zirkov were stretched thin keeping all the newest rescued women secure and transporting them to and from Dal to testify.

“I guess I could be the liaison again.”

Zirkov ran a finger over her brows. “No. Not if it will bring this sadness to your face. You desire to do more with your life.”

“You know me so well after two months as mates, don’t you?”

“Enough to know you need more than I’ve given you.”

She leaned forward and kissed him. “You’ve been wonderful. If I take the liaison job, I’ll return as a civilian, which means it will be a full-time desk job.”

“And you need action.”

“I need to make a difference. But I do have an idea.”

His fingers sifted through her hair. “Tell me, and I will make it happen.”

“Hold on there, cowboy, you haven’t heard my idea.”

“I am a commander, not a cowboy.”

Two agents walked toward them on the trail. McCarthy and Thomson. They’d only been with Earth Intelligence for a year. McCarthy’s lips thinned as he whispered to Thomson. When the men passed Maggie and Zirkov, McCarthy intentionally shoulder-slammed Maggie.

“Watch it,” she said.

“You don’t belong here, Walsh. Go spy somewhere else.”

Zirkov’s horns pitched forward, and he unfurled his arms and hands, flexing every muscle as he followed the agents. “You will not disrespect my female.”

The agents both turned, hands on their still-holstered guns. Maggie ran between the males, her back pressed against Zirkov. “No need to draw your weapons.”

“Call off your dog,” McCarthy replied.

“Do you really want to go there? I can easily step aside and let my *husband* teach you manners, or you guys can stop being asses.”

Thomson's arm flung out, stopping McCarthy from charging forward. "Kes is the one threatening us."

"He's protecting me. There's a difference."

"I accidentally bumped into you. It's a narrow path."

"Stop the bullshit, McCarthy. You're not fooling anyone. If you have a problem with me, tell me to my face. Yes, I was the leak. I was *used*. Og'dals kidnapped me, implanted an alien device in my brain, and drugged me. They made me their marionette and Assistant Director Sutherland helped them. In addition to being physically used, I was betrayed by the one person who was supposed to have my back. Imagine yourself in that position. Strike that. I pray for your sake you never have to watch yourself point a gun at the person you love because aliens control your brain and your body. And if you can't understand any of what I went through, then remind yourselves that the higher-ups cleared me. Focus your hostilities on those who are trying to destroy Earth, not on innocent people who fight to save it."

Thomson lifted a brow. "You're right. It won't happen again." He shoved McCarthy forward.

"I still want to beat them," Zirkov said as the agents disappeared down the trail.

Maggie grabbed his hand. "Come on. Let's do something fun."

"Beating them senseless would be fun."

"I think I know what I want to do with my life, Z."

His hand curved over her ass. "Make love to me night *and* day?"

She poked him in the chest. "You are causing as much trouble as those agents."

He replied by poking her between her breasts, though not as hard.

"Hey!"

“I’m following your example, Ms. Walsh. And you did tell me I may poke you anytime.”

“That wasn’t the type of poking I was talking about.” She flicked his hand away, but he resumed poking her. “This is annoying, Z.”

“Yes, it is.”

“So, when I did this to you over the past few years, you found me annoying?”

“Very much.”

“Why didn’t you stop me?”

“I was happy to have any contact with you, even your finger poking me.”

He was still poking her with his finger. “You can stop now.”

“Not until you say yes to going back to work with me.”

“I won’t be strong-armed, or fingered—hell, that doesn’t sound right—”

“I think it’s an excellent idea.” A huge grin slid onto his face as a hand slid down her body.

She shoved him back. “Keep your fingers away from me, at least until I finish talking. As I was saying, I won’t be strong-armed into working with someone who refuses to follow the rules. But I’ll give you a chance to convince me.”

“I follow the rules. The ones that aren’t stupid. What do you propose?”

“A game of hide-and-seek. You give me a five-minute head start. Then, you’ll have three minutes to find me. If you do, I’ll return to work with GI7 as the liaison officer. But if you don’t find me, you say yes to what I’m planning to do, without knowing the details.”

He lost his smile.

“What’s wrong? You don’t trust me?”

“I trust you, vasha, and I would never stop you from doing what your heart desires. But the bet is not fair to you. You cannot win. I will find you. I will always find you.”

She locked her hands around his neck before kissing him. “Then I guess I win either way.”

He pressed his lips to hers in one final kiss, then turned her around and swatted her ass. “Go, female. You have five minutes before I track you and make you mine again.”

“The bet was whether I’d work for you.”

“Oh, you will work for me. On your hands and knees.”

“But that’s not—”

“Four minutes.”

“Shit.” Maggie took off, darting through the woods, not sure where she could hide that he wouldn’t find her. Trails and cabins were scattered throughout the area but he had a keen sense of smell. Crossing paths with a skunk would be perfect right about now. Then again, she had to decide if she wanted him to catch her or not, especially since she wasn’t sure what the wager was at this point. She didn’t want to go back to work as a liaison officer.

That settled it; she needed to outmaneuver Zirkov.

Maggie ran straight toward the BBQ party taking place over by the firepit. Some of the men stoked the bonfire while others carried the hot dogs, burgers, and alcohol from the main lodge. If she could blend in with the crowd, the smoke and smells of all the people and food would hopefully mask her scent. But she needed a good hiding spot, too.

“Hey, Maggie, are you eating with us?” Shaunda asked. “I brought a blueberry pie.”

“Shaunda!” She gave the analyst a big hug. “Of all the times to tempt me, damn! I’m in the middle of a bet. I need a place to hide. But save me some pie.”

“Will do!”

Maggie scanned the trees for one with enough branches for climbing. Then she spotted a deer stand at the edge of the festivities. Perfect!

She climbed the wood slats nailed into the tree trunk and pushed open the hatch in the floor. The tree stand had camouflaged netting around the sides so she could watch the party from high up and spot Zirkov.

Her heart raced as she waited for him to emerge from the woods, but he never did. Had Thomson and McCarthy returned and started a fight with him? Thomson had been sincere, but McCarthy....

A hand covered her mouth from behind. Lips settled on her neck and planted kisses until they reached her ear. "You lost, female," Zirkov said as he removed his boots and then unlatched his pants. "I will claim my reward."

"Here?"

"We're camouflaged. No one will see us. But then you knew that when you chose this location, my clever Magdalena."

"I chose it because I didn't think you'd smell me way up here, especially with all the people and food down there."

"I told you, I will always find you. And I have. Time to claim my prize." He ripped her t-shirt down the middle with his claws.

"The bet was I'd return to work with you."

"That was before I changed the terms."

"You can't change the bet like that."

With another two swipes, her bra fell off, leaving her upper body completely bare.

"We can't do this here, Z. They'll hear us," she whispered. "And you need to stop shredding my clothing. I'll have to leave here naked."

"You'll wear my shirt."

“I’m starting to think you enjoy me in your clothing more than mine.”

“My clothing carries my scent. Other males will know to stay away from you,” he said as he flicked his tongue along a very hard nipple.

His every touch wove a spell through her that made her forget the outside world. She couldn’t keep her hands off him any longer. Maggie caressed the pleasure nodes on his head as his lips moved lower.

Zirkov kissed a path between her breasts down to her navel before flipping her skirt up. With another two swipes of his claws, her panties fell off. Her legs automatically spread for him.

He buried his face in her pussy, circling her clit before sucking on it. It was all she could do to keep quiet with each stroke. This was going to happen here, with everyone she knew feet away.

The noise from the party below filled the air. No one conversation stood out as Zirkov brought her to the edge of an orgasm, then broke off.

Silver eyes peered up at her, a devilish look on his handsome face. “You’re doing well, my mate.”

Fuck that. If he was going to toy with her, she could do the same. When his head lowered and he flattened his tongue, slowly running it through her sensitive folds, she sank her fingers into his pleasure nodes. Any thoughts of torturing him disappeared as his fingers fucked her and his blessedly gifted tongue played with her clit. Each time he changed the motion against her engorged nub, she mimicked the motion against the bumps at the base of his horns. His moans filled the air better than any symphony because this song had been written for her.

Her body arched, and she contained the scream as the orgasm lifted and held her, making her see stars in a tree with nothing but leaves and branches overhead. Zirkov pulled his

face away, but not his horns as she continued rubbing the nodes. He seemed powerless in her grip.

“Drekk, female, what are you doing to me?” he said, breathless as his body began to shake.

“Remove your pants.” It wasn’t an order he needed to hear twice. He shoved his pants below two enormous, hard cocks. “On your back, Commander.”

“You’re supposed to be on your hands and knees.”

“Not this time.” Maggie straddled his hips and ground against his mating and pleasure cocks together.

“Krike, female, that’s good.”

“It’s about to get better,” she said as she guided his mating cock into her.

He bucked upward, driving himself in until their hips crashed together. She pinned his arms to the ground. “I’m in charge.”

“You’d like to think that.”

Her hands moved up to the base of his horns, holding them like handlebars. The tips curved back on instinct to protect her. She lifted herself slowly at first, then slammed down on him. “Something’s missing.”

“My pleasure cock.” His hands parted her ass, but she swatted them away.

“Hang in there, cowboy. And I do mean hang for another few seconds.” She wrapped her hand around his pleasure cock and guided the tip into her entrance alongside his mating cock.

“Maggie?”

“I’m in charge today, cowboy.”

“You’re a bossy little thing,” he said, his voice enthusiastic. “I’ve never heard of this position.”

“I’m gonna ride you.”

“Both cocks, together?”

“You’re the one who insisted on using both cocks together. We’re gonna do this my way,” she said as she eased down on both cocks.

Zirkov waited as she adjusted and took all of him. She’d never felt so full, even when his pleasure cock was in her ass. Having both cocks in her pussy felt surreal, but it was the expression on his face that stole her heart. She’d never seen the male look so happy, so vulnerable, and at peace with the universe.

When she seated herself as fully as she could, she rose again. The bumps on his pleasure cock stroked her inside. With each rise and fall, she gained a momentum that started a cascade of electricity within her.

“Oh, my...”

Zirkov propped himself up on his elbows, giving her better leverage to fuck him. “Ride me, vasha.”

“You... keep... calling... me.... vasha...not... sholani,” she struggled to get the words out as she rode him. She’d never asked him before what vasha meant. He’d only said it was an endearment.

Zirkov’s lips curled and his eyes never left her. There was a solitary focus to him... her.

“You are my sholani. There is no other for me and there never will be.” He wrapped his arms around her torso and eased her back, positioning himself on top of her, his cocks still inside her. “But from the day I met you, you’ve been my vasha.” His hips slammed against hers, driving himself deeper than she’d achieved.

“Yes.... God, yes!” The words leapt from her as he continued a punishing pace. The orgasm exploded within her. “Yes!!!”

Zirkov stilled, his seed pumping into her. That possessive expression on his face made her heart expand and her toes curl.

From beyond the tree blind, a series of whistles and cheers rose.

“You go, girl!” Shaunda shouted.

“Oh my God!” Maggie said, covering her face with her hands as Zirkov continued releasing inside her.

He firmly pulled her hands away from her face. “There is no shame in what we are doing. I told you I’d claim you when I found you.”

“I thought we’d go back to our cabin.” Yeah, that was on her. She should have known he always meant what he said. She stroked his face. “I don’t regret a second with you, but I have one question. Can we live up here forever? I’m not sure I can face those people down there.”

“I will kill anyone who makes you feel like anything less than the queen you are.”

“Queen?” She laughed. “Where did you get that from?”

“It’s what I’ve called you from the beginning. Vasha. Queen. You are my queen, the ruler of my heart, the one I would die for, the one who rules over me. You are and always will be my one and only.”

“I thought that was a sholani.”

“It is more than a sholani. You’re the one I’ve chosen, beyond what the gods fated for me. You are a part of me, Magdalena. Wherever I go, whatever I do, I will always carry you with me, in my thoughts, my heart, and my soul.”

“I love that,” Maggie said as she looped her hands around his neck and pulled him down for another kiss. “Because you, Z, are, and always will be my sholan, my best friend, my lover, and the only person I’ll ever trust with my heart. Now, kiss me.”

“Gladly, vasha.” Zirkov sealed his lips to hers and once again made her forget about the world around them.

Thank You for reading! - Julie

What has Maggie decided to do with her life? Yeah, she lost the bet to Zirkov, but will she return to being a liaison, or

does she have something better in mind? And what will Zirkov say about her chosen path? If you want to find out what happens, read the bonus scene, "Queen of the Castle."

And guess which alien's heading to the Big Apple. Will he find love there, especially with the magic of the holidays in the air?

Keep reading to find out (and to get that link to Zirkov's bonus chapter).

The **link to the free bonus chapter** is at the bottom of the blurb for *WHISKED AWAY BY THE ALIEN* which follows.

WHISKED AWAY BY THE ALIEN (BLURB)

Holiday Heartmates (book 1)

There's an alien in my kitchen wearing an apron... and nothing else.

There's something delicious cooking in my kitchen and it isn't the donuts or latkes. The tall blue alien with horns that hit the ceiling has arrived in time to save Hannukah dinner for my family, but he knows nothing about cooking. Why is he really here? And how do I tell him that under that apron he's supposed to wear clothing!



Mine to Eat!

Whisked Away by the Alien is a steamy alien first contact romance laden with discovery, love, and temptation. Expect twists and turns and a very Happy Ever After.

Read [Whisked Away by the Alien](#)

Read [Zirkov's Bonus epilogue](https://dl.bookfunnel.com/8dqw877nae) <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/8dqw877nae>

THANK YOU!

Thank you for reading the last book in my Alien Marshals & Mates series! I'd love if you would leave a review—even if only a few words—about *Zirkov*. Just write what you liked about my book or how it made you feel... whatever is in your heart.

[Leave a Review on Amazon](#)

[Leave a Review on GoodReads](#)

[Leave a Review on BookBub](#)

Thank you!

Julie

SERIES BY JULIE K. COHEN

If Julie were an Alien, she'd bounce around from planet to planet, looking for new adventures. This could explain why she writes in several romance genres.

ALIEN ROMANCE

- [Zyanthan Warriors](#)
- [Alien Marshals & Mates](#)
- [Holiday Heartmates](#)

MONSTER ROMANCE

- [Knotty Monsters](#) (Orcs!)

SCI FI ROMANCE (no aliens)

- [Mine to Protect](#)
- [Mindwiped](#)

REVERSE HAREM ROMANCE

- [Guardian Wolves](#) (paranormal)
- [Prison World](#) (humans, non aliens, Sci Fi romance)

PARANORMAL ROMANCE

- [Broken Shifters](#) (main series)
- [White Wolves](#) (prequel series)
- [Guardian Wolves](#) (after Broken Shifters; this is reverse harem)

NEWSLETTER SIGNUP

Stay up to date

If you want to receive updates on new books being released, and receive access to bonus chapters, please [sign up for my email newsletter at JulieKCohenRomance.com](http://JulieKCohenRomance.com)

ABOUT JULIE

Julie K. Cohen has always ‘played’ with stories and plots in her head, but never conceived of putting pen to paper until her high school years. While building a career and family over the years always held the highest priority, she never gave up writing. Through the years, family, husband, and friends encouraged her to keep writing. Without their love and support, and the additional support of the writing community, she wouldn’t be where she is today... sitting in front of her computer, creating new characters, plots, and romances for her readers to enjoy.



JulieKCohenRomance.com

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to Deborah Garland and my beta readers for their insight, feedback, opinions, passion, and support. You ladies are the best! Additional thanks go to my wonderful ARC readers for taking the time to read, review, and help me locate those pesky typos before publishing. I'm very lucky to have you!

Julie

CONTACT ME!

I'd love to hear from you! Questions and feedback about what you like and didn't like in my novel are welcome! Please contact via my website JulieKCohenRomance.com or follow me on social media.

Search for **Julie K. Cohen** on any of these platforms:

Threads: <https://www.threads.net/@juliekcohen>

