

LAURIE ROMA



A 3013 NOVELLA

3013: JUSTICE

3013: JUSTICE

3013: THE SERIES

Laurie Roma

THE 3013 SERIES

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3013: JUSTICE

Liberated from her life as a captive, Secret has hidden herself away at the sanctuary in Zion to rest and recover. Unfortunately, time is a luxury she can't afford. Before she can truly consider enjoying her newfound freedom, she must first fulfill the vow of vengeance she'd made and deal with the dark stain of her past.

As an elite assassin for the Alliance, Commander Talon Spartan is used to living in the shadows. He always figured he was meant to spend his life alone, but surprisingly, fate has other plans for him. Secret is a bright star in his dark world, and he is willing to do whatever it takes to help her find the justice she seeks.

Will they be able to free her from her past, or will tragedy tear them apart before they can truly find happiness together?

DEDICATION

This one is for those who suffer in secret.

May you find light, love, and a little bit of justice.

PROLOGUE

THE WORLD HAD changed in the year 3013.

Earth rebuilt their civilization after the Alien Wars ravaged the planet and an unknown virus nearly wiped out the entire population, but nothing could ever bring back what once was. A new age of mankind was born, but some of the edicts set forth for humans to survive have become obsolete in the ever-changing universe.

What fate has in store is uncertain, though, one constant is clear. In a cosmos filled with endless possibilities, love is the ultimate prize. Warriors from every species search the stars for love, and they will risk all to fight for those who hold their hearts. But danger is always present when worlds collide. As new challenges arise, all the known races must adapt and learn from their allies. However, not all desire peace, or to live in harmony.

And as a new year dawns, the battle for the future has only begun...

CHAPTER ONE

AS THE MOST popular bar in Zion, Exodus was always crazy busy. However, during the past month, it had seemed like the entire city had been stopping by to celebrate. Reports of a cure for the virus that caused infertility in a large portion of the human race had been circulating around the city for months, but most people hadn't believed the rumors were actually true.

Until now.

Over the last few weeks, the first doses of the cure had been administered to those lucky enough to have gotten a coveted appointment at one of the designated treatment centers. The entire city was celebrating the eradication of the last mark of damage the Zyphir had caused, and those who had suffered from the virus were now filled with a new sense of hope.

While the virus left behind by the Zyphir had only infected humans, all of the known races were immensely pleased about the medical breakthrough. Those who lived in Zion were especially excited about this new development and what it meant for the future of Earth. Although most of the world had been ravaged during the war with the Zyphir, the city of Zion had remained essentially undamaged. As a perfect blending of past and present, Zion had always been a unique city.

It was a united zone where all the races lived together in harmony.

Even though Alliance elites, citizens, and rebels were basically considered equals within Zion, there was still a vast divide between the different human classes throughout the rest

of the world. Hopefully, the creation of the cure would move them one step closer to achieving true equality and bring about the dawn of a new age for humanity.

The official statement made by the company that had created the cure confirmed that every elite, citizen, and rebel would be eligible to receive the treatment. From the gossip making the rounds, some of those within Alliance command had not been pleased that Hart Pharmaceuticals hadn't just handed the cure over to them. Despite their irritation, the rest of the world was happy that everyone who needed the cure could and would receive it without bias.

Instead of dealing with the usual political posturing bullshit, the Hart Pharmaceutical representatives had gone straight to the owners of Exodus to ask for help organizing the launch of the cure. Alliance officers might be officially in charge, but they only had the illusion of control over Zion. Everyone knew that Rogan and Lucian Adaro and their Dragon Warrior mate, Jade Vyper, were the true leaders of the city.

Although many people rightly feared them, they also trusted the powerful trio to protect the city and everyone who resided there.

Besides the various med-centers throughout the city that had been designated as vaccination sites, the large coliseum next to Exodus had also been set up as a location for people to receive the cure. That was another reason the bar was overflowing with patrons. Once people were finished with their appointments in the coliseum, most of them made their way next door to join the festivities.

To accommodate the masses, Exodus had been opening its doors earlier than usual. It was a pain in the ass for the entire staff, but it was only a temporary inconvenience. Or so they had thought. After a month of dealing with the extended hours, things still weren't slowing down. While packing the place might be good for business, they would have to hire more staff if it kept up much longer.

Exodus might be the most popular hangout in Zion, but at its core, it was first and foremost a Krytos sanctuary. The entire compound consisted of several adjacent buildings that were a mix of historic structures and new construction, most of which were off-limits to everyone but the staff and residents. Only a few of those buildings were open to the public, but all guests and customers on the premises still had to follow the rules of the sanctuary.

The main bar was located in the massive white stone structure that had once been a revered art museum. The elegant exterior of the building had been preserved, but the inside of Exodus had been renovated to suit their needs. Outdoor seating had been extended into the large courtyard between the buildings since they'd run out of room on the main patio. Even the nightclub on the lower level had been opened early for extra seating, but that wasn't the only addition.

The Sky Bar was a new female-only lounge located on the rooftop of Exodus. Situated under a sky dome made out of purple crystal that could be opened or closed depending on the weather, the lounge was a beautiful haven within the sanctuary. The Sky Bar offered comfortable seating, access to

a full menu of delicious food and drinks, and the promise of safety.

The new bar had primarily been created for all the females who were now living at the sanctuary, especially the former Tarin slaves who had recently been freed. Although some of the females at Exodus roamed around all of the various areas inside the building freely, there were many who still felt uncomfortable around males.

Because of that, the only males allowed inside the lounge were Rogan and Lucian. Out of deference for the females, the other male employees limited their involvement in the Sky Bar to working security outside the entrance. Several of the males offered to help restock and clean after closing, but the females who worked there took pride in handling all of those tasks themselves.

Especially the Tarin females who had only recently discovered freedom.

The Sky Bar had become a new favorite hotspot, not just for humans, but for females of all the races. Some joked that they simply enjoyed hanging out in the testosterone-free zone, while others just liked the unapologetically feminine ambiance in the lounge. At the moment, part of the dome was opened to let in a pleasant breeze while the other section of the crystal had been darkened from its usual pale lavender to a deeper shade in order to block out some of the strong sunlight.

Secret preferred working in the main bar downstairs over the elegant lounge. At least there was a chance she could be entertained with a good brawl or a decent scuffle. Regrettably, she'd been splitting her time between the two bars since some

of the Tarin females had mentioned feeling safer whenever she worked a shift with them. If her presence made them feel a little more comfortable while they acclimated to their new surroundings, she was willing to try to accommodate them.

However, there were times she wished she hadn't agreed.

Breathing out a heavy sigh, she scanned the crowd from where she was pouring drinks behind the long bar. This was one of those times. Even though she stood in a shaded area of the lounge, it was still too damn bright in there to suit her current mood. She hadn't gotten much sleep the night before, and a pounding headache only added to her fatigue and irritability.

With the way she was feeling, it would probably be safer for everyone if she returned to her quarters. Some solitude in a dark, quiet room sounded like bliss compared to being bombarded by a cacophony of feminine chatter and cheerful music, but she didn't want to burden anyone by asking them to cover her shift.

Not that anyone was free to cover for her anyway.

Since the launch of the cure was done, Rogan, Lucian, and Jade had left early the previous day to travel to Ilius to visit her mother and fathers. They had already postponed the trip several times since their official mating, but now was the perfect time for them to go and share the wonderful news that they were expecting their first baby.

The entire staff was dedicated to making sure things ran smoothly in their absence. While the longer hours and the additional workload that came with the influx of patrons were a pain in the ass, no one complained. Even some of the more

fearful and timid Tarin females who usually hid away from crowds had been helping out in the kitchens and during cleanup.

Every table was currently occupied in the Sky Bar, and servers hurried around the room, delivering food and drinks and clearing away empty glasses and plates. There was a definite charge of excitement in the air that had become familiar. The new infertility cure had filled people with hope. That was all people were talking about, though there were plenty who remained cautious and a little uncertain.

For someone like Secret, the cure didn't mean anything to her personally. Still, she was happy about what it meant for the humans, like the group of friends sitting at the bar in front of her. When she finished pouring their drinks, she set the glasses down in front of them. They thanked her in unison before they each took a sip of the frothy, neon rainbow-layered liquid they had ordered.

She snorted out a laugh and shook her head at the odd-sounding yummy noises the humans made. She would never understand why someone would want to consume something that looked like it could be radioactive, but that particular drink seemed to be popular amongst the patrons of the Sky Bar.

Humans really were fascinating creatures.

While Secret thought they were strange most of the time, she appreciated their complex minds and the way they connected with one another. She also enjoyed their flair for creativity and innovation. Humans had invented a variety of wonderful concepts over the years. Some of those things had

vastly improved their quality of life, while others had brought them to the edge of destruction.

While most of the races had similar attributes and physical characteristics, humans were distinguished by their diversity. Secret liked their physical differences, especially their varying body types, shades of their skin, and the color of their eyes and hair. She often wondered if they appreciated their marks of uniqueness, but figured people often disregarded what was common to them.

The four friends sitting in front of her on the other side of the bar were a perfect example of what made humans so interesting. All of them were beautiful, yet they looked vastly different. One had her brown hair pulled back in a thick braid, while the petite woman sitting next to her had long, loose curls that fell down to the middle of her back in a vibrant shade of red.

The third female had blonde hair done in short, stylish spikes, allowing for all to see the star tattooed next to her right eye. The last female had her sleek black hair cut to just above her shoulders and there wasn't a single blemish on her beautiful dark skin except for the scroll tattoo near her right eye and her bonded mark near her left eye.

The scroll mark designated her as one of the rare fertile females the Alliance had enhanced as one of their elite soldiers, while the star mark near the blonde's right eye declared her as infertile. Unlike their friends, the redhead and brunette bore no identifying marks, but Secret knew from listening to them that the redhead was a citizen, while the brunette was definitely a rebel.

With the infertility cure, those marks would no longer be necessary.

The four friends had always been regulars at Exodus, but they seemed to prefer the Sky Bar now. They usually sat in Secret's section when she was on duty, and while she didn't interact with them much, she had learned a great deal about humans by listening to their conversations. She enjoyed their playful banter, heated arguments, and candid opinions. The four of them had grown up together, and while life might have taken them down different paths, their friendship had remained steadfast and true.

Secret respected that type of loyalty.

It was rare in any world, but she thought their devotion to one another was even more commendable considering their differences in status. From what she had observed from other patrons that frequented the bar, friendships that crossed boundaries were difficult to maintain. That didn't seem to matter to them, though.

Individuality wasn't something other races usually prized, especially the D'Aire. Truthfully, she had never been too concerned with fitting in, but it was impossible to ignore her own imperfections when she was constantly reminded of them. Her silvery white hair and iridescent blue eyes designated her as a member of her race, but the scars on her face, neck, and arms were enough to make her stand out.

And those were nothing compared to the marks on the rest of her body.

The looks of sympathy her scarred visage garnered from strangers annoyed her, but she had learned to ignore them. She

didn't want or need anyone's pity. Even the glances of disgust and revulsion were easy to overlook. Honestly, she thought the way the other members of her own race went out of their way to avoid her was more disrespectful than anything else. They acted as if her defects were contagious, or they could somehow be tainted by association.

Like the D'Aire currently sitting on the opposite side of the room. When the two D'Aire females had entered the bar with a few of their human friends, they had visibly flinched once they'd gotten a look at Secret. After their group had been seated, they had done their best to pretend that she didn't exist.

It wasn't the first time that had happened, and it wouldn't be the last.

She tolerated their behavior since it was simply rude and not an actual issue that had to be dealt with. But if they weren't careful, someone was bound to push her too far. If that ever happened, they would find out she wasn't the typical passive D'Aire female they were used to dealing with. A lot of the female D'Aire excelled at fighting, but Secret was more than just a warrior.

She was a trained killer.

Over the years, she had honed both her body and mind into a lethal weapon with one purpose...vengeance. That wasn't exactly something she'd ever announce publicly, though. Her past and her future weren't subjects up for discussion. Her life story was her own, and that was a secret she didn't want to share with anyone at the sanctuary.

She was sure a few of the residents at Exodus could sense she was dangerous, but that wasn't surprising. Even though

Secret was the sole D'Aire residing at Exodus, she wasn't the only one with a dark side. Most of the staff members carried a similar lethal aura, although they were more likely to punch someone in the face than gut them with a blade.

Secret admitted she had a particular fondness for sharps, as was evident by the twin curved blades she had hidden away in her boots. She also had a set of smaller knives tucked inside the leather forearm sleeves that were attached to the black fingerless gloves she wore. Weapons were generally frowned upon at the sanctuary, but she never went anywhere without her blades, so she simply kept them concealed.

Killing wasn't something she was proud of, but she wasn't ashamed of it either. Her years of being a captive on Tartarus had given her a different perspective on life. She had been forced to kill out of necessity in order to survive. It was kill or be killed, but she still lived by a strict moral code.

Having the chance to rest and recover at Exodus had been a blessing. It was a refuge that provided more than just a safe space. Meeting the people who lived and worked there had also been an unexpected bonus. They were a rough and rowdy bunch, but they were also some of the best souls imaginable.

Secret was a loner by nature, but she was forced to interact with a variety of people at the sanctuary on the daily. Before coming to Exodus, she had little knowledge of how to live a regular existence, but she was slowly learning. Most of the time, she considered socializing a complete pain, though she had to admit it had been good for her.

Still, she would never be what others considered *normal*.

While there were only a handful of people she thought of as friends and even fewer whom she trusted, she would willingly throw down for anyone at Exodus. Especially all of the Tarin females who were at the sanctuary looking for safety. Secret might not talk about what had happened to her, but the scars on her body were enough to make the females at the sanctuary trust her in a way that words couldn't.

The Dragon Warriors had offered to remove her marks, but she had turned them down. While some might have gladly accepted their generous offer, she couldn't. Secret saw her scars as badges of honor. Of proof that she had survived a hell few could imagine. Perhaps one day she would be ready to let those awful reminders go.

But not yet.

Not until she completed her quest for vengeance.

While she could have chosen to cover them, she preferred wearing the black leather vest and matching pants that most of the Krytos favored. If seeing her scars bothered people, that was too damn bad for them. There was no way to cover up the slash mark that ran through one of her brows and down her cheek or the curved mark on one side of her neck that proved just how close she'd come to losing her head.

Remembering how she'd gotten that particular mark made her headache worse. She finished up another drink order, then was glad to be spared a prolonged trip down memory lane when one of the servers hurried over to slump against the bar top.

"Is it time to close yet?" Violet whined. Bonded to a Krytos and another human, she was one of the few humans

who lived and worked at Exodus.

Secret's lips twitched as she fought back a smile. "I wish."

"Do me a solid, will you? Fill the drink order for the brats at table twelve before they change their minds again? If they do, I might just have to hurt them."

"They been giving you a hard time?"

Violet sighed. "It's nothing that bad. They're just being annoying."

"I'll ask Juno to take the drinks over when they're ready," Secret offered, mentioning the large Krytos covered in tattoos and attitude that was currently scaring the shit out of a group of humans waiting for a table near the entrance.

"Oh, I would love that. You're the best!" Violet giggled. "That should give me enough time to run downstairs and make sure Fiona and Levi eat something before the next rush. I'll be back in a few."

As she hurried away, Secret called the order up on her screen and got to work making the drinks. While the booths and tables had automated order options, a lot of the patrons preferred to place their food and drink orders with one of the servers.

"It's the Travers sisters and their friends," the blonde sitting at the bar announced quietly. She shared a look with her friends, then she shot Secret a conspiratorial glance, including her in on their conversation. "I heard they threw a fit last week when they couldn't get the cure."

The brunette rolled her eyes. "Why didn't they just make an appointment like everyone else?"

“They just got back from one of the space stations. Since Regent Travers is their uncle, I’m guessing they just expected to show up whenever they wanted,” the female with black hair told them dryly. “They were one of the wealthiest families in Light City, but they moved here after the massacre. I’m sure they were used to getting preferential treatment wherever they went and are not used to how different things are here in Zion.”

“Welcome to the real world,” the redhead snickered, then she let out a happy sigh. “I’m really excited about the cure. I can’t wait for my appointment next week.”

“I’m still not sold on this whole thing,” the blonde said, a hint of worry evident in her tone. “Maybe I’ll wait a few more months to make sure you don’t turn into a zombie or something before I get mine.”

Their brunette friend snorted in derision. “I think it’s a trap. They might claim Hart Pharmaceuticals is managing everything, but the new guy in charge of the company is still an Alliance officer. That makes me highly suspicious.”

“She’s right,” their scroll friend confirmed. “I don’t want anything bad to happen to any of you, so I think we need to remain cautious.”

“I heard some of the other scrolls are even getting the cure to completely eradicate all traces of the virus,” the redhead explained.

The brunette scoffed. “That’s crazy. Why would they inject something into their body that they don’t need?”

As they continued debating, Secret finished the drink order for the problem table, then she waved Juno over and briefly explained the situation. With a feral grin, the Krytos lifted the tray of drinks and practically skipped toward the table.

“What do you think, Secret?” the redhead asked. “Do you think they’re lying about the cure, or is this really the miracle we’ve all been waiting for?”

Secret didn’t say anything for a moment as she took her time to consider how to respond. While she didn’t know much about the medical side of things, she understood being overly cautious when something sounded too good to be true.

The cure meant everything was going to change for the human race.

The virus and the resulting infertility had been the cause of so much conflict and pain over the years. Declining population had forced humans to declare martial law, and females were literally branded with their fertility status to make it easier for elite males to claim them. While the Alliance selected certain individuals to be given enhancements in order to make them stronger, faster, and smarter, citizens were relegated to positions with little to no chances of wealth or advancement. Citizens might be the backbone of society, but they were completely unappreciated and overlooked most of the time.

Then, there were the rebels.

Humans that were classified as rebels were essentially designated as criminals. The rebels didn’t believe in the Alliance’s rules and regulations, nor did they agree with women being marked with their fertility status. Rebels also refused to allow their children to be taken away so they could

be tested and conscripted into military service, which was one of the main reasons rebels had fought against the Alliance for so long.

With the creation of the cure, humans were going to have to reevaluate their priorities. If fertility was no longer an issue, the divide between the human factions would become obsolete. That would change the entire power structure and destroy the control the Alliance had over everyone. Secret wasn't sure if the Alliance was ready for that, but she believed freedom and equality were definitely worth fighting for.

Humans had been segregated for far too long, and the current class system had done more damage than good over the years. Secret understood what it felt like to have her freedom taken away, and for that reason alone she wanted to destroy the system that branded females as potential breeders and alter it into something better. A great deal of reform needed to happen in order for Earth to step away from the current martial law regime, but curing the virus was the first step to making that a reality.

“I don't think it hurts to be cautious, but the cure wasn't created by the Alliance. It was made by an elite scientist and his Xenon mate,” Secret pointed out. “The Xenon wouldn't have gone out of their way to come here and help create a cure if they were deliberately trying to hurt humans.”

That perked the redhead up. “That totally makes sense.”

Secret couldn't help but add, “Do you really think Jade, Rogan, and Lucian would have helped distribute the cure if it was dangerous?”

“Okay, you got me there,” the brunette grudgingly admitted. “But I’m still going to wait to make sure people don’t start dropping dead before I sign up.”

Secret turned toward the entrance of the bar at the sound of a commotion. A young Krytos male was causing a stir as he pushed his way through the crowd of people that were waiting for tables. Secret frowned at him through the glass, then her expression cleared when she noticed he was carrying the petite Tarin female he was in love with.

They might have looked odd together since he was so much bigger than she was, but they were a good match. Rex was a soft-spoken, sweet, empathic young male, while Mara was struggling to overcome a life that had been filled with pain and suffering. Although they were taking things slow, it was nice to see the relationship building between them.

But something had obviously disturbed their newfound happiness.

For the sake of expediency, Secret boosted herself up and over the bar top instead of wasting time taking the long way around. Patrons and servers gasped and scrambled to get out of her way as she hurried toward the entrance.

“What’s wrong?” Secret demanded as soon as the glass doors slid open.

Hearing her voice, the Tarin female leaped out of Rex’s arms and flung herself at Secret. She hated being touched. Everyone at the sanctuary knew that, but Secret understood the Tarin female wasn’t thinking straight at the moment.

“What happened, Mara?” she asked, awkwardly patting the Tarin on the back. When all she did was continue to shake and shiver, Secret glanced over at the large male wringing his hands together. “Rex?”

“I—she—”

Juno hurried over to join them. “Rex, you know you shouldn’t be here. Hey, what’s wrong with Mara?”

“She saw a spider downstairs and totally freaked out,” Rex blurted out. “I didn’t know she had this bad of a phobia. I didn’t see anything, but she wouldn’t calm down. She said she needed to see you, so I brought her here.”

Hearing what he’d said made Secret stiffen.

She knew exactly what had made Mara freak out, and it wasn’t about spiders. At least, not the kind with eight legs. Spider was the nickname for one of their former captors, and the main cause of most of Mara’s nightmares. The male deserved to die in the most painful way possible, and Secret was longing to be the one to provide that for him.

Without a word, she gently pushed the female back at Rex and turned away.

Snapping out of her haze, Mara reached out and grabbed hold of her wrist. “I wasn’t seeing things. He’s here,” she whispered. “He’s really here.”

“I believe you,” Secret assured as she gently pulled her arm away. “Rex, take her back to the kitchen and stay there until it’s done.”

“Until what’s done? Where are you going?” Rex called out.

Leaving them behind, Secret didn't bother turning around as she stalked toward the stairs. "I'm going hunting."

CHAPTER TWO

COMMANDER TALON SPARTAN had a talent for killing.

While most would consider what he could do a curse, he chose to think of it as a gift. A dark and deadly gift he used against the blights on society who sought to hurt others, and those with enough money or connections to hide their evil deeds. Those particular individuals were almost impossible to take down by ordinary measures.

But Talon was anything but ordinary.

People definitely did not want to find themselves on his hit list since one needed to permanently stop breathing to be taken off it. Like his current target. The man didn't know it yet, but the unfortunate soul was already as good as gone. His fate had been sealed the moment Talon had marked him for extermination. Even though they had only brushed past one another on the crowded street, it was more than enough to get the job done.

Talon only needed the briefest touch to kill.

His unique abilities made him one of the Alliance's most efficient assassins. He was quick, clean, and deadly accurate every time. Best of all, no one was even aware he was responsible for taking out his targets after he was done.

Although there were countless elites who had developed a wide range of special abilities after they had been enhanced, Talon's particular skills had earned him classified status as a living, breathing weapon. That was saying something since the Alliance didn't even know the true extent of his gifts.

He'd never allowed anyone to document what his real talents were for fear those in power would try to use or exploit him. Although hiding his abilities was a direct violation of Alliance's regulations, he didn't give a fuck. Truthfully, the rules didn't apply when it came to protecting himself, his family, and those under his command.

The only people who knew what he could really do were his parents, his older brother, and his team. That was enough for him. He'd prefer that his younger siblings never find out what he could do. If they ever did, he wouldn't lie to them, but it was safer to keep them in the dark.

Hiding the truth from the rest of the world was easy enough due to his family's status. They came from old money and were influential in both the political arena and business, which gave him plenty of cover. He was well aware it was hypocritical to use his family's wealth and status as a shield, but he considered it an advantage of his birth more than an ill-gotten gain.

Talon's rather dubious reputation gave him additional protection. He was a dangerous man, and not just because of his special abilities. He was an excellent tactician, a skilled fighter, and an expert marksman. Those skills alone would have made him the perfect assassin, so his extra powers were just a lethal bonus.

With his skills, it hadn't been surprising that Talon had quickly risen in the ranks to become a commander of his own elite Strike Force Team. However, his swift ascension had caused a few people to develop personal grudges against him.

That didn't bother him, though. One didn't grow up as part of a powerful family without learning how to deal with enemies.

He had forged his own path in life, but that didn't matter to some. He could live with whatever petty grievances were aimed his way as long as they stayed the hell away from the other members of his team. Anyone who was foolish enough to cross them did so at their own peril.

While people were aware that Talon was the commander of a Strike Force Team, only a few individuals knew that his small team was made up entirely of assassins who specialized in a variety of ways to kill. Since they operated under the highest level of secrecy, there wasn't much oversight over his team. They were allowed to operate covertly and without interference.

That didn't stop the whispers and rumors from spreading about them. While there were some who would have loved to use him to strike out at his family, there was nothing anyone could do without clear evidence.

And evidence was something Talon never left behind.

Like his mother, Talon had been born with the ability to see auras, but he had thankfully skipped inheriting the empathic part of her gift. As a child, he'd never really cared about the various colors he saw swirling around people. Back then, he'd thought it was pretty lame, but his attitude had changed once he'd realized he could differentiate between good and bad people simply by reading their colors.

That had given him a powerful advantage that couldn't be denied.

Most people believed auras were a simple concept, but it was actually a complex physical manifestation of one's essential being. Some liked to call it a soul, while others denied such a thing existed. The truth was that all living things had an aura. However, the colors and brightness of an aura varied depending on the essence of the individual. Some of the colors were contingent on one's emotional state, but the base usually remained pretty constant.

After being enhanced, Talon hadn't noticed any immediate changes. He hadn't realized anything was different until he and his brother, Jax, had been kidnapped when they'd been returning home during one of their breaks away from the academy. Then, his new gift had come out full force. It had shocked the hell out of him and Jax when he had killed their captors.

He hadn't meant to do it.

It had just...happened.

His abilities had unexpectedly transformed into something that was utterly terrifying. In an instant, he went from seeing auras to being able to manipulate them. With the slightest skin-to-skin contact, Talon could alter someone's emotions. If someone was sad, he could brighten their mood. If they were angry, he could instantly calm them.

But that wasn't all he was able to do.

The power over life and death had literally been put into his hands.

It was a complicated process, but broken down in the simplest terms, Talon could use the darkness that manifested

from evil deeds and turn it back on its owner. He couldn't exactly fix a corrupted aura. He could only void it out. The problem was if there was enough darkness present in someone's aura, eliminating it also destroyed the owner. It was like wiping a slate clean until there was nothing left.

His death touch was the part of his gift he kept secret from the rest of the world. Naturally, he didn't go around killing everyone with a dark aura. That would be too damn psychotic, even for him. While everyone showed hints of darkness at times, only a few wore those dark stains like beacons of malevolence. Those were the people who didn't deserve to keep breathing.

The mark Talon had just taken out was a prime example.

He had been a predator who preyed on women. The man's background hadn't been that different from Talon's. Coming from an affluent family with political connections that had shielded him for most of his life, he'd grown up with every advantage. However, instead of making something of his life, the bastard had used his wealth and privilege to cover up the various crimes he'd committed over the years.

Since most of the victims had been civilians and rebels, Alliance officials hadn't put much effort into finding out what had happened to them. For years, no one had realized what he had done.

Then, the male had unfortunately crossed paths with Talon.

As his team was highly specialized and only went after specific targets, they tended to have a fair amount of time between assignments. That didn't mean they didn't stay busy. Besides conducting their own investigations, they also assisted

other Strike Force Teams when requested, or if their particular skill set was needed. Although their team was small, they were an asset on any mission. They didn't accept every request. If a case was interesting enough, they made the time to assist.

And their success rate only added to their mysterious reputation.

They had just finished assisting another Strike Force Team with a difficult mission in Zion when Talon had noticed a man with a dark aura on the street. One glance was all it had taken to realize he shouldn't have been walking free. His team had done a deep dive for information on the man, and in a matter of hours, they had started to put the pieces together that other investigators hadn't bothered to.

The man had a history of being a womanizer. That was common knowledge. He usually partied with a small group of friends and entertained different women wherever he went. What people didn't know was a lot of those females ended up meeting tragic ends. Some of them had simply disappeared, while others had been confirmed to be dead.

Several of those cases had been written off as accidents, but there were a few crimes that had been blamed on different perpetrators. Since the females had been spread out over different cities and space stations, no one knew the total tally of the missing and murdered.

It was easy to make a body disappear in space.

Talon's team cared about each life that had been taken. They also understood how difficult it would have been to make the man pay under the regular system of justice. That was one of the reasons he'd never been caught. In his younger

years, there had been a few women who had tried to bring charges against him for sexual assault. But in the end, they had all withdrawn their complaints after being paid off or intimidated into silence.

Now, all of his victims could finally find some peace.

The man had been accommodately drunk as he'd stumbled down the street with two of his incompetent friends. They'd been too caught up in the festive mood that had spread throughout the city to even notice Talon brushing past them in the crowd of people.

If they had pushed it through proper channels, the operation could have been reviewed and approved by Alliance command. However, Talon wasn't willing to risk the chance he could slip through again. Taking him out was a simple job that could have been handled by someone with less experience, but he didn't mind taking care of it personally. It was offensive to see the corrupt, smiling fuckhead strutting around as if he didn't have a care in the world.

The simple task had only taken a few seconds to complete, and it left Talon feeling slightly unsatisfied. The authorities usually ended up declaring a natural cause of death for those he assassinated. However, this time, they would probably blame it on the copious amounts of drugs and alcohol the man had consumed.

It was a shame, really.

Some might have thought him ruthless or cold-blooded for feeling that way, but he thought this particular target deserved a far more painful end to his existence.

“It’s done,” Talon informed his team through the comms system he was wearing.

“*Copy,*” Cedric Twist responded. “*For the record, I still say this was too damn merciful. I really wish you would have made that nasty fucker suffer more.*”

Since Talon had just been thinking the same thing, he didn’t bother responding.

Cedric was the team’s communications specialist and an expert hacker. At the moment, he was safely stashed away in his quarters on their ship. Whether they were traveling, docked at a space station, or on planet, he chose to remain onboard their vessel. While he claimed he didn’t have to pay rent that way, it also saved him from having neighbors since he hated crowds, and well... people in general.

“*It’s not done until he’s no longer breathing,*” Winston Hawes countered. “*There is still no sign of distress yet.*”

As second-in-command and an all-around cynic, Winston insisted on watching Talon’s back, even during low-risk missions. He was an exceptional sniper with an almost supernatural gift to hit whatever he was aiming at. He took care of most of their long-range targets and also provided cover for the rest of the team during active missions.

But right now, he was simply shadowing Talon and their mark.

“Relax,” Talon ordered, unbothered by the delay since he’d deliberately planned it that way. Besides, he could still feel his gift was doing its thing by the slight strain on his own energy.

“That’s right. Boss never fails,” Cedric bragged. “He’s a freak like that.”

“Never say never,” Winston said dryly. “There’s always a first time for everything.”

“Remind me to kick both of your asses later,” Talon murmured as he continued to stroll down the street. “Freak? Really?”

Cedric let out a nervous laugh. *“Just a slip of the tongue, boss.”*

“Careful, or I might just cut it out for you.”

Some might think it was unprofessional or even callous to joke around while they were in the process of killing someone, but keeping their banter light and casual helped offset the heavy burden of their duties. No matter how justified their reasons were for their actions, ending lives took an emotional toll.

Unlike his older brother who was famous for having an explosive temper, Talon was known for being pretty laid back and calm most of the time. He had to be since getting emotional was dangerous with his abilities. As commander of the team, he preferred to treat the members more like family rather than a strict military unit. Since there were only six of them, it worked out better for all of them that way.

That didn’t mean he couldn’t enjoy scaring the shit out of them.

“If you’re going to maim him, at least wait until after we eat,” Teale Murphy interjected from where he and Laken

Kyon were seated at one of the coveted tables located on the second level balcony of Exodus.

The outdoor balcony was fairly private and gave them a perfect view of the surrounding area. The two of them were dressed like civilians to blend in with the other patrons at the bar, but they were really there to do surveillance.

“The food was just delivered. You better get moving, or we’re going to start without you. Sure you won’t come join us, Ced?” Laken asked.

“Hell no. There is no way I’m going anywhere near that crowd. Besides, Fadi is already making something for us here,” Cedric said, mentioning their pilot. *“Damn it, I’ve lost track of the mark. All of those fucking street vendor stalls are blocking my view, so facial rec isn’t picking him up. Give me a minute, and I’ll hack into some of the security systems in the area.”*

“Don’t bother. I’ve still got eyes on them,” Winston assured them.

“Switching to the feed from your glasses. Fuck, you’re so far away. How can you even see them?” Cedric complained.

“Quit bitching and just zoom in. I can’t help that my vision is better than yours.”

All of the members of the team were wearing high-tech sunglasses that could magnify the view, replay the recorded feed, and had lenses that could display necessary data. Cedric usually preferred using a satellite view or tapping into the local system instead of the feeds from the glasses. He claimed

it was too much like being in someone else's head, though sometimes there was no other option.

Thankfully, they didn't have to monitor the situation for long. A few seconds later, the man collapsed on the street, and cries of alarm filled the air. Talon felt the strain on his energy fade, and he knew that the mission was complete.

"Target's down," Winston confirmed. *"I'll hang back a little longer to observe, then I'll head over to join you."*

"I'm going silent, but I'll continue to monitor the investigation from here," Cedric told them.

"Let us know if we run into any issues," Laken added.

"Will do. Ping me if you need me."

"Why are you all so worried?" Talon asked as he walked up to join Teale and Laken at their table on the balcony. "It's not like we're new to this."

He sat down and immediately went to work on the platters of food that were spread out on the table. That was the one downside to using his gift. It took a massive amount of energy to void someone's aura, and he needed to refuel after using his abilities.

"Not worried," Laken declared, smiling brightly.

She was a pretty, petite female who was often underestimated because of her eccentric appearance. Today her hair was dyed an electric blue, but tomorrow could be bright pink. It all depended on her mood. She also enjoyed dressing in outrageous outfits, like the purple, blue, and silver skinsuit she was currently wearing. While she might seem quite memorable, it didn't matter. That was partly due to the fact she

had developed one of the strangest abilities ever recorded after she'd gotten enhanced.

People couldn't remember her face.

There was a small percentage of the population who experienced prosopagnosia or face blindness, but Laken was the only one who actually caused it to happen to other people. That made her an expert spy and scout, but it was hell on forming relationships. Only after being around her for an extended period of time were people actually able to recall what she looked like, so only her team knew who she was.

Sitting next to her was a massive man with short red hair and a matching beard. Teale Murphy towered over other elites and could intimidate someone with just one look. He was dressed in a white shirt, jeans, and a black leather jacket that covered the blaster he wore in a shoulder holster. He preferred the old-school style of fashion, but his black boots were standard for all elite soldiers.

Although he was damn good in a fight, his greatest skills were as a gifted healer and poison expert. Ironically, he also happened to do most of the cooking while they were traveling. He was an excellent chef, but most people would probably call them crazy to eat whatever he fed them considering his affinity for poisons.

Then again, they never claimed to be sane.

“That said, we can't just ignore it when Winston gets one of his feelings,” Laken pointed out.

“I ignore his feelings all the time,” Teale deadpanned once he finished chewing.

“Same,” Talon agreed.

“I heard that, you assholes,” Winston growled through their earpieces.

Talon and Teale tapped their chicken wings together in a mock toast to congratulate themselves on irritating their friend, then they continued eating.

Laken shook her head. “We shouldn’t ignore it because he’s usually right. We need to close this up nice and tight, so we should share some of our information with the investigation team. The main fucker might be dealt with, but we know he didn’t always act alone. We can’t let his revolting friends get away with what they’ve done, either.”

“I’ve already given Cedric the green. He’ll send the data anonymously once he thoroughly vets whoever is in charge to make sure they won’t just bury the info.” Talon drained half a glass of juice in one swallow.

“We might be better off just releasing it publicly,” Laken muttered.

“That’s an option as well.”

The worst of his hunger abated, Talon paused to glance around the area. He took note of the crowd of people seated below in the ground level courtyard, then he froze as something caught his attention. “Fucking hell...”

Concerned, Laken leaned forward. “What is it, boss?”

“See the two Tarin males sitting down there? They’re a problem.”

She turned her head slightly to get a better look. “We’ve met plenty of Tarin during our travels. Didn’t you say they generally tend to have darker auras due to their unique energy signatures?”

“Not like this. They almost have no color at all,” Talon told them softly.

Teale muttered a vicious curse. “We’ll have to wait until they leave Exodus to deal with them.”

“Right,” Laken agreed. “We don’t want to break sanctuary rules and end up getting banned. I like breathing too much to risk pissing the Dragon Warriors off.”

“We need to be careful about this. Contact Cedric. I want him to start pulling info on them while I go find Jais. He’ll know if they’ve been here before,” Talon said, mentioning one of Exodus’ managers. “You two keep watch until Win gets here.”

“I’m on my way to you now,” Winston told them.

As Laken began sending a message on her wrist unit, Teale leaned forward to speak quietly to Talon. “It’s tricky since there’s two of them. Want me to take care of it?”

Talon shook his head. “If I’m right, those two are probably already on the wanted list of criminals who fled Tartarus, so it won’t have to be done covertly. It will be safer for us to wait until we get clearance to take them out...”

His words trailed off as he watched a D’Aire female stalk out of the building below. From where he was sitting, he couldn’t see her face. That didn’t stop her from capturing his complete focus, though.

The female was surrounded by a brilliant halo of iridescent light that shimmered in a way he'd never seen before. The kaleidoscope ranged from dark to light, but he thought the shadows were just as beautiful as the bright parts of her aura. The hints of darkness just made all the other colors seem more vibrant as they swirled together.

When she glanced around the courtyard, he sucked in a harsh breath. Her long white hair flowed freely down her back, but she had cut the front into bangs so they covered her forehead. It was an unusual style for a D'Aire, and he thought she might have chosen it to cover some of the scars on her face and neck. He thought those marks only enhanced her stunning beauty.

Each added to her uniqueness, making him even more dazzled by her.

In a universe filled with beautiful females, she had no equal.

His pulse began to pound in a frantic rhythm as all the blood in his body seemed to drain straight down to his cock. He usually had good control over his reactions, but she was an anomaly that completely annihilated his self-restraint.

As if she could feel him staring at her, she turned and lifted her gaze to scan the balcony. When their eyes met, it was a shock that jolted straight through his system. In that single heartbeat, everything changed. Without warning, that halo of light around her slowly flared out and stretched until it completely surrounded him.

Her eyes widened in surprise, mirroring his own reaction. Even if she couldn't see it like he could, she must have sensed

the connection forming between them. It was as if her aura had somehow marked him, binding him to her.

In that instant, he knew what that meant.

She was the keeper of his heart, the D'Aire mate fate had chosen for him.

CHAPTER THREE

JOY FLARED TO life inside Talon even as a little bit of dread started to sink in. He was pleased she belonged to him, but that didn't mean she would feel the same once she realized who and what he was.

He couldn't even blame her for that.

Life wouldn't be easy being bonded to a killer.

Relationships were rarely simple, but this had the potential to be a catastrophic clusterfuck for both of them. Before he could spiral down those dark thoughts, he watched as her surprised expression disappeared and her lips curved into a sardonic smirk before she turned away.

Amazed that she had essentially dismissed him, he watched as she went back to surveying the crowd again. Clearly, she was searching for someone. That person must have been important for her to ignore the pull of her keeper. Since he was watching her closely, Talon saw the exact moment she focused in on the two Tarin males he had pointed out earlier.

There was a flash of metal in her hand as she slid something out of the leather forearm sheath she was wearing. He would have bet a pile of credits that she now had a knife tucked securely in her palm. The move had been smooth, signaling to him that she had done it before. Concerned she was about to attack the Tarin out in the open and blatantly break sanctuary rules, he shot to his feet.

Unfortunately, the Tarin males noticed her at the same time. There was a spark of startled recognition on their faces, then their shock shifted to fear. They jumped to their feet and bolted from the table, pushing people out of their way as they fled.

With the snap of her wrist, the female sent the knife in her hand flying. The blade sank into one of the male's backs, sending him tumbling to the ground. His scream of pain mingled with the other patrons' cries of alarm. She raced over to him and stomped on his fingers before he could reach for his own weapon, making him scream in agony as she ground her boot against the bones in his hand.

Talon held his breath as she bent over. For a second, he thought she was going to end the Tarin right then and there, but she only reached down to remove the knife tucked in the Tarin's belt. She tossed it to Jais Starr who hurried over with Trip Rage. The Krytos and Helios males were both managers at the sanctuary and no strangers to violence, but even they were gaping at the man sobbing on the ground.

"What the fuck is going on, Secret?" Jais shouted. "You can't just—"

"They're slavers and fucking murderers," she snarled back.

Hearing that changed everything.

"Go." Trip slammed his own foot down on the Tarin's back, and jerked the knife out, making him scream in pain. He handed the knife back to her. "We've got this fucker."

Leaving them behind, she ran after the other Tarin.

Talon took off after her, following her progress from higher ground. He heard Teale and Laken calling after him, but he didn't stop. As he raced toward the end of the balcony, he quickly assessed his options. It would take too long to take the stairs down to the ground level, and he might lose them completely if he cut through the building.

Instead, he made a calculated decision...and jumped.

Landing on the roof of the adjacent lower building, Talon dropped into a roll, then was back on his feet and running again without pause. As he sprinted across the rooftop, he had to detour around various obstacles. When he reached the end, he used the raised edge of the roof as a springboard and made the leap to the next building.

As he ran, he went through the map of the sanctuary grounds in his head. It consisted of different buildings spread out over what would be considered several city blocks, but most of the property was private and would be unknown to the Tarin male trying to escape.

Glancing down, he saw the Tarin still had a good lead on the D'Aire female, but she was quickly covering the gap. From her perspective on the ground, she probably couldn't see him clearly as they raced through the maze of pathways between the various buildings and gardens. Still, she was doing a good job chasing after him.

Talon had always been fast, and he pushed himself to the limit to try to get ahead of them. When the Tarin made an abrupt turn down a different pathway, Talon knew he was heading back toward the main street to try to get lost in the crowd. Before that could happen, Talon leapt down. Bracing

his legs against the side of the building, he kicked off and redirected himself toward his target.

He slammed into the other male with the force of a freighter and hooked an arm around the Tarin's neck to stabilize himself. His momentum sent him spinning around the other male's body, and Talon used that leverage to flip the Tarin right off his feet. He hit the ground hard, and Talon landed with one knee pressed against his back.

Holding him down wasn't necessary, though.

The male had been knocked out cold.

When Talon rose to his feet, he had just enough time to lift an arm to block a blow aimed for his head. He felt the power vibrating through the arm as he slapped it away. Turning, his eyes widened when he got a good look at who had attacked him. Before he could speak, his D'Aire keeper struck out again. He blocked, dodged, then blocked again before spinning away to avoid the leg she kicked out.

Fucking hell.

While most mates introduced themselves with a kiss, he got a kick.

Somehow, it didn't surprise him.

It was exhilarating and strangely satisfying to know that they were equally matched. She was a damn good fighter, but neither of them was putting their full effort into the match. Sometimes restraint took even more skill. That told him he would have been in real trouble if she had been trying to kill him rather than simply disable him.

Secret cleared her mind enough to realize that he wasn't really fighting back. He was merely defending against her attack. To be fair, she hadn't really been trying to hurt him, either. She'd simply been lashing out, wanting to teach him a lesson for getting in between her and her prey.

He was the keeper of her heart, after all.

What a fucked up twist of fate that was.

It had felt good to release some of the anger she'd felt at seeing the bastard who was currently lying sprawled out on the ground. While the Tarin she'd thrown her knife at back in the courtyard was a piece of shit, this male was one of her own personal demons. Because of that, she had lost herself for a moment.

But now that she was thinking clearly again, the guilt was starting to set in.

Fighting with her keeper was pointless. Not only was her anger misdirected, it also showed her lack of control. That was something that hadn't happened in a long time. Combat was meant for survival and shouldn't be used in petty displays of temper.

She knew that better than most.

Stepping back, Secret eyed him carefully as she slowed her breathing. Like her, he wore all black. However, his outfit seemed more utilitarian and suitable for stealth than her leathers. Despite his casual clothing, she could tell that he was an elite. Probably a pretty high-ranking one based on his skill level. He wouldn't have been able to stand against her otherwise.

He was a good-looking male, with an angular face sculpted into strong features. His dark brown hair was longer than most soldiers wore theirs, and he had it pulled back into a short tail. Some strands had escaped their binding and fell loose around his face. He wore almost transparent sunglasses that were tinted a pale gray, but she could easily see his cunning amber eyes staring back at her.

Assessing.

Analyzing.

And if she wasn't mistaken, a little amused.

She also saw a hint of heat there in his gaze. She didn't want to think about that part of things at the moment. Hellfire, her life was way too complicated to even consider having a freaking keeper, but she didn't seem to have a choice on that matter. Now that they'd met, they were pretty much stuck together.

No, that wasn't accurate.

Despite her apprehension, she was truly glad to have him standing before her. Elation had surged through her the moment she had turned and glanced up at him. Mine, her heart had claimed. In that instant, her life had changed, shifted until he was at the center of everything. It was a strange feeling, and she didn't have a clue what to do about it.

It wasn't exactly a situation she'd ever thought she would find herself in.

Sure, she'd had plenty of dark days when she had fantasized about how wonderful it would be to have a keeper of her heart, but she never thought she would actually find

him. It wasn't fair to bind him to her, so she wouldn't. At least, not until he knew exactly what he was getting himself into.

Unsure what to say, she went with a basic question first. "Who are you?"

His lips curved into a small smile. "I'm yours, but I assume you already know that."

Caught off guard by his blatantly honest response, she swallowed hard. She liked his deep voice, and she wasn't sure if it was his words or the tone that sent a slight shiver racing down her spine. "I wasn't...that's not...I was asking for your name."

"Talon Spartan. And you?"

"They call me Secret."

He shot her a curious look at that, but she wasn't about to explain herself at the moment. That would have to wait. She turned when Jais shouted her name and watched as he hurried toward them, followed closely by two humans.

"Secret, are you okay? Thank the gods. I'm glad to see you aren't hurt." Jais' gaze shifted over to Talon. "Spartan. What the hell are you doing here?"

Secret glanced between the two males. "You two know each other?"

"I know that trouble tends to follow in his wake."

"We've been friends for years, Jais. Don't try to make me look bad in front of my keeper," Talon retorted dryly.

Jais' eyes went wide with shock. "Your keeper? Stars, I don't know if Exodus can survive the two of you together." He

paused, looking thoughtful. “Come to think of it, most of the mated couples here at the sanctuary are a little crazy, so I guess this shouldn’t surprise me.”

“Careful,” Talon warned. “You can insult me, but not her.”

“I’m not insulted,” Secret said bluntly. “I am a little crazy.”

“Well, at least you admit it.” Jais heaved out a loud sigh as he pointed toward the Tarin on the ground. “This is what I am talking about. Fucking hell. Which one of you killed him?”

“Neither. At least, not yet,” Secret amended.

“Would you like me to take care of that for you?” Talon asked politely.

His unexpected offer had Secret blinking at him in bewilderment. She cocked her head to the side as she studied him, curious as to whether or not he was serious.

The other human male cleared his throat. “Commander, we are still on sanctuary grounds.”

“She’s my keeper, Teale. If she wants him dead, he dies.”

“You’re both fucking crazy,” Jais muttered.

“I think it’s really sweet, in a serial killer sort of way,” the human female said in a loud whisper.

“I think you mean psychotic, Laken,” Teale deadpanned. “It’s psychotic, not sweet.”

“Don’t be so judgmental. Okay, fine. Let’s compromise and go with psychotically sweet.” Smiling brightly, she waved. “Hi, I’m Laken Kyon, and this is Teal Murphy. We’re both members of Talon’s team.”

“His team?”

“He’s the commander of our Strike Force Team. I’m so happy you are together now. It will be nice to have another female around to balance out all the testosterone.”

Laken took a step forward and reached out as if to hug her, which made Secret take a reflexive step back to avoid contact.

That turned out to be a big mistake.

Roused from his temporary slumber, the Tarin jumped to his feet and lunged for Secret. He held the dagger he’d pulled from his belt against her throat, using her as a shield as he backed away from the group. That was partially her fault. She should have checked him for weapons the moment he went down.

“Stay back! No one move, or I’ll kill her.”

Everyone froze.

Secret met Talon’s gaze as she was dragged backwards. Gone was that soft smile he had gifted her with earlier. The blank expression on his face might have masked his emotions, but nothing could hide the murderous intent gleaming in those tawny eyes. She tried to send him a small, reassuring smile of her own to tell him not to worry, but he simply raised a brow at that.

Obviously, their nonverbal communication skills needed work.

Even with a blade pressed against her throat, she wasn’t worried...much. She could have tried to free herself, but she wanted something from him first. Their proximity was actually a welcomed opportunity for her, and she slowly moved her

hand until the pads of her fingertips were pressed against his wrist.

Part of the reason she hated touching people was due to her seeker ability. Being able to scan someone's mind was a rare gift some D'Aire had, but Secret's ability was a little different. She couldn't hear what someone was thinking. She could only see their memories.

The more powerful seekers could do both. They didn't even need to be close to someone for their ability to work, but Secret required skin-to-skin contact to see someone's memories. That was why she wore gloves so only her fingertips were bare. It helped minimize her chances of reading someone accidentally.

She would have truly been driven mad if she were constantly bombarded with other people's thoughts, so she was glad her gift wasn't stronger. She still didn't like having to touch people to make her ability work. It was a sacrifice she was willing to make when the circumstances called for it. While torture would have been a far more satisfying method to get the information she wanted from the Tarin, this was easier and much more accurate.

Secret closed her eyes and ruthlessly delved into his mind to extract what she needed. Viewing his dark memories made her sick, and her stomach pitched and roiled in protest. The male was absolutely disgusting. A depraved monster who relished hurting others. She tried not to go too deep into the past, yet still flinched as she saw herself in a few of his memories.

Focusing more on recent events, she was relieved when she found what was needed. Information on the whereabouts of her other targets. The males still on her personal list of vengeance that hadn't been crossed off yet.

Now, she knew exactly where to find them.

“Let go of her,” Talon demanded.

“Not a chance! Move back, all of you. Do what I say, or I'll slit her throat,” the Tarin warned, pulling her back with him. “I'll let her go once I'm safe.”

No, he wouldn't, Secret thought.

But that was okay because he wasn't going anywhere. The male was too stupid to realize he was already dead. He just didn't know it yet.

“Not a smart move, Thado,” Secret commented. “Do you really think you can get away?”

“Shut your mouth. If that human is your keeper, he won't risk losing you. I'm surprised to see you here, birdie.” The Tarin said the nickname snidely as he dragged her back a few more steps. “I'd heard you died in the pits.”

“You heard wrong,” she stated flatly. “I'm surprised you're alive as well. I surely thought you would have bled out after I cut your balls off.”

“I still owe you for that, you winged bitch,” he growled, then he let out an evil chuckle. “Or I guess that's no longer an accurate name since my lord hacked them off you.”

Hearing him voice her greatest shame made her snap.

In one smooth motion, she slipped the hidden blade from her forearm sheath and shoved it through his wrist. He cried out as his grip on his own weapon loosened. Catching it midair, she spun out of his hold, then slammed the knife deep into his chest, directly into his black heart.

When he hit the ground with a *thud*, she mentally crossed him off her list.

The sound of feet pounding on the pavement made her glance up, and she saw Yumi running toward her. Yumi was a Tarin female and Secret's closest friend. They had been held in captivity together, where it had been a daily struggle to survive.

Yumi was out of breath, and her shoulder-length black hair was in disarray as if she had just rolled out of bed. She wore an oversized, wrinkled blue shirt and leggings that added to her rumpled look, but the feral gleam in her black eyes and the faint smudge of blood on her sleeve told Secret she had already been to the courtyard.

"Did you get what you needed from him?" Yumi asked, staring down at the body on the ground.

"I did." Since her friend was one of the few beings who knew of Secret's seeker ability and background, the question wasn't surprising. "I know exactly where to find them."

"Excellent."

She leaned over and retrieved the black blade from the male's wrist, wiping it clean on his clothes before offering it back to Secret. She nodded in thanks, then slipped the knife back into her forearm sheath. Neither of them even considered

removing the dagger buried in his heart since it was right where it belonged.

She discreetly glanced toward the blood on Yumi's sleeve. "You saw the spider?"

"He's dead," Yumi confirmed.

"For fuck's sake," Jais muttered, reaching up to rub a hand over his face. "Do I have to remind you that this is a damn sanctuary? I swear, they don't pay me enough to deal with this shit."

Yumi smiled sweetly, which was always a dangerous warning. "It was their mistake for coming here."

"Jade, Rogan, and Lucian made it clear that slavers are the exception to the rules," Secret reminded him. "If they are foolish enough to show up here, they deserve the death that awaits them."

Talon listened to them with no small amount of fascination. The females looked vastly different, yet they had an undeniable strength and commanding presence in common. He was sure some people would find their conversation morbid. Some would even say they were being downright sinister.

He, on the other hand, was secretly pleased.

Hearing the way they spoke to one another wasn't that different from how his own team interacted. Perhaps it wouldn't be so hard for Secret to accept him since she clearly had her own dark side. Since he'd heard what that Tarin had said to her, Talon knew that his death was damn well justified.

Yumi finally noticed Teale and Laken, and her black eyes narrowed. “Who are they?”

Secret pointed at Talon with her thumb. “They’re his.”

“Who is he?”

“He’s...my keeper.”

Yumi’s dark eyes popped wide. “Your what? By the gods, when did this happen?”

“Just now.”

“Well, fuck.” She let out a little laugh. “What are you going to do with him when we leave?”

“Are you really leaving the sanctuary?” Jais asked, sounding worried.

Secret nodded. “We need to go to Beta Station 4.”

“I can take you there,” Talon offered. “My team and I have been to Beta Station 4 before. Our ship is ready, and we can be on our way in under an hour.”

Secret studied him for a long beat of silence before saying, “What if I told you that I’m going there to kill someone?”

“I just need to know one thing,” he said softly. “Are you going after more slavers?”

She hesitated briefly before nodding.

His lips curved into a fierce smile. “Then, I’m all in.”

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SOUND OF distant male laughter made Secret jerk awake.

For a moment, fear clogged her throat. Her pulse raced, and her heart pounded like it wanted to jump right out of her chest. She didn't know where she was, but she refused to open her eyes and look around until she got her panic under control.

Moving would alert anyone nearby that she was awake.

It wasn't the first time she'd woken up disoriented and afraid. Males' laughing nearby always led to trouble. She'd learned that it was best to gather as much information as she could before showing signs that she was conscious. Drawing attention to oneself was never a good thing. It could often lead to a whole lot of pain and misery...and sometimes even death.

The scents and sounds surrounding her were unfamiliar, but she didn't sense any danger. Memories flooded back in an instant, and she finally allowed herself to open her eyes. She sat up on the bed and scanned her temporary quarters on Talon's ship. Relief filled her when she confirmed she was alone.

She heard another burst of laughter coming from the other side of the closed door. This time, it didn't bother her. She knew the faint sounds were coming from Talon and his team.

Surprisingly, just thinking about her keeper made her feel a little calmer.

Sighing, she glanced down at the weapons she was holding. The black blades were curved like claws and were so familiar to her they were like extensions of her own hands.

From a young age, she had learned to sleep with a weapon close by. That practice had saved her life countless times over the years. After being rescued, she still hadn't been able to shake off the habit.

Secret wasn't sure if she ever would.

Setting the blades down on the nightstand, she got out of bed. Her body felt stiff and sore as she padded across the room on bare feet. She made use of the bathroom, then considered taking a long, hot shower. She ultimately decided against it since she just didn't have the energy and would have probably ended up drowning herself.

Walking out into the living room area of the spacious guest suite, she collapsed onto the plush sofa. Just that little bit of activity had exhausted her. She lifted the privacy shield on the wide window and stared out at the darkness that was speckled with brilliant stars and colorful gas clouds.

Time meant very little in space.

Unsure how long she had been asleep, she felt disoriented by the lack of sun or moonlight. There had been a time when she had lived amongst the stars, but that had been long ago. She had been dwelling on land for far too long, and the vastness of space that had once been familiar now felt foreign and slightly daunting.

Back at Exodus, it hadn't taken Secret long to get ready to depart. Truthfully, she didn't have much that belonged to her except for some clothes and a handful of items that had easily fit into a single bag. She'd invited Talon up to her quarters in order to have a private conversation with him while she'd

packed, but the residents of Exodus hadn't been willing to leave them alone.

While most people had been surprised by her sudden departure, she had always known her stay at the sanctuary was only temporary. Until she had arrived at Exodus, very little about her life had been up to her. Now, she had nothing but options available. As appealing as that might have seemed, it was also slightly overwhelming.

Traveling to Beta Station 4 wasn't a choice.

It was a duty.

She had a personal mission to complete, and until it was finished, she would never truly be free. Secret was damn good at holding a grudge, and over the years she'd made a list of every person she held a grievance against. There were only a few specific individuals who remained on that list, and she wouldn't rest until she crossed them off.

Some of the crew from Exodus had offered to join her on their journey, while others had begged her not to go. That had surprised Secret. Sure, she had made some friends during her time at the sanctuary, but she never expected them to care for her so deeply. Besides, she didn't want to drag anyone else into her personal vendetta.

It was bad enough that her keeper and his team were involved now.

She'd been shocked when she had received a communication from Jade on her wrist unit. Jais had sent word to the Dragon Warrior trio to let them know about Secret and Yumi's plans, and they had been concerned enough to respond

back. They had told Secret to contact Jade's brothers in case she ran into any problems. The offer was appreciated, but she really hoped it wouldn't be necessary.

Jade was intimidating as hell, but meeting her mates and finding true love had tempered her in a way nothing else could. The same couldn't be said for the Vyper brothers. Those males were nothing short of terrifying.

Talon's team had given Secret and Yumi a warm welcome, but there had been a hint of wariness in their gazes as they'd given them a tour of the ship. Even if she was Talon's keeper, Secret was still an outsider to them. She understood their reactions. If they had accepted her without any hesitation, it would have been difficult for her to trust them in return.

Caution was essential for survival.

While she dealt with her own uncertainty about the situation, Secret wasn't worried about Yumi fitting in. That was kind of her thing. She was smart, beautiful, and easily made friends wherever she went. Her zest for life and outgoing personality drew people to her, and her carefree attitude made it easy for her to disguise just how cunning she was. Not that she was a danger to any of the people on board.

As long as they didn't try to hurt her or Secret, she wouldn't harm them.

Yumi enjoyed being social just as much as Secret preferred solitude. Even so, she had been prepared to force herself to spend time with Talon and his team to get to know them better. Unfortunately, soon after they had left Earth, Secret had started feeling ill. She had experienced the same thing after

she'd been rescued from Tartarus and had spent several days of travel completely incapacitated.

As the team's healer, Teale Murphy had treated her. She hadn't flinched when he'd used a pressure syringe on her arm, although she hated the damn things. The medication helped, but what she needed more than anything was to sleep off the worst of the space sickness.

After leaving the medical bay, she barely remembered Talon escorting her back to her quarters. The guest suite wasn't so different from the one she'd been living in back at the sanctuary. There was a bedroom, a full bathroom, and a large living room all decorated in tasteful grays and blues. The only real difference between the two spaces was the furnishings on the ship were secured to the floor to prevent anything from moving around.

From the muffled voices and laughter coming from the lounge outside of her quarters, it seemed like the group was having a good time. Now that she was feeling a little better, she should have gone out to join them. They had things to discuss and plans to make, but she couldn't bring herself to give up the quiet just yet. She still had a headache, and the debilitating fatigue plaguing her was seriously making her regret leaving her bed.

A soft knock on the door made her sigh. She called out the voice command to open the door. Secret had been expecting to see Yumi but wasn't that surprised to see Talon standing in her doorway instead. He was carrying a tall glass filled with pale orange liquid and a pressure syringe filled with her next dose of medication.

He was dressed in a pair of black pants and a matching tank that showed off muscular arms that were completely covered with intriguing tattoos. The door slid closed behind him as he stepped inside the room, trapping them together in the dark. The atmosphere instantly shifted, and the air felt charged with energy.

She had assumed it would feel awkward being alone with him. He was the keeper of her heart, but she really didn't know anything about him besides his name. That didn't seem to matter, though. Just looking at him made her heart pound and her pulse race. Her desire for him was undeniable. It was as though every cell in her body was soaking in his energy, as if she had been starving without his presence nearby.

Was this how all D'Aire felt when they met their keepers?

Talon took a careful scan of Secret as he studied her in the dim light. Dressed in a soft gray tunic and matching lounge pants, she looked like a goddess in repose. Ethereal and breathtakingly gorgeous. That strange aura of shimmering light still surrounded her but was now enhanced by the starlight spilling through the wide window at her back. Her long silvery-white hair was sleep tousled, and her iridescent blue eyes looked slumberous.

It made him want to carry her back to bed, and not just to rest.

Dangerous territory, he warned himself.

Like most D'Aire, she was innately elegant and gloriously beautiful, but that wasn't what attracted him to her the most. While fate might have declared them destined for one another, her strength and skills would have made an admirer out of

him, even without their cosmic connection. They were a testament to her own hard work and perseverance.

Secret was a mystery to him, and he couldn't wait to discover everything about her. He wanted to know it all. Her likes and dislikes. What made her laugh and cry. He also wanted to know exactly what had made her the fierce fighter he knew her to be. Sadly, her story was likely to break his heart...and make him fucking homicidal.

He had tried to ask Yumi some basic questions about Secret, but she'd been extremely tight-lipped about the smallest personal details. Although she had blocked him, he wasn't upset with her. They were clearly good friends, and the loyalty between them was deep and abiding. He would never get angry at someone for protecting his keeper. Besides, Talon figured it was better to get his information straight from the source anyway.

"I just stopped by to see how you're feeling." He walked over and held the glass out. "There is a vitamin booster in the juice that should help with your headache."

"How did you—never mind. Thank you," she said, taking the glass.

When she gestured toward the empty seat next to her on the sofa, Talon sat down, careful to keep his distance. She had implicit boundaries, and he was determined to respect them. That didn't stop her aura from reaching out and wrapping around him. He immediately pushed aside his own desire for her when he sensed how ill she was through their connection.

She was sick and tired but refused to give in to the need to sleep. Part of that was pure stubbornness, which was

something he understood. She was also glad to finally have a chance to speak to him privately. Since he also wanted to spend time alone with her, he couldn't argue that point either. The last reason that kept her from giving in to her body's need for sleep was a kind of punishment. She was deliberately pushing past her limits, willing herself to overcome what she saw as a weakness.

He didn't like that. Not one damn bit.

“Drink the juice,” he urged. “Then, I'll give you the next dose of your medication.”

Secret lifted the glass and took a tentative sniff at it before taking a sip. She nodded her approval, then drained the rest of the glass. “How long have we been traveling?”

“About twenty-six hours.”

Her eyes widened. “I've been asleep for a whole day?”

“Just about. Beta Station 4 is at the fuck-end of nowhere, but our ship has been upgraded by some Dragon Warriors I know. So, what would have taken weeks of travel will only take us a few days to get there. Do you suffer from space sickness every time you travel?”

“I never used to when I was young, but the last few times I was on a ship, I felt like this,” she admitted. “Is there anything I should be doing right now? There are probably plenty of duties that need to be taken care of on board. I can help with ___”

“You need to rest.”

“I don't expect a free ride.”

He frowned. “You think I expect payment for taking my keeper somewhere?”

“No. Of course not. I just—” She huffed out a breath. “Okay, I’m just going to be blunt.”

His lips twitched as he tried to hold back a smile. “Please do.”

“I know you’re my keeper, but I’m not ready for the full bond yet.”

Talon started to tease her to lighten the mood, then thought better of it. He didn’t want her to think he wasn’t taking what she said seriously. “I understand. We’ve only just met, so bonding would sort of be skipping a few steps. Besides, you’re sick. I’m not about to pounce on you when you can barely stay awake.” He held up the pressure syringe. “Roll up your sleeve. Time for your next dose.”

As her lips tightened, he thought her pout was fucking adorable. His gaze caressed her pale skin as she opted to jerk the shoulder of the tunic down to expose the top of her arm rather than raise her sleeve. He tried to be as gentle as possible as he released the medication into her arm, then he set the empty plunger down on the table.

“Now, you should go back to bed.”

“I will soon.” She studied him for a long moment, then blurted out, “Why are you so calm about all of this?”

“This?”

“Meeting me. Finding out we’re mates. Watching me kill someone. Take your pick.”

“Ah.” Going with complete honesty, he said, “I try to stay calm most of the time. I have to in order to maintain control over my own ability. You’re a seeker, right? Since I never heard you ask that Tarin any questions out loud back at the sanctuary, I’m guessing you probably read his mind. I’ve worked with seekers before, so I sort of understand how it works.”

“I’m not as powerful as other seekers. I can’t hear what someone is thinking or sense how they’re feeling. I only have access to their memories, and I have to touch them in order to see anything.” She raised a hand and glanced down at it. “That’s why I hate touching people and wear gloves most of the time, so only my fingertips are exposed.”

“I have a similar gift.”

Secret’s eyes lit up with interest. “Is it something you developed after you were enhanced as an elite?”

“I was born with the ability to see auras. But after I was enhanced, my gift changed. It’s sort of difficult to explain.”

Talon thought her seeker ability might be a blessing in disguise. He’d been worried about how to explain everything to her, but it would be much easier to simply show her. “I don’t want you to be afraid of what I can do. In order to help you understand, I think you should just see for yourself.” He lifted an arm and held it out. “Go ahead.”

She immediately recoiled, then let out a baffled laugh. “Just like that? You’re willing to just...show me everything?”

He shrugged. “Once we bond, you will have access to my mind anyway. I want to tell you everything so you know who

you will be bonded with. My life has been...complicated. There are a lot of things that are difficult to explain. There are even some things I'm not sure I can describe with words. So, in order for you to understand, the best way to do that is for you to access my memories."

Secret appreciated his candor and admired his bravery. It wasn't easy to give someone complete access to their mind. Everyone had things in their past they didn't want others to know. Embarrassing things. Regretful things. Deeply personal things that might cause one's mate to get upset. However, he was right about the most important factor.

Once they were bonded, there would be no secrets between them.

That was the way it was between a D'Aire and their keeper.

Since she would know it all eventually anyway, there was no use in waiting. Not giving herself time to back out, she took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and prepared herself to dive into the past.

CHAPTER FIVE

USUALLY, WHEN SECRET read someone, it felt like diving headfirst into ice-cold water.

The shock of it was jarring.

She was an intruder in their mind. An unseen trespasser, invading on the most private moments of someone's life. Replaying another person's memories was like watching a movie with the screen covered in thick oil, difficult to see until the hazy images became more visible.

The moment she touched Talon, everything was different. Their joining felt as natural as breathing. His mind welcomed her in, and each memory was as clear as glass. What was even more astonishing was she actually felt what he had during each and every event, like a faint echo.

She could feel his joy and his sorrow.

His pain and his triumph.

And feeling it made it seem like she was experiencing everything with him.

She'd heard about the Spartan-Rollins family back at Exodus. There were probably very few people on Earth who didn't know who they were. Most of the family was what would be considered high-profile, but admittedly, Secret had never paid much attention to the gossip.

One of Talon's fathers was a retired regent, while his mother and other father owned a clothing empire named Starlight Designs. Despite their powerful positions, Ian Spartan, Donna Spartan-Rollins, and Jack Rollins had raised

Talon and his three siblings in a home filled with love. Now, Talon's older brother, Jax, had taken over their father's old position on the Council of Regents. Jax was bonded in a trio relationship, and they'd just welcomed their first child, a beautiful baby girl named Kiara.

The youngest sibling was Connor, who was still in the academy. Talon worried about the young male since he had a kind soul and a generous heart. He often wished Connor would apply for an exception after he graduated so he could run the family business instead of continuing on as an officer.

Secret was surprised to discover Talon's little sister, Mya, was the mate of the Adaro brothers who owned New Vega. Since they were cousins of Rogan and Lucian Adaro, the owners of Exodus back in Zion, Secret already knew all about her. She just hadn't made the connection to her new keeper until she saw Talon's memories of the young female.

She watched countless memories replay, some good and some bad. She would suffer from overload if she tried to see everything, so she started choosing random memories to view. His time at the academy was interesting, but she felt a blinding rage when she watched him share his first kiss with a girl.

She was definitely going to have to skip over those memories in the future.

When she got to the memories that highlighted his abilities, she was shocked and fascinated by what he could do. She'd heard about people being able to see auras before, but she never expected that someone could manipulate a person's life force like Talon could. It would have been terrifying if it

wasn't for his honor and integrity. He lived by a strong moral code that only allowed him to terminate evil people.

She now understood why he'd said it would be difficult to explain his past.

His Strike Force Team did ruthless things for good reasons. Not many people could accept that way of life, but she could since she already lived by those same guiding principles. Evil had to be eradicated for good to thrive. That was the way it had always been, but few had the courage to step up and work to make it happen.

When the moment they had met back at the sanctuary flashed through her mind, she was pleased he had felt that same connection spark between them. She'd been worried that it hadn't been the same for him since he was human, but that wasn't the case.

Talon Spartan belonged to her as much as she belonged to him.

At first, Secret had thought he was crazy when he had suggested using her abilities this way, but he'd been right. Getting to understand him through his memories made her feel like they had known each other for years. He was a formidable, yet honorable, male worthy of her trust. Knowing who Talon was made her apprehension about their future fade away.

Now, she could honestly thank fate for bringing them together.

Feeling lightheaded, she pulled away from him. "That was..."

When she opened her eyes, her words trailed off. The first thing she noticed was that Talon was extremely pale, and his muscles were tense. There was a stark wildness in his dark gold eyes that she didn't understand, but she could tell something was very wrong.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

His jaw clenched tight, then released. “I saw some of your memories while we were connected.”

Secret was horrified by that, and embarrassment flushed her cheeks with heat. She quickly realized she should have expected it. They weren't officially mated yet, but their unique gift seemed to have triggered the bond between them. Linking together was never supposed to be one way, at least not between them.

So, it was only fair that he got a glimpse of her past since she had seen his.

Talon fought the need to get up and ram his fist through the closest wall. He felt incandescent with a rage he feared would never burn out. When she had connected to him, he'd been completely unprepared for the images that had flooded his mind. He'd seen her memories with startling clarity, making him feel like he'd been there with her.

By the gods, he truly wished he had been so he could have destroyed everyone who had ever dared to harm her.

After fighting in the war with the Zyphir, Secret's father had been one of the first ambassadors appointed to represent her race. She had been born on their ship, and for the first

sixteen years of her life, she had lived amongst the stars with her father, mother, older brother, and two uncles.

They had been happy, blissfully so...until it had all ended in tragedy.

Not much had been known about Tartarus at that point, so when they had been attacked by a Tarin vessel, it had come as a complete shock. No one had even realized the Tarin had been capable of space travel, which had allowed them to conceal a lot of their criminal activity. Most of Secret's family had been killed, except for her and her mother.

They had been taken back to Tartarus as captive slaves.

All of the details weren't clear, but he got the gist of what had happened. The slavers had initially planned on selling both her and her mother, but they had ended up keeping Secret. When the males had tried to separate them, they had fought back. Her mother had managed to take out several of the males before she was slain, while Secret had killed a few and badly injured another.

In return, Kadir Siv, the slaver in charge, had hacked off one of her wings.

A D'Aire's wings were extremely strong, more like armor or scales than made of feathers. Removing one took a great deal of effort. When hers had been cut off of her, the agony she'd suffered had been immeasurable. It had felt like it had taken hours, days even. But nothing could have been worse than the devastating pain of losing her mother.

Her entire family was gone...leaving her completely alone.

Despite being damaged, Kadir hadn't gotten rid of Secret. She'd thought he'd kept her around because she could no longer be sold at a high price. Talon could see for himself that it had been for a very different reason. He could tell by the way Kadir looked at her that he was obsessed with her.

As further punishment, Secret had been forced to become a gladiator of sorts where she'd had to fight against countless opponents. Some of the fights in the pits had ended in horrible beatings, while others had been the cause of the various scars on her body. Then, there were the battles that had ended in death.

She had survived, but at great cost.

Not many people could have endured the physical, sexual, mental, and emotional abuse Secret had, but she had a diamond core that refused to break. Her strength of will alone would have kept her going, but she had also made a promise to herself and her family to exact revenge on all who had wronged them.

Talon made note of every face he saw in her memories. He wanted to burn their images into his brain to ensure he would never forget them. His heart bled for her, and his soul cried out for a share of the retribution she so desperately wanted. He vowed that he would help make sure all of her enemies would come to a painful end, even if they had to hunt them across the universe.

But there was one death he desired more than any other.

Kadir Siv was the mastermind behind the new slave network on Beta Station 4. For that alone, he deserved to die. However, Talon promised he would personally pay that

sadistic fuck back for every moment of pain Secret had suffered at his hands.

“How much did you see?”

He hadn't seen it all, but it had been enough.

“I saw how difficult your life was, and how it has made you into the fierce fighter you are today,” he said softly. “The Dragon Warriors rescued you?”

“Amari and Eden Nazira did. They had liberated the slave camp I was being held at while they had been on Tartarus visiting friends. The camp had been a network of caves hidden deep in the mountain, so the other Tarin warriors who had been fighting the slavers hadn't discovered it. Amari and Eden had been flying around in dragon form and caught a glimpse of smoke coming from one of the vents. When they had shown up, it was one of the best moments of my life. Watching them destroy everything had been fucking glorious.”

“I bet.”

“Unfortunately, several of the slavers had left for another raid, so they weren't on planet when the Dragon Warriors had arrived.”

“How did you get the name Secret?”

“After we were rescued, I was...they called it shock. It wasn't. Not really. I was in survival mode, which meant don't trust anyone. Don't share anything personal.”

“That's understandable.”

“When we were taken directly to Exodus, I didn't want to talk to anyone. Since I refused to answer when they asked me

who I was, they said it was okay if I wanted to keep it a secret. It just stuck after that. Yumi and a few of the other Tarin females who were in the camp with me know my real name, but they refuse to use it out of respect for my wishes.”

“Why don’t you use it now that you’re free?”

Sighing, she glanced out the wide window as if she were searching for something in the inky darkness. “I don’t deserve to, not yet. I was named for one of my mother and father’s favorite human words. Only after all the slavers who killed my family are dead and gone will I use my real name...Justice V’Lys.”

“Then, I will help you clear your list and reclaim your name.”

With immense glee, Talon thought darkly.

He’d never been so fucking glad that he literally killed people for a living. If his unique gift and all the skills he’d amassed could help her find the vengeance she sought, he considered it well worth it.

Secret glanced back at him with a small smile that warmed his heart. That she was able to smile at all after everything she’d been through was a wonder to him. He promised himself to do whatever it took to give her reasons to do it more often. He wasn’t a man familiar with soft words and easy smiles, but he would become a fucking specialist at romance if that’s what it took to keep her happy.

“Your ability to control auras is very interesting. I have to ask, why do you force yourself to touch people before you make your kills?” she asked. “Does it help you read them

better, or are you just punishing yourself by making it more personal?”

Surprised by her questions, his brows furrowed. “I have to touch someone in order for my ability to work.”

She slowly shook her head. “No, you don’t. In every memory that I saw, your ability started working as soon as your aura touched theirs. Not when you touched their skin. Physically, you were still a few inches away. Does the distance make it harder to control?”

Talon started to say that he didn’t have an aura, but he knew that wasn’t true. Of course, he did. He just couldn’t see his own the way he saw everyone else’s. It struck him just how foolish his assumption had been. His only excuse was he’d never been able to talk to anyone about his ability before. At least, not to someone who could actually see and understand what he could do.

Sure, his mother could see auras, but not the same way he could. He’d altered his siblings’ emotions in front of her several times, but she hadn’t noticed anything but the slight change in their auras’ colors. It wasn’t like he was going to kill someone in front of her just to see if she could observe it.

“Can you really see my aura?”

“I can’t right now, but in your memories, I could. You can’t see it?”

He shook his head. “My mother told me that my aura looked a little different. But I really didn’t think anything of it since I couldn’t see it myself. I guess I sort of forgot it’s there.”

“It looks like mine. Actually, it’s pretty much identical. When we met, our auras sort of merged together. At least, that’s what I saw in your memory of that moment.”

“How is that possible when I can’t see it?”

She shrugged. “I guess the memories I see aren’t just what you remember. It’s more of a replay of what really happened. I don’t know if that makes sense, but that’s the only way I can describe it.”

“I get it. What most people consider a memory can be skewed or influenced by their interpretation. What you see is an actual recollection of an event or experience.”

“That sounds about right.” She covered a yawn with one hand, then shook her head as if trying to shake off her fatigue. “Do you think—hey!”

Talon scooped her into his arms and carried her back into her bedroom. “I can feel how tired you are. We can talk about all of this more later. Right now, you need to sleep.”

He gently placed her down on the bed and brushed some hair away from her face. He started to pull away, then let out a breathless laugh when she grabbed his arm and pulled him down next to her.

“You haven’t slept since we boarded,” she accused in a sleepy mumble. “Go to sleep. I still have questions you need to answer, but that can wait until we wake up.”

Since her eyes were already closed, he let himself grin. If she thought he was going to argue about getting to sleep on the same bed as her, she was dead wrong. The fact that she now

felt safe enough with him to be at her most vulnerable meant he'd done the right thing about opening his mind to her.

“There’s no rush,” he whispered. “We have nothing but time now.”

Talon waited for a response, but she had already drifted off. He wished he could reach out and touch her, but he didn’t want to risk waking her and having her reach for one of those wicked blades on her nightstand. A little scuffle might be fun, but she needed rest more than amusement at the moment.

Lifting the covers, he tucked them around her before settling back down beside her. He studied her relaxed expression, loving her more with every breath she took. He’d been attracted to her the moment he saw her, but now he understood the real power of fated mates.

Now that he’d seen the parts of her life that she kept hidden from everyone, he knew she was truly beautiful inside and out. Destiny had chosen the perfect female for him, but what he felt for her was so much more than just a predestined connection.

Secret was everything to him.

And now that he’d found her, he’d do whatever it took to keep her safe.

CHAPTER SIX

IT TOOK THREE more days for Secret to completely recover from her bout of space sickness. She and Talon had spent most of that time getting to know one another between her frequent naps. They talked and shared stories over meals, bonded over their similar experiences, amused each other with anecdotes of when they were young, and discussed plans for the future.

They'd talked through strategies of how to handle the takedown of the slavers on Beta Station 4, and how to rescue the captives being held at other locations. They had also shared memories again a few times to try to figure out exactly how his ability worked.

And each time they linked, it brought them even closer.

He loved spending time with her and didn't even mind when she fell asleep mid-sentence. In fact, he appreciated any excuse that allowed him to carry her back to her bed where he could tuck her in. He enjoyed having an opportunity to take care of her. From small things, like forcing her to take her medication, to feeding her and making sure she rested comfortably.

During those days, he'd remained by her side, only leaving when she was sleeping or to take care of a few critical things. Talon had also tried to learn how to use his ability from a distance. Every member of his team had volunteered to help after he'd shared what Secret had told him. His attempts to manipulate his team's emotions from a few inches away had been successful, but he still hadn't managed it from a greater distance.

It wasn't easy when he couldn't see his own aura.

Talon only seemed to be able to see it when he was around Secret. Their connection strengthened his ability, but it was still problematic. Stretching out his aura took a whole lot of effort and a great deal of energy.

The first few attempts had left him shaky and on the brink of passing out. Even being a foot away from someone took an enormous amount of effort. It was like using a muscle he hadn't known he possessed. Until he strengthened it and learned how to use it properly, it was more of a detriment than an advantage. But if he could someday master the skill, it would add a whole new dimension to what he could do on a mission.

“So, now that you're awake for more than five minutes, are you finally going to tell us why we're going to Beta Station 4, and who we're going to kill?” Cedric asked before shoving an entire piece of honey bread into his mouth.

They were sitting down to a fabulous meal the team had prepared as an informal bonding celebration for Secret and Talon. While they hadn't officially completed their bond yet, there was no doubt that they would.

His team knew they were heading to Beta Station 4 to capture or kill a bunch of slavers, but Talon hadn't mentioned Secret's personal connection to their targets. That was her private business, and she would tell them herself if or when she was ready. That didn't mean they hadn't figured it out for themselves.

Talon shot Cedric a frown, which the hacker chose to completely ignore. “You know why we're going.”

“Yes, but we need more details, boss,” Cedric complained.

Secret had been digging into the food with gusto. She’d only been able to handle light meals while she’d been sick, but now she could eat without restrictions. In between bites, she gave the team a brief background on the Tarin slavers’ operation back on Tartarus. Yumi added some details here and there, but both of them left out their personal experiences with the slavers.

“The Tarins who escaped Tartarus have scattered to various locations, so it’s been difficult to find them,” Winston said. “All Alliance officers have access to the wanted lists but going by descriptions with no images is almost impossible.”

Yumi let out a snort of derision. “That’s just stupid. You’ll never find them that way.”

Winston’s eyes narrowed. “We’re doing what we can.”

“Not good enough,” she accused. “Why haven’t you recruited people who have actually seen them to help with the search?”

“We have! And this team has personally taken down a few of those bastards!”

As their argument raged, Talon sampled a forkful of a new pasta dish Teale had made. He’d been watching Winston and Yumi bicker for days, so it wasn’t anything new. Personally, he thought they needed to either fight it out or fuck, but he wasn’t stupid enough to say that out loud.

“The slavers have set up a new operation that they are running out of Beta Station 4,” Secret said, cutting into Winston and Yumi’s argument. “They chose that location since

it's far away and none of the freed Tarin females have chosen to reside there.”

Teale waved his fork in the air. “You got all of this information from that Tarin back at Exodus?”

Secret nodded before drinking some of her wine. The light blue *ahava* wine was made out of berries from the D'Aire home world and was a particular favorite of hers. Talon knew she barely remembered visiting there as a child, but he would take her for a visit as soon as they were able. Once she was free of her past, he wanted to help her reconnect with that part of her life.

“The restaurant they opened is a front. They might serve a variety of Tarin dishes, but their menu is really a coded way for clients to purchase slaves. If the group doesn't have what they want on the menu, they can place a special order for an extra fee. The slavers then send out their scouts to find someone that fits that description.”

“That's just sick,” Laken said, going pale.

“Who the fuck are these clients?” Cedric demanded. “I want a list of these motherfuckers so we can expose every detail of their fucked up lives.”

“Agreed,” Winston mumbled around a mouthful of pasta.

“We'll need to find the client list. The slavers had a wide range of clients back when they worked for Korsek, which was the name Quilla Rego used as a cover to run her criminal network,” Talon reminded them. “Most people thought the network was destroyed when she was killed back in Light

City, but the group on Beta Station 4 is just a continuation of that same organization. They're bound to have a new list."

"Do you know where they are holding the captives?" Fadi Farez asked. "We'll need to rescue them before anyone can retaliate or move them."

"Some are being held on a small planetoid, while others are being kept on the planet Vexar," Secret told them, mentioning a hostile planet that was home to a variety of dinosaurs and carnivorous plants.

"Didn't Quilla use Vexar as a base before she was killed?" Laken asked.

"She did, until it was cleared out," Teale said. "I wonder why they went back there."

"It makes sense. There was already a camp there for them to use. All they had to do was repair it. And the dinosaurs on the planet are a good deterrent to keep any random travelers from stopping there," Winston reminded.

"We'll need to hit all three locations at once. I've already contacted Commander Olivia Tavish on X21 and asked for her to send a Strike Force Team to Vexar. They're already on their way and will stand by until we give them the green to head down to the surface," Talon told them.

"What about the planetoid?" Teale asked.

"We lucked out," Cedric said. "A few days ago, boss asked me to do a scan to see what teams were in the area. High Commander Matt Malloy and his team were close by."

"Malloy confirmed. They were supposed to head to one of the other Beta Stations to start the decommissioning process,

so they were more than happy to postpone that trip to help us rescue the captives,” Talon told them.

Talon and Matt Malloy had been friends for years. Malloy had been the commander of his own Strike Force Team until he was recently promoted, so Talon had been confident that his friend would help rescue the captives. As expected, it had taken Malloy less than a minute to agree.

Laken smiled. “Well, that makes it easy.”

“You don’t have to look so happy,” Teale grumbled under his breath.

“I can’t help it,” she said with a laugh. “That man has developed a serious commitment phobia. Bad enough that he practically runs away from any female that gets close to him for fear he might wind up mated. It’s hilarious.”

“What does his phobia have to do with you?” Teale snapped. “No, don’t answer that. Just stay the hell away from him from now on.”

“What are you on about?” When he didn’t say anything, Laken chuckled. “I simply enjoy messing with him every time we see him since he never remembers me.”

“I don’t understand. Why wouldn’t he remember you?” Secret asked.

Laken’s eyes widened. “That’s right. We’ve only been introduced once.”

Secret frowned. “What does that mean? Am I missing something?”

After Talon filled her in about Laken's particular condition, Secret murmured, "How interesting."

Yumi laughed. "We've been introduced five times, but I think we're good now."

"It's definitely one of the more unique abilities I've come across," Talon said.

"Look who's talking, soul slayer," Laken shot back dryly. "But seriously, I'm pretty shocked you remember me, Secret. Do you recall the first time we met?"

"I remember first seeing you up on the balcony with Talon and Teale, but I didn't know your name until you told me down on the pathway. I haven't had any problems remembering you since." Secret shot Talon a questioning glance. "You developed an immunity after working with her. I wonder if you somehow passed it to me when our auras connected."

"Maybe." He reached out to stroke a hand down her hair. The gesture seemed to startle her, but she didn't protest or pull away. Leaning closer to her, he whispered, "I wonder what other extraordinary things we can do together."

She snorted out a laugh and playfully shoved him away before focusing back on the food in front of her. "Eat your pasta."

He chuckled before doing just that.

"So, how much longer until we get to the station?" Yumi asked.

"Must you ask that every day?" Winston muttered. That set off another wild argument between the two of them.

Secret stared at her friend, aghast by the vile names she was calling Talon's second-in-command. She'd never seen Yumi react to a male this way, and a part of her wondered if there was something more at play between them.

Yumi had avoided all physical contact with males after their rescue, even though Tarins needed to feed off energy derived from violence, bloodlust, or sex. At Exodus, she had been fed plenty just from being around all the other people there. But on board the ship, it seemed like the lack of energy was driving her a little crazy.

She was going to point that out but was waylaid when she felt Talon attempting to use his aura to reach out to the bickering pair. Curious about how his gift worked, she placed her hand on his arm to try to experience it with him. He'd simply wanted to calm them down a little, but that wasn't all that happened.

The moment Talon's aura touched Winston's, images began flooding into Secret's head. The memories weren't just flashing one by one like they normally did. It was a tidal wave of information that she couldn't even begin to sort through and decipher.

Closing her eyes against the sudden onslaught, she groaned. "Uh oh. This is new."

"What?" Talon asked, worry clear in his voice. "Are you feeling sick again?"

The moment he switched his attention away from using his aura to focus on her, the information dump stopped flooding into Secret's mind. She felt completely drained of energy, like she hadn't eaten in days, even though they were currently in

the middle of a meal. Unable to hold herself up, she slumped against her keeper.

Talon wrapped an arm around her securely and rested his hand on her forehead. “The fever isn’t back. Maybe we rushed your recovery—”

“It’s not that,” she assured him. She tried to sit up but didn’t have the strength to fight him when he refused to let go of her. “Winston? Do you happen to have a pink dartboard on your wall?”

Winston gaped at her. “How the hell did you know that?”

“Because I saw it.” She turned back to Talon. “It seems like my seeker ability came out to play the moment your aura touched Winston’s.”

“What?” Yumi gasped. “But you weren’t touching him.”

“I know, which is why I said this is a whole new development.” Secret sighed heavily. “And now I have to figure out how the fuck to use it.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

HOURS LATER, SECRET declared defeat.

She was exhausted and suffering from depleted energy reserves from attempting to learn how to use her newly expanded seeker ability. It was exciting to know she no longer had to touch someone to view their memories, but the downside to that was just how drained she felt after struggling to read someone from a distance.

Discovering that her gift could work in combination with Talon's ability had been completely unexpected. She'd never even considered such a thing could be possible, but perhaps she should have.

They were fated mates, after all.

While their abilities were vastly different, the way they worked together made sense. Their individual powers had definitely experienced an upgrade, but they both had a lot of work to do in order to be able to use them together properly.

Secret's brain wasn't used to downloading years' worth of someone's memories in the matter of mere seconds. Because of that, it was natural to experience some backlash. The debilitating effects from receiving such a massive transfer of information weren't just mental, though. It also left her feeling physically ill, shaky, and suffering from a pounding headache.

Following her accidental reading of Winston during dinner, he hadn't been angry, just surprised. Actually, everyone at the table had been, but no one had been more astonished than Secret herself. In order to assess the new limits of her seeker

ability, Yumi had offered to be the next test subject. Since Secret already knew most of the good and bad moments of her life, Yumi hadn't been afraid of sharing those memories with her for the sake of practice.

Winston had been adamantly against that idea, claiming that he'd gotten a headache from Secret's reading of him. Until they were sure of the repercussions of the readings, he'd stressed that Secret should continue to practice on him. Yumi had argued against that, but Secret and Talon decided to stick with Winston as her test subject for the evening.

It had quickly become clear that Secret needed Talon as a catalyst to make her gift work from a distance. He needed to either be touching that person or using his own aura to connect to them. Like Talon's struggle with stretching his aura, she needed to learn how to expand her mind.

Unfortunately, that was easier said than done.

It wasn't like she could simply upgrade her own brain to increase the processing speed. It would take time and patience, two things she had far too little of. She'd also have to figure out how to overcome the debilitating fatigue that hit her after using her gift.

After reading Winston a few more times, she knew far more about the male than she'd ever wanted to. They'd tried to keep each session short, but the effects were still overwhelming. One good thing to come of that was she now trusted him more than she ever would have without seeing his memories.

She was grateful Talon had such a loyal and honorable second-in-command. She appreciated their steadfast friendship

that had started back when they'd been in the academy, and she even gained a better understanding of the other team members through his memories.

She'd also confirmed that Winston had developed feelings for Yumi. He might not be ready to admit it, but he'd fallen hard and fast for the Tarin. If Yumi ever decided to give him a real chance, Winston was a male she could depend on.

Secret sat back in her chair, her hunger finally sated after consuming a stack of fluffy pancakes slathered in rich syrup and a side of scrambled eggs and sausage. It was something the staff at Exodus indulged in on the regular after they closed for the night. Comfort food, they'd told her. She still wasn't sure exactly what that meant, but it had become a favorite of hers.

Next to her, Talon pushed aside his own empty plate. Both of them had expended a lot of energy using their gifts, and they now needed rest. He'd tried just being the bridge for her ability without trying to alter Winston's aura in any way. That had taken less energy from him, but more from her.

Winston had gone to bed shortly after the last reading attempt, and Cedric had returned to his workroom to dig up any and all information the Alliance had on the slaver network. It had been Teale's turn to keep watch on the command deck while Fadi got some sleep, so both of them had left hours ago. Only Yumi and Laken remained sitting at the table to keep Secret and Talon company while they ate.

"You guys look like you're about to fall over," Laken pointed out. "You should go get some rest. We'll clean up."

“Thanks.” Talon practically dragged Secret out of her chair. “We’ll see you both tomorrow.”

“Are you going to want to do your brain scan thingy on me tomorrow?” Yumi asked. “If I’m not awake, just come pound on my door.”

Secret chuckled. “I guess it depends how I feel. Don’t worry. Just sleep in, and we can decide when we’re both awake.”

She fought the urge to lean against her keeper as they started down the hallway to her quarters, then smiled to herself when she heard Yumi talking to Laken behind them.

“Go to bed, Laken. I’ll load the dishes into the cleaning unit. I have to go into the kitchen anyway. I’m going to order up one of those vitamin booster things for Winston and force him to drink it.”

Laken chuckled. “I’m sure he’ll love that. Maybe I’ll make Teale drink an energy booster since he’s on duty tonight.”

As they turned the corner and made their way down the hallway where the guest suites were located, Talon leaned closer and asked, “What is going on with those two?”

“Which two?” She poked a finger at his arm playfully. “Yumi and Winston, or Laken and Teale?”

He heaved out a loud sigh. “What the hell is happening on my ship? I used to only have to worry about dealing with Cedric and Fadi’s relationship drama. Now, everyone else is pairing up. This is either going to be really amazing or a total fucking disaster.”

That made her chuckle. “I’d say it’s going to be an amazing disaster.”

“Not funny.”

“I think it is,” she countered with a smile. “They might not be fated mates, but there is true affection there.”

Before they arrived at the door to her quarters, she placed her hand on his arm. Like him, she was wearing a long sleeve black tunic and lounge pants made of a material that was as soft as a cloud. It had surprised her when he’d told her that most of her clothing had come from his family’s company.

She hadn’t realized it, but Starlight Designs provided all of the clothing for the recently released slaves and captives living at Exodus. Since the quality of the clothing was so good, Secret had continued to buy from that brand whenever she’d wanted something new.

Everyone who worked at Exodus also received a discount on everything they ordered. Talon told her that once his mother and sister found out that Secret was his keeper, her closet was always going to be packed with new things they made for her. That both thrilled and terrified her, not that she would ever admit that out loud.

“I was wondering where your quarters are.”

He stopped, giving her his full attention. “Are you hinting that you’d like to sleep alone tonight?”

Shaking her head, she said, “I don’t hint. I’m just curious. We’ve been staying in my quarters for the last few days, and I was wondering what your living space looked like.”

He smiled. “Then, I’ll show you.”

Rather than take the stairs, he guided her onto the lift. A few seconds later, they arrived on his floor two levels up. She and Yumi had been staying on the guest level, where they had limited access to the more private areas. The group had been using the dining room, kitchen area, and lounge on the guest level to make it easier on everyone, but Talon had already given her access to the rest of the vessel. She hadn't really paid attention to that since she'd been too sick to wander around.

When they arrived at the double doors guarding his quarters, he waved her forward. Before she could even use her palm to unlock the doors, they slid open at her approach. She looked back with a raised brow, then made him laugh as she strutted inside as if the space belonged to her.

Well, it kind of did, she supposed.

While her guest suite was elegantly decorated, it had the sterile, cold feel of a place barely lived in. There was no personality there. Stepping into Talon's quarters, she could immediately feel the difference.

They hadn't turned the lights on, but they were flying close to a pink gas cloud that illuminated the room with a splash of vibrant color. It was the same setup as her suite, though the rooms were almost twice the size. Decorated in black and gray with a few silver accents here and there, his quarters should have seemed dark and oppressive. but it was actually the opposite.

There was a warm, relaxed atmosphere that she really liked. As she strolled around the living room, she got a better sense of how he lived. Talon wasn't one of those messy beings

who flung clothes around and left items scattered everywhere. He also wasn't one of those super clean fanatics that didn't allow any disorder in their space.

When she turned, she saw him leaning against the wall in a casual pose with his arms crossed over his broad chest. His lips were curved in that small, secretive smile she liked to think belonged to her alone. The space sickness she had been suffering from over the last few days might have been a blessing in disguise. Spending time together and getting to know him without the urgency of lust clouding her mind had been good for them.

She wanted him.

There was no denying that.

But her life hadn't been easy, and she had countless triggers that were difficult to explain. Connecting through their unique abilities had lifted a weight off her heart and mind. He understood her, knew about her past, and yet, he still wanted her.

That was a gift beyond measure.

As she slowly approached him, he pushed off the wall and met her halfway across the room. He took one of her hands in his and gently rested his other hand on her hip, keeping his hold light. When he began to move them in a slow circle, she frowned.

“What are you doing?”

“Dancing.”

“What?” She choked on a baffled laugh. “Why are we dancing?”

“Because I never have before. Danced with anyone, I mean. It’s another first for us. I like the idea of us doing a lot of firsts together.”

“So do I.” Taking a deep breath, she let it out slowly and mentally prepared herself to take the next step. She lifted her arms, wrapping them around his neck. “Thank you for being so patient with me. I know this isn’t how keepers usually—”

He leaned forward and gently brushed his lips against hers. Another first for them. The kiss was light, soft as a whisper, but the impact it had on her body felt enormous. She’d desired him before, but now she ached for him in a way that was completely unfamiliar.

“This hasn’t been a hardship for me. I’ve enjoyed every second we’ve spent together. Of course, I want you, but I can control myself.” He rested his forehead against hers. “You and I are unique. There is no *should* or *supposed to* when it comes to us. There is no set schedule we have to follow. No timelines or end date. You and I are beyond restrictions.”

“Beyond restrictions. I like the sound of that,” she whispered. “Take me to bed, Talon. I want to bond with you.”

“With pleasure, keeper.”

He lifted her off her feet and carried her into the bedroom. Tall and powerfully built like most D’Aire females, she wasn’t small by any means, but he carried her as if she were light as air. When he set her down at the foot of the bed, her body slid against his in a way that tempted and teased them both.

She felt her nipples tighten as her breasts brushed against his hard chest, and his intense gaze heated her blood. They

continued to stare into each other's eyes as their lips met again, light and sweet. The kiss deepened, and their lips parted, tongues stroking together in an erotic dance. Her eyes fluttered shut as they shared breath and heat, and she leaned against him, wanting more.

Wanting everything.

"I'm almost afraid that this is all a dream," she whispered. "Tell me this is real."

"It's real. You are the keeper of my heart, my mate, my bond," he vowed. "My perfect match in every way."

Talon watched as she took a step back and striped off her tunic, tossing it to the floor. The pink light had shifted to a softer purple as the ship passed through another cosmic cloud, and it highlighted her gorgeous body as she stood before him. His gaze traced over the various scars marring her luminous skin. They mapped the years of adversity she had survived. She was a warrior who had led a difficult life, but those marks did nothing to detract from her beauty.

Staring at her, he felt an unfamiliar wave of tenderness flow through him. He wasn't a man used to soft words and gentle caresses, but he wanted to learn. He wanted to give her everything she needed and more. He'd provide whatever it was she had been missing in her life and give her all the things she didn't even know she wanted.

Not taking his gaze off her, he stripped his own shirt off and tossed it aside. Desperate to feel her skin against his, he pulled her closer. She arched against him as he wound her long silvery-white hair around one hand. Pulling her head back gently, he claimed her mouth again.

Her lips immediately parted for him, welcoming him in. The taste of her was sweet on his tongue, and he was instantly addicted. He groaned against her mouth as she wrapped herself around him, and his cock lengthened and thickened in his pants. He pulled back a little, needing to make sure she was completely with him before he lost control.

“Are you sure—?”

“Yes,” she assured, cutting him off. “I’m done waiting. I want you. I want to feel your body pressed against mine. Want to feel you deep inside me.”

“Fuck,” he growled.

“That, too.”

He choked out a laugh. “You are an extraordinary female.”

“I’m pleased you think so. Now, shut up and kiss me again, keeper,” Secret demanded. “I love how you kiss me.”

“Then, I’ll never stop,” he vowed.

Their lips met again with urgency, and they rushed to strip off the rest of their clothes. He let out another groan as the steel hard column of his cock slapped against his bare stomach, and he shuddered when she wrapped her hand around him. There was nothing tentative about her movements as she began stroking him, moving her hand up and down the thick length of his shaft.

She was claiming him, owning him, as was her right.

Secret gasped when he pinched one of her nipples in retaliation, making pleasure shoot straight down to her throbbing clit. When he shifted his focus to her other breast,

she tried to maneuver him back toward the bed. He spun them around, catching her off guard as he tumbled them onto the mattress.

Her chuckle turned into a moan when he covered her with his big body. Instead of feeling trapped, she felt safe, protected. He'd been careful to keep his weight off her, but she wanted it. Craved it. Needing to feel all of him, she wrapped her arms and legs around him, pulling him closer. She loved the heavy weight of his muscular body on her, and she spread her legs wider until they were pressed core to core.

They both gasped as his long, thick shaft rubbed against her slick pussy. When the head of his cock nudged her entrance, she lifted her hips, welcoming him in. Their tongues stroked and tangled together in a demanding kiss as he slowly slid inside her. Taking his time, he rocked his hips, thrusting into her with slow, measured strokes.

His cadence quickened, building in intensity as he filled her with every inch of him. The orgasm caught her by surprise. Tearing her mouth from his, she threw her head back and let out a wild moan as she came apart. He didn't stop moving, continuing to thrust as he reached down and rubbed her clit to prolong her pleasure.

Unwilling to let her escape, Talon captured her mouth again, drinking in every gasp and moan. Now that she was slick from her first climax, he began pounding into her with greater force. His hips pistoned against her as he drove his cock deep, and she met his every thrust with her own.

As they raced toward the ecstasy that awaited them, Talon pulled back just enough to look down at her. He needed to see

her face, wanted to watch as the pleasure claimed her. As they stared into each other's eyes, no words were spoken, and his heart clenched when she reached for his hand, linking their fingers together.

He felt love for her flood him, filling him to capacity until it pushed him closer to release. She hooked her foot around his leg and flipped their position. Rising up above him, her head fell back so her long hair rained down until the tips brushed against his thighs. Her aura flared brighter, making her look like some sort of ethereal goddess.

She pumped against him, and he gripped her hips hard as she rode him. He levered up and captured her beaded nipple into his mouth. Sucking hard, he drew a loud moan out of her before he switched to her other breast. She sank her fingers into his hair, pulling his head back, and she fused their mouths together again.

"I love you, Justice," he whispered, using her real name for the first time as he wrapped his arms around her tight. He needed her to know the depths of his feelings for her and using any other name wouldn't have been right. "I'll love you until the end of days and beyond."

"You are the keeper of my heart, Talon. My love, my light," she whispered, resting her forehead against his as she began to shudder with release. "I think I was born loving you."

Unable to hold back, his climax tore through him as she rode him to completion. Flames burst to life within him, filling him with white-hot pleasure. Their bond continued to grow with each pulse of his release. They were two radiant beings merging together until they became one. Suddenly, he saw the

shimmering aura around them flare as the bond fully formed between them.

When it was finally complete, they were joined as true mates. Bonded together mind to mind, heart to heart, and sharing the same soul. Their love had been written in the stars and their life forces were tied together in the most intrinsic way possible.

Now, nothing could ever come between them...not even death.

CHAPTER EIGHT

BETA STATION 4 was an absolute shithole.

While the newer Alliance space stations were equipped with the latest technology and offered every amenity one could think of, the Beta Stations were relics of a time long past. They were from a time when humans struggled to accommodate life in space, when they were just entering the phase of being considered a technologically advanced race.

Now, only a few of the older stations remained in service.

As they drifted outside of Beta Station 4, Secret stood at the wide window in the lounge, staring out at the obvious patches and repairs that had been done to the exterior of the antiquated station. That didn't exactly make her feel great, considering they would be boarding the damn thing soon.

There were a few smaller vessels waiting their turn to dock at the station, which surprised her. Since Beta Station 4 was literally on the edge of Alliance-controlled territory, she'd figured it would be pretty desolate.

She quickly realized how foolish that thought was.

There was freedom to be found away from the well-regulated, newer stations. No one really cared about the Beta Stations, so it made them the ideal place for people to escape to if they wanted a little more autonomy...or anonymity.

It also made the old stations the perfect hiding spot for criminals.

Thinking about the upcoming mission, Secret reached down and absently adjusted one of her forearm sleeves. She

was dressed in the lightweight black armor the Strike Force Team wore on missions. Completing her combat outfit were her favorite curved blades that she had strapped to her thighs, and daggers tucked into her boots. She was also wearing a new harness across her body that stored more than a dozen throwing knives.

Besides her visible weapons, she also had a set of throwing needles concealed in her forearm sleeves, with more hidden in her belt. She'd been offered a blaster but didn't feel comfortable carrying a weapon she wasn't familiar with. When she'd mentioned her knife collection and throwing needles a few days ago, Teale had offered to coat them all in poison for her. She'd been intrigued by the idea but figured she'd need more time to get used to that idea before she made that particular upgrade.

It was definitely something she'd make use of in the future.

After she and Talon had fully bonded, her control over her abilities had vastly increased. She'd been thrilled when she had realized she could actually touch someone and actively choose not to read them. It had made her so emotional that Talon had threatened to use his own ability to soothe her if she didn't stop crying. To his surprise, that had been something she'd wanted to experience. Willing to oblige, he'd held her close and a few seconds later, her tears had turned into laughter.

Having a keeper who could alter her moods was better than a chocolate high.

Though she no longer had to wear gloves, she'd chosen to wear them for the mission. Just knowing she had a choice was truly remarkable. Another benefit she and Talon discovered after their bonding was that they could use their combined powers with far less backlash than what they had experienced before. It still took a lot of energy, but the mental and physical effects weren't nearly as bad.

Over the last few days, Secret and Talon had practiced on each of the members of the team. Talon was now able to alter someone's emotions from a distance, and Secret was able to read them using his connection. She still had to limit how long she read someone so she wouldn't get overloaded with information, but the transfer of memories went a whole lot smoother.

They still had trouble if they were more than a few feet away from their subject, but knowing a physical touch was no longer necessary was a blessing. That sounded slightly odd when it came to the subject of killing people. When she'd said as much to her keeper, Talon had just laughed and told her to get over it.

They really were a perfect pair since getting over it hadn't been a problem for her.

Since they had completed their bond, Secret and Talon had been totally united. They were two halves that made up a whole. A true bonded pair. With their minds fully merged, she now knew every moment of his life. And in return, he knew every moment of hers. They could even communicate telepathically now. That had taken some time to get used to, but it also came in pretty damn handy.

It would be even more useful during their upcoming mission.

The team had spent days going over their plans, coming up with a few different workable options. While Secret and Talon's main goal was to kill Kadir Siv, taking the head off the snake wouldn't be enough to shut down the entire trafficking network. They had to destroy everything, piece by revolting piece, making sure there was no way they could revive under someone else's leadership.

In order to do that, they needed the client list and a complete record of the people who worked for the slave trade. The regular employees who handled the day-to-day running of the business wouldn't be hard to find, but victims were often kidnapped by scavengers and contractors that kept their distance from the main operation. It would be difficult to track down all of the kidnapers, but Secret and Talon wouldn't rest until they were found and made to pay for their crimes.

There were also a handful of other greedy elites and civilians who had been enticed into working for the slavers on Beta Station 4. Some of them had taken bribes to look the other way, while others probably didn't even know who they had done a favor for. Even so, all of them still had to be taken into custody and thoroughly interrogated.

Taking down their main headquarters and both slave camps at once was critical. It would minimize the chances of anyone issuing a warning or trying to escape. Unfortunately, to do that, Talon would have to make some concessions. Including a high commander in on the mission plans meant

they would have to follow Alliance rules and regs closer than Talon and his team were used to.

While that was expected, it was still pretty damn annoying.

Talon had set up conference calls with High Commander Matt Malloy and Commander Olivia Tavish on X21 to go over any questions they'd had. They'd both been sent all of the information Talon's team had on each of the slave camps they would be storming so they could come up with their own plans of attack.

As of a few hours ago, they promised their Strike Force Teams were in position, ready for the go-ahead to rescue the captives and destroy the camps.

After a brief debate, Talon had made it clear he would not discuss their plans with the commander of Beta Station 4. They were heading to the station under the guise of delivering a shipment of the cure from Hart Pharmaceuticals anyway, so it was best to just keep everyone thinking that was all their visit was. They knew about some of the people helping the slavers on the station, but not all of them. Until the team could figure out every single person involved, it was better not to tip anyone off.

Secret felt Talon coming up behind her before she saw his reflection in the window. When his arms slid around her waist, she leaned back against him. "Is everything set?"

"Yep. We're going to be docking soon." He turned her to face him, glancing down to peruse her body in appreciation. "I never realized how sexy these uniforms could be. Do you think you have enough knives on you?"

She sent him a sly look. “These are only the ones you can see.”

“Oh, I know exactly how many you have on you right now, and I’ll be happy to strip them all off of you later.”

He had been meeting with Cedric in his workroom while she’d changed into the black armored uniform in their quarters. Once they had fully bonded, they’d quickly realized it had been uncomfortable for them to be away from one another. She’d been dealing with the brief separation better than he was. To ease his anxiety, he stalked her through their mind link whenever they weren’t together.

“You’ve developed quite the habit of lurking in my mind since we bonded, keeper,” she accused playfully.

“I can’t help it. I don’t like it when you aren’t close enough for me to see you, and this mind merge is too damn tempting,” he admitted. “I was never like this before. This is all your fault, so you have to just deal.”

That made her laugh. She wasn’t going to argue since she felt the same way about him. In the past, she’d thought being dependent on a keeper would’ve been constrictive, but it was quite the opposite. Knowing she had someone supporting and loving her gave her a happiness she hadn’t even realized was possible.

“You make me happy, too,” Talon whispered lovingly in her mind.

“Stalker,” she teased, then shivered when he lifted her hand and pressed a gentle kiss to her knuckles. She wondered if she would ever get used to his romantic gestures. Pulling her

hand away, she waved a finger at him. *“None of that now. We have to go kick ass first. Then we can get back to the fun stuff.”*

“But kicking ass is fun,” he countered, pulling her close.

“It really is,” she agreed with a chuckle.

When his wrist unit signaled, he glanced down at it and sighed. “Damn it.”

“Your brother?” Secret asked, amused. “I can tell since he’s the only one who causes that particular aggrieved expression.”

“I was hoping this would wait until after we finished the mission. Then, I could explain everything properly, but...”

Talon had no one to blame but himself.

Of course, Jax had found out now that it was officially a sanctioned operation. Taking down any escaped Tarin slavers was a high priority for the Alliance, as well as the other races, and it had been easy to get the clearance they needed. High Commander Malloy had personally taken responsibility for that. The details were still undisclosed but having an open classified mission file that linked Talon, Malloy, and Olivia on X21 would have been enough to get Jax’s attention.

He was a regent, after all.

Talon was pretty sure there was a flag on his name so that anytime he was linked to a mission or assignment, Jax was immediately notified. Since Jax was friends with Malloy, he had probably contacted him as well. The high commander wasn’t a gossip. If anything, Malloy tried like hell to stay out

of other people's personal business, but he often got dragged into situations against his will.

Beneath his bold, brash façade, Jax was like a mother hen when it came to his younger siblings. He took every opportunity to nag, pester, and interfere in their lives. That was one of the reasons Talon lived off the radar the majority of the time. He rarely made visits home since he just didn't know how to deal with the constant barrage of questions. He also didn't like his loud, boisterous family constantly trying to force their social fun on him.

So, he'd decided that he could love his family and still not want to be around them.

Talon made his way over to the screen on the wall of the lounge and sent the call directly to the larger monitor. The image of Jax Spartan barely had time to pop up on screen before he was off and running his mouth.

“Did you fucking fall and hit your head, fang?” Jax's intense gray eyes narrowed as he scowled on screen. “Or did one of your crazy team members accidentally hurt that tiny little brain of yours during training? I mean, seriously! What the fuck is wrong with you? What the hell is this I hear about your motley crew deciding to become space pirates and taking over a fucking space station?”

Since his brother was using Talon's childhood nickname only his siblings used, he knew Jax wasn't really angry. Just worried and venting. Used to his behavior, Talon just shifted into a comfortable position with his legs braced apart and his arms folded across his chest.

As his brother continued to rant and rave, his gaze flickered over to check on his keeper. Still by the window where she remained out of view, Secret stood watching him with a little frown on her lush lips. He felt her growing anger through their bond, and he felt his heart clench with love for her. While the world might see him as a monster or someone to be feared, she wanted to protect him.

“He’s insulting you. I don’t like it.”

“Jax doesn’t mean it. He’ll stop being ridiculous after he vents a little.”

“Hmm,” she muttered, still not sounding pleased. *“So, according to him, we’re space pirates now? Does this mean we get to keep the station after we’re done?”*

“Funny.”

“I thought so. You are very different from your brother. It’s a wonder you both come from the same family unit.”

“Our temperaments might be vastly different, but deep down, we’re more alike than you might think. I know you’re getting upset, but he really doesn’t mean most of the bullshit that is spewing out of his mouth right now,” Talon assured. *“He’s just worried and doesn’t express it that well.”*

“I know, but I still don’t like it. Shut him up, or I will.”

Since time was running short, Talon cut his brother off. *“Are you about done? I have to go kill a bunch of people soon, and I still have to do a last briefing with my team.”*

Jax’s expression darkened. *“That isn’t funny. Fucking hell, we need to find you a new job. And mom is right. With an attitude like that, you’ll never find a girl who—”*

Secret decided she'd heard enough. She strolled over to Talon's side and placed a chaste kiss on his cheek before focusing a frigid stare at the male on the screen. "He already found her. Greetings, brother of my keeper."

Jax gasped and actually recoiled in his chair. "What?"

"I look forward to getting to know you, but proper introductions will have to wait. We really do have to go kill some evil slavers right now. Oh, and we are definitely going to be having a discussion about your habit of insulting my beloved keeper later," she warned as she lovingly stroked the handle of her curved blade.

Eyes wide, Jax sputtered on screen.

"I think you broke him," Talon teased as he wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her closer. He buried his face against her hair and just breathed her in. Her delicious scent was enough to make his annoyance disappear.

Secret shrugged. "End your call, keeper. We have work to do."

Grinning at his shocked brother, Talon did as she asked and ended the call. "That was pretty damn satisfying. I don't think I've ever seen anyone shock my brother speechless before." He lightly brushed his lips over hers. "Thanks for that."

"Anytime."

Someone cleared their throat loudly, and she and Talon both glanced over as their team joined them in the lounge.

"Can't you wait until the mission is over before you two start groping each other again?" Teale deadpanned.

“Quit being so judgy,” Laken scolded. “If groping helps them get in the mood to hunt down bad guys, so be it.”

“I give the boss some major props,” Cedric said in a loud whisper. “I mean, look at all those knives she’s wearing. What if something gets cut off accidentally? Risking that takes... well, balls.”

Yumi snickered. “That’s usually my first target to slice off a male.”

That had all the males in the group shifting uncomfortably.

“Stars, that’s vicious,” Winston muttered.

Yumi smiled at him sweetly. “Don’t worry. I only cut them off males who truly deserve it.”

“Thank the gods for that.”

Like the rest of the team, Yumi was decked out in black body armor. With her double short swords strapped to her back, a blaster on her hip, and spiked wrist guards that would literally impale someone when she struck them, she looked like the badass Tarin warrior she was.

Once they’d arrived in Zion, Yumi had asked a few of the residents at Exodus to teach her how to use a blaster. While they’d been on board, Winston, Fadi, Laken, and Teale had taken over Yumi’s shooting lessons in the massive holo-room located down on the lower level that they used for training purposes.

Cedric was the only one who wasn’t currently wearing body armor since he wouldn’t be boarding the station with them. As was standard during their missions, he would be staying on their vessel, where he could monitor the security

feeds and their comms. Despite the fact he would be putting their ship on lockdown, he still wore a blaster in his shoulder holster. That was more for his own peace of mind, though.

There was very little chance someone would be able to break into the ship that had been upgraded by Alexis Volis Tesera and her four Dragon Warrior mates. Actually, there was no fucking chance at all that would ever be possible.

Alexis, a former elite, had been friends with Talon since their days at the academy. Now, she was living her best life with her mates and her twin babies in a castle on Tartarus. She was also pregnant again, which was a small miracle. Secret had heard plenty about the Dragon Warriors who had taken up residency on Tartarus. Their arrival was the main reason the slavers had fled the planet.

Evildoers never lasted long wherever the Dragon Warriors were.

After viewing all of Talon's memories, Secret wasn't bothered by any of the friendships he had formed with various females throughout his life. While she hadn't been pleased to see him with other females, she wasn't about to dwell on that part of his past. They had come and gone, while only she would ever remain constant.

His heart belonged to her alone.

Throughout the years, he had often befriended other females who had been branded with star marks to stop them from getting bullied or singled out. Even if he'd only spoken to them once, his dark reputation had been enough to keep most of them safe.

He'd also aided countless other people in passing over the years. While he would prefer to forget about the various good deeds he'd done, to others, those events had been remarkable. Because of that, her beloved assassin had a network of people who were willing to help him if he only asked.

Talon let his team have their moment of fun, knowing they needed it before the severity of the mission took over. He let the banter play out around him as he glanced out the window. It was finally their turn to dock. When the metal doors to their assigned docking bay slid open, the ship slowly began its entry into the dark interior.

It was time to go to work.

Pushing aside pleasantries, Talon got down to business. "Cedric? Get back to your workroom. As soon as our doors open, I want you to lock down the station and take control of their comms system."

Cedric made a fist and tapped it against his chest in salute. "Got it, boss."

As he hurried off, Talon continued speaking to the rest of the group. "Remember, Maverick will personally come to greet us since he'll be suspicious as fuck to see our Strike Force Team handling cargo delivery. I want you to observe everyone, from the officers to the dock workers. We have to make sure the docking bay is safe before we read the commander in on the situation."

Once they left the docking bay, they would split into two teams to converge on their target. Talon, Secret, Teale, and Laken would head directly to the front entrance of the large restaurant the slavers were using as their headquarters.

Meanwhile, Fadi, Winston, and Yumi's team would make their way through the concealed entrance one level down that was hidden away in another shop.

They'd decided the safest way to ensure no harm came to any of the patrons in the restaurant would be for Teale to knock everyone out using a modified somnium bomb. Somnium was a harmless sleep mist that would induce dreamless sleep when used on most of the races, but Yumi had insisted that it wouldn't work on the Tarins.

Especially those with high energy levels.

Talon had been amused when he'd discovered that Yumi's energy levels were fully charged because of all the sexual energy he and Secret had been emitting. He'd taken a bow and told her he'd been glad to be of service. Then, he'd laughed and had to duck when Secret had tossed the apple she'd been eating at his head.

Instead of debating the issue, Yumi had proved her words by letting Teale test the drug on her. The somnium made her dizzy for a second or two, but she had easily been able to shake it off. The team had decided that it wouldn't be a problem if the somnium didn't work on the Tarin. That way, they could knock out any potential hostages, and the team could take down the Tarins without hurting any innocent people.

Both he and Secret actually preferred it that way. While she had no problem slitting their throats if they passed out, she desired a proper fight more than an easy kill. She needed to face her demons and finally put her past behind her.

And Talon planned on helping her do just that.

CHAPTER NINE

“WHO ARE YOU here to kill, Spartan?” Commander Maverick Cain asked instead of offering a proper greeting.

Talon had been a little surprised when the commander of the station had been waiting for them on the landing platform with only two of his trusted officers. The rest of the docking bay had been cleared of personnel, leaving the team alone with their small welcoming committee.

That took a level of trust that impressed him, especially since the commander knew what Talon and his team were capable of. Then again, Maverick obviously knew they were there for a different purpose than what he'd originally been told, so he probably just wanted to keep their meeting private.

Standing next to him, Secret snorted in amusement. “*You seem to get that kind of reaction wherever you go,*” she said through their bond. “*How do you manage to do covert work when everyone knows trouble follows wherever you go?*”

“*I’ve been wronged, keeper. You should be defending me,*” he said flirtatiously.

She side-eyed him before saying, “*Pay attention. What are you getting off these three?*”

“*They have the basic standard mix of colors. There’s no real evil in them.*” Since there wasn’t anyone close by them, Talon decided to get to the point. “You’re right. We did come here to kill someone. Several people actually.”

“Fuck me, I was just kidding.” Maverick’s eyes went wide with shock. “Seriously?”

He quickly explained the situation, watching as rage bloomed bright in all three of their auras. Maverick began pacing, the thud of his boots on the metal platform the only sound in the cavernous room.

“Those bastards! I can’t believe they set up this fucked up network here,” he seethed. “Are you sure? Of course, you’re sure, or you wouldn’t be here.”

“Didn’t anyone do a background check on them before you let them open up their restaurant?” Secret demanded.

“Of course, we did,” Maverick snapped back. “We may be on the edge of nowhere here, but we still follow Alliance rules and regs when it comes to things like that. And we paid close attention since they were our first Tarins setting up residency here on the station.”

“Lieutenant Green handled their background checks. I know because I was supposed to do it, but she took over since it was high priority,” one of the officers said.

Lieutenant Green hadn’t been on their list, but she was now.

“I want her taken into custody now!” Maverick ordered.

Before the officers could move, Talon said, “Not yet. The station is officially locked down. No one is going anywhere, and we have more than just the lieutenant to round up for questioning. How quickly and quietly can you call your Strike Force Teams here?”

“We have four since we handle a lot of brawls and fights here,” Maverick told them. “They work on rotation, but I can

activate them all now and have them meet us at the restaurant.”

“No, have them meet us here, and call them in one at a time. We need to clear them all before we use any of them for this mission.”

It took a little longer than Talon would have liked since each of the teams had more members than his own, but the process went smoothly. The Strike Force Teams were called into the docking bay one at a time, and each officer was given a brief interview by Talon’s team.

He and Secret stood by, watching for noticeable fluctuations in their auras. Maverick and the other officers had been baffled as they’d watched everything. To outsiders, Talon’s methods must have seemed a little unusual, but the results were undeniable.

Out of all the officers, two members were taken into custody.

Talon had marked one of them as a problem as soon as he’d entered the docking bay, but the other man had been trickier to spot. He’d been a master at hiding his true feelings, or perhaps he just didn’t feel things like normal people did. His aura had only changed during his interview, finally giving him away.

After reading their memories, Secret discovered the first male was just a greedy fuck, but the second was a true sociopath. Both males had not only taken bribes, they had also used the slavers’ services. Maverick and the other officers had been horrified by their teammates’ depravities, and they were

even more fired up and determined to end the entire slaver network.

The perfect time to hit the restaurant was right before closing. It was the only time when all of the slavers would gather in the private room in back to eat a meal together and go over business. There was very little trust between most of the members, but they needed one another to keep things running.

After their meetings, the Tarins usually scattered. Some would stay out enjoying the various bars and clubs on the station until they passed out somewhere, while others would retreat back to their own spaces. From Secret's memory scan of the Tarin back on Exodus, she knew that two of the slavers kept their own slaves hidden away in their quarters. Unfortunately, she didn't know which two, so they would have to figure that out.

Right before closing, Laken and Teale would enter the restaurant. Once they were seated, they would release the modified somnium dispersal units and knock out any customers still inside the restaurant. They wanted to make sure innocent patrons weren't used as hostages, but they also couldn't be sure if all of those customers were, in fact, innocent. Anyone in the restaurant could be a potential slave buyer, and that was something that couldn't be ignored.

Talon, Secret, and Maverick would enter through the front with one of the Strike Force Teams, while another team would go through the hidden entrance with Fadi, Yumi, and Winston. The rest of the officers were being sent to start rounding up a list of secondary targets who had aided the slavers.

Secret still thought everything would be a whole lot easier if they just took care of the problem themselves, but Talon had told her they had to include the commander and some of the officers from the station. It would be good to have more people working with them to make sure no one slipped through the cracks. It would also be beneficial to let the officers see exactly who they were fighting to ensure it never happened again.

Talon's team walked over to join him and Secret as Maverick pulled the Strike Force commanders to the side to speak with them. The other officers left to get ready for the op, under strict orders not to speak to anyone until they returned.

"I have a bad feeling," Winston announced.

"Oh, fuck," Teale muttered. "Here we go again."

"You just jinxed us," Fadi complained. "Are you worried about the Beta Station 4 officers, or the mission itself?"

"I don't know."

"Well, that's really helpful, Winnie," Yumi said dryly.

"Don't call me that," Winston growled.

Before they could really start arguing, Talon said, "We'll just have to proceed with caution. Once everyone is ready, things are going to move fast. I'll contact the other teams now so they can go rescue the captives and take down the camps."

After Talon contacted the other teams, Cedric confirmed all of their primary targets had gathered in the restaurant. Talon's group left the docking bay ahead of Maverick and his teams. The remaining officers would go to the Tarins' residences and rescue any captives they could find, as well as

start tracking down secondary targets and taking them into custody.

As they entered the atrium, Secret scanned the area for any potential problems. They quickly moved toward the restaurant to minimize the chances of word getting out of their arrival at the station before shit went down. Talon's particular reputation would definitely cause a stir, and people were bound to start speculating if he was recognized.

After days of relative quiet on board their ship, all the noise and the crowd of people were jarring to her. She and the rest of the team wore cloaks over their body armor so they could blend in with the crowd as they made their way through the busy atrium, but she'd forgotten that her own scarred face was quite noticeable. She reached for the hood on her cloak and started to pull it up, but Talon grabbed her hand and stopped her.

"Don't ever hide your beauty from me."

She shot him a look beneath lowered lashes as she squeezed his hand. He really did say the sweetest things sometimes. *"I just thought my scars might draw too much attention. Besides, what if all the Tarins aren't in the meeting? Someone might recognize me."*

"Doesn't matter." He lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles as they stepped onto the glides that took them up a few levels. *"No, don't pull away. Holding hands just helps us blend in. We're just a couple in love taking a stroll through this shithole of a station."*

"Lucky us."

He let out a snort of laughter in response.

“Flirting on your way to a massacre,” Cedric quipped through their ear comms. “This is certainly a new one for you, boss. I’m not sure if I should gag or applaud.”

“You can’t hear us,” Secret pointed out. “How do you know we were flirting?”

“I’d say kissing your hand counts as flirting,” Cedric said dryly, reminding them that he was watching everything through the security feed.

“Can you all maybe pay attention to the fucking mission? Laken and I are about to head in,” Teale hissed out.

“I’m capable of flirting with my keeper and watching you walk,” Talon commented blandly. Tapping his wrist unit, he opened up the comms feed to Maverick’s team, who were following them at a distance. “Maverick, when you get up to this level, block it off.”

“We’ll block both entrances to the balcony and start quietly redirecting people away from the area now. Should I send the other teams to start rounding up the other people on the list, or do you want to wait?”

“Send them now,” Talon confirmed. “As soon as you see us enter the site, you can follow us in.”

“Got it.”

“We’re doing the same down here, and we’ll wait for your signal,” Winston reported from where he was stationed one level below.

The restaurant was located on the fifth level balcony of the atrium. Once they blocked off both entrances to the balcony as well as the level below, they'd be able to keep the area pretty well contained.

Secret had fought plenty of battles. She'd also schemed, plotted, and executed her share of plans while she'd been in captivity, but never something with so many moving parts like this mission. Crazy as it might have sounded, she enjoyed watching it all come together.

As she watched Laken and Teale make their way into the restaurant, Secret sighed. "Is it strange that I wish we were the ones going in first? I know we can't since someone would surely recognize me, but still..."

"No," Talon said. "I feel the same."

"Eleven diners and five staff members present in the main dining area. The private room isn't visible from the front," Laken reported through the comms.

"Say the word and we'll get things rolling," Teale said.

"Do it. Everyone, get ready to go in," Talon ordered.

"Hold on. Give us another minute or two. I think some of the customers are about to leave," Laken murmured. *"Yep, they are getting up now."*

Talon pulled Secret to a stop in an area between two shops that was partially shielded from view. They removed their cloaks since they no longer needed them, then they put on the half masks that had been hanging around their necks. Once released, the somnium wouldn't last too long, but the masks

would help defend them against any lingering remnants of the sleep drug in the air.

As Laken had predicted, a couple of civilians strolled out of the restaurant a few seconds later. They were too busy laughing and chatting that they didn't even notice the lack of people on the balcony until they were swept away by the Strike Force Team at the end of the walkway.

"Mist is released," Laken announced from inside the restaurant.

"Everyone move in," Talon ordered. "Cedric, monitor the surrounding shops for any hidden exits we might have missed."

"Got it, boss."

At their approach, the automatic doors to the restaurant slid open, releasing a cloud of somnium that quickly dispersed. He rushed toward the entrance with Secret by his side. They'd gone over the plan countless times and had even strategized for contingencies and potential issues. But in reality, things could drastically change in a heartbeat, making all of those plans obsolete.

In this instance, they had underestimated the sheer cruelty of their enemy.

Talon had only made it a few feet into the restaurant when the world exploded around him. Fire and smoke billowed, and a shrill alarm rang out that was barely audible over the deafening sound of the blast.

He turned and tried to shield Secret with his own body, but it did no good. The force of the explosion lifted them off their

feet and hurled them over the balcony...straight down to their doom.

CHAPTER TEN

INDESCRIBABLE AGONY TORE through Secret as she grabbed hold of Talon and released her wings. When they surged out of her back and ripped straight through her body armor, only one white wing burst free while the other one appeared as the severed stump she'd been left with after that brutal attack years ago.

She felt the same torment she'd experienced when her wing had initially been hacked off every time she released her wings, so she'd only called them out a few times since it had happened. Thankfully, her single wing was enough to protect them both from the scorching flames of the blast. The intense fire seared the surface of her wing and what was left of the other one, but she didn't care about the pain.

She had to do whatever it took to save her keeper.

The dark cloud of smoke swirled around them as she flapped her wing hard to try to slow their descent. Since she couldn't see anything, she had to use the layout of the atrium in her mind to try to guide them toward a safe landing spot. With a bit of luck, she managed to glide them over to a stall with a cloth roof that had been set up on the ground level of the atrium.

They hit the fabric hard enough to topple the stall over, then they rolled onto the floor, landing amidst debris and people scrambling for cover. It was utter chaos. Screams and cries could barely be heard over the shrill alarm, and bodies of the fallen lay broken and bleeding on the ground.

Lying underneath Talon, Secret moved him off her and tried to hold back a scream as she retracted her wings. Her vision blurred, and the pounding in her head made it hard to think, but Secret desperately tried to shake off the disorientation. Losing that battle, she closed her eyes for a moment, or perhaps she'd just blacked out.

When she opened her eyes again, there was a brief moment of confusion. For a second, she couldn't figure out where she was or what had happened. Then, everything came rushing back to her in startling clarity. Her muscles screamed in protest as she sat up. Everything hurt, but she forced herself to ignore her own injuries.

She turned Talon over to check him for wounds and was finally able to take a full breath when she realized he was fine. He'd just gotten knocked out during their fall. Her mask had helped her breathe through the blast, but now it felt too constricting. She pulled it off, dropping it on the ground.

Roused from sleep, Talon gasped and surged up to a sitting position. He tore off his own mask. "Son of a bitch, you're bleeding," he accused, reaching out to touch the side of her head. "Where else are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," she wheezed.

"Fuck that, I can feel your pain. That's what knocked me out. I've never felt anything as excruciating as that before, and I know it wasn't coming from me."

His hands raced over her, searching her for any injuries. She knew the moment he remembered to use their mind merge. She'd been trying to block him, but he easily forced his way in. The look of anguish that crossed his face told her that

he knew how much it had hurt to release her wings. Ignoring the chaos around them, he jerked her against him.

“By the gods, keeper.” His voice shook with emotion as he whispered against her neck. Although his hold on her was tight, his fingertips were gentle as he stroked her smooth skin through the holes in her body armor.

“Commander Spartan!” Cedric yelled through the comms. “Talon! Laken! Teale! Someone fucking answer me!”

Secret winced when the voice shouting in her ear interrupted, then she noticed Talon’s earpiece was missing. Removing hers, she shoved it at him. “You deal with this.”

“We’re alive,” Talon reported once he shoved the comms unit into his ear.

“Thank fuck! The security feeds are down, so I can’t see shit!”

“I’m here,” Teale croaked out. “But Laken is down. Fuck, she’s hurt bad.”

“What is your location?” Winston demanded.

“I moved her behind the bar in the back of the main dining area.”

“Hold tight. We’re working our way to you,” Winston told him, sounding out of breath. “Targets engaged, but we lost four through the fucking hole they blew into the side wall in a secondary explosion. One of them is our primary, Kadir Siv. Plan F, boss?”

“Affirmative,” Talon growled out. “We’ll go after the others.”

“What’s Plan F?” Secret asked

“It means everything is fucked and we improvise until we complete our mission,” Talon admitted.

That worked for her.

Glancing up, her eyes went wide as she surveyed the damage. They really were lucky to be alive. The bomb the Tarins had placed in the restaurant had destroyed a good portion of the fourth, fifth, and sixth levels. The flames continued to rage despite the automatic suppression system trying to extinguish the fire. Parts of the balconies had broken to pieces, sending slabs of concrete and rubble crashing to the ground. Dozens of people were injured and medics rushed on scene to help.

As Secret scanned the area, her tracking gaze caught sight of a dark figure in the crowd. He stood out since everyone else was facing the mess, while he was heading away from it. She started to go after him, but she caught sight of another figure out of the corner of her eye. The male was on the second level, and when he glanced down, their gazes locked.

Both of them froze.

Kadir Siv’s black eyes widened with recognition, then he smirked in a familiar way that made her feel sick. When he turned and disappeared into the crowd, Secret took off after him.

“I just saw Kadir on the second level.”

“Wait for me. We’ve locked down the station,” Talon reminded. *“He’s not going anywhere.”*

“He has a way off the station,” she warned. “I’m sure of it!”

Talon cursed viciously as he had to veer off course to avoid colliding with a few gawkers that hadn’t moved out of his way. *“Head toward the docking bays. Cedric, find me Kadir. Now!”*

“Trying, boss. The security feeds on the station went down at the same time the bomb went off. They must have rigged it that way,” Cedric told him.

He’d almost caught up with Secret when a body slammed into him from the side. He ducked and spun away, barely avoiding the knife that had been aimed at his throat, then kicked out at his attacker. The Tarin male avoided the kick, then he slammed into Talon again, trying to take him down. While he was touching him, Talon saved time by using his ability to kill him.

The male fell dead at his feet.

Talon hadn’t tested his ability to kill since he’d bonded with Secret, so he hadn’t realized it would work so quickly. It still took a lot of energy, but it had been as easy as breathing. All he’d had to do was think of the attack, and it was over. That meant he was going to have to be very careful until he understood this part of his gift better.

He started to bend down to check the body for anything useful but paused to fight off a wave of dizziness. Talon wasn’t sure if that was an aftereffect of the blast or if it was from using his ability. He just knew he couldn’t go down yet.

Not when his keeper was tracking her greatest enemy.

The fact that Secret was still on her feet after suffering such debilitating pain from releasing and retracting her wings made him reevaluate his own forbearance. It had felt like he'd been sliced open, carved to pieces, then had acid poured directly on his bones. He'd never experienced anything like that before. To know she'd willingly done so in order to save him was humbling and just made him love her even more.

"I know you love me, keeper," Secret said through their bond, her voice tinged with amusement and a hint of exasperation. *"But I really don't think I can do without you now, so saving you was for my own selfish purposes. And I guess it's true what they say...a female's tolerance for pain far surpasses that of a male."*

That made him laugh. *"You definitely got that right. Where are you?"*

"I'm busy fighting my own bad guy. Give me a minute."

He blanched when he realized he had been distracting her while she'd been fighting. Before he could move, two of the Strike Force Team officers rushed over to gape at the body on the floor.

"Commander Spartan, what—"

"Take the body somewhere secure, and make sure no one touches his wrist unit."

"Yes, sir!"

He paused, then pointed toward where a crowd of people were clustered together. "There will be another body to collect in a few minutes."

Leaving them behind, Talon made his way toward his keeper. He pushed his way through the mass of people, and a moment later, he was given a stark reminder that Secret didn't need his help. He watched as she used her curved blades against a large Tarin male who was fighting with a long sword.

He was pretty skilled, but it only took a few seconds to see that she was a much better fighter than her opponent. She fought like her blades were extensions of her own hands. Still, there was an old saying about blades having no eyes. One mistake or miscalculation could lead to a disaster.

"Stop thinking that. Are you trying to jinx me?" she demanded.

"Of course not. I just want you to finish the fight soon. Stop playing with him."

"Contact Yumi for me," Secret told him. *"Tell her I'm fighting Mion."*

He did as she'd asked, then winced at the string of vicious curses that came through the comms system in return. Yumi had quite the temper and wasn't afraid to show it. While Kadir Siv was Secret's main enemy, Mion was Yumi's. He knew Secret was trying to give her friend a chance to fight Mion for herself, but it turned out not to be necessary.

"She's busy helping people and said to finish it for her," Talon reported. *"Give her peace."*

"Done."

She'd been playing defense, biding her time and stalling for her friend. Now, Secret attacked without mercy, using a ferocity born from vengeance. Kicking out low, she knocked

him to his knees, then expertly concluded the fight with a vicious swipe to the Tarin's neck.

The crowd that had gathered roared their approval, making Talon appalled by their behavior. They were treating it like a performance being held for their entertainment. He wasn't sure if he wanted to laugh or curse at the absurdity of it all. The residents at Beta Station 4 had some serious fucking issues if these types of events didn't even make them blink twice.

"I announced he was a slaver when I started fighting with him, and he was foolish enough to admit it to everyone," Secret explained. *"It's only fair the public should know their crimes."*

"That will make the cleanup of this clusterfuck easier."

As she wiped her blades clean, Talon heard someone shouting his name. He impatiently scanned the crowd of people, then frowned when he saw a woman hurrying toward him.

It took him a moment to recognize Scarlett Nikandros since it had been years since he'd last seen her. A powerful precog, Scarlett had been held captive by the Alliance as surely as Secret had been held on Tartarus. The only difference was the Alliance had claimed it had been for her own good.

She had been used as a weapon by high-ranking, powerful elites, and their desire to keep her under their control had come at the cost of her identity and freedom. Talon knew he would have suffered a similar fate if the Alliance had ever discovered what his true ability was, which was why he'd helped her escape her old life back on Earth.

No time for pleasantries, Scarlett spoke in a rush. “Spartan, your target is doubling back. You need to head up to Level Six. He has a shuttle hidden in one of the cargo bays. If he takes off from there, it will destroy the station’s shield. Then, everyone here will be fucked. You need to stop him before he leaves. Trust me.”

“I do,” he said honestly. “Thanks for the warning.”

As he turned, he almost ran right into Secret. Grabbing his keeper’s hand, he pulled her with him as he hurried toward the glides. They were on the clock, but at least they knew exactly where to go now.

“Did you catch all that?”

“I did. In your memories, that female used to have a scroll mark on her face.”

“She’s in hiding.” Still holding her hand, he found himself asking, *“You’re really not jealous of any of my female friends?”*

“You sound disappointed.”

“Not disappointed, just curious.” That was true since he could barely stand it when she spoke to the other males on his team without him, and he trusted them implicitly.

“I know your true intentions, as you know mine. If there ever was an occasion when you truly made me jealous, I would just kill the female...then make you pay dearly for the rest of eternity.”

He was a sick man since hearing that thrilled him.

Talon reached out to the rest of the team, filling them in as he and Secret raced toward Level Six. “Cedric, how many cargo bays are on that level?”

“Four, one in each section. I’m trying to patch the security system, but the main circuits are still down. I’m afraid if I force it, it might fuck with some other system on this heap of metal.”

“Yumi, Fadi, and I are heading up to meet you now. We can help search,” Winston said. *“Teale is transporting Laken back to our ship for treatment.”*

“How is she?” Talon asked.

“She was critical,” Teale responded, his voice rough with emotion. *“Luckily, I was able to stop the bleeding on scene. I just got her back to our med-bay, and now she’s healing in the med-pod. Without the upgrades the Dragon Warriors gave us, we would have lost her. I’m heading back to join you now.”*

“Don’t,” Talon ordered. “Stay there and get our ship in the air. If Kadir manages to get past us, I need you to make sure you destroy him before he can leave.”

“Copy. Heading to the command deck now.”

“We’ve just reached Level Six,” Talon announced as he and Secret raced past a bunch of shops toward a long corridor that would take them to a more private section of the station.

“We need to figure out what the fuck to do if the station’s shield fails,” Winston reminded. *“Should we start evacuation procedures just in case?”*

“That would cause mass panic,” Yumi pointed out. *“We’d also lose the rest of the slavers and their collaborators.”*

“We might have to risk it if—fuck!” Talon snarled as Kadir Siv appeared at the other end of the hallway with another Tarin male. “There they are!”

Secret took off running, desperate to reach her quarry before he could get away. The males sprinted toward a large metal door that had to be the cargo bay where their shuttle was hidden. The other male attacked her with a whip while Kadir used his palm to unlock the door. She spun out of the way, then reached down for the handles of her curved blades. Before she could pull them free, Talon shot the male with his blaster, sending him crashing to the ground.

He shrugged. “It was faster.”

Kadir disappeared inside the room, and the door slid shut again before they could reach him. She slammed her fist against the thick metal in frustration.

“We can’t let him get away!”

“Cedric, open the door of Cargo Bay 4,” Talon ordered.

“I’ve tried, boss. It’s not connected to the main system. I’d have to do it in person.”

Winston, Fadi, and Yumi raced over to join them.

“Let me try,” Fadi said, pushing his way in front of the lock. “Ced, can you walk me through it?”

“It’s too late. He’ll take off before we get the damn door open,” Yumi pointed out, kicking the metal door for emphasis.

“Fuck this. Let me just blast the lock.” Winston pulled out his blaster, but before he could use it, Fadi shoved it away.

“You can’t! My scan shows there is an explosive attached to the door. If we try to force it open, we’re going to end up in pieces.”

Secret grabbed hold of Talon’s hand. “Use your gift.”

Talon stared back at her with an incredulous expression. “How?”

Secret believed he could do it. They hadn’t tested his ability to kill at a distance since they’d bonded and attempting it through a solid metal door was all kinds of crazy, but she still believed it was possible. She wasn’t sure how or why.

She simply believed.

Linking their hands together, she said, “It’s just like we practiced. Once we combine our gifts, you just have to stretch your aura out to meet his. Kadir is the only living being on the other side of this door. We just have to find him.”

“We can try,” he said, still not sounding convinced. His brows furrowed as he shook his head. “It won’t work. I can’t get past the door.”

“Your aura is a part of you. If you can’t go through the door, try going under.”

“Under...”

Of course, Talon thought.

Since he was touching his keeper, his aura was now visible. Willing it to move, he stretched his aura out, pushing it through the tiny opening at the bottom of the door. He felt lightheaded and a little weak, but he pushed that feeling aside and focused on the task at hand.

“I don’t...”

“You don’t need to see him to find him,” Secret whispered back.

He closed his eyes and let his senses flare out. They were blind in the hallway, but he didn’t need sight to find his target. All he needed to do was use his own aura to seek out the beacon of evil that surrounded Kadir Siv.

The male was busy uncovering the hidden shuttle at the far end of a packed room. The distance was straining Talon’s energy, but Secret poured everything she had into their connection. Talon felt himself instantly become stronger, and he used their combined power to strike out.

The moment he touched the darkness surrounding Kadir Siv, Talon could feel Secret reading his memories, searching for the information they wanted. He struggled to hold on, determined to give her the time she needed.

“I know where to find their client list,” she said through their bond. *“You can kill him now.”*

“Are you sure?”

“By your hand or mine, it’s the same result,” she told him. *“End him for me.”*

Secret watched carefully as Talon ruthlessly used his ability to void Kadir Siv’s aura. It only took a few seconds, but to her, it felt like a lifetime. Once Kadir’s body fell to the floor, Talon retracted his aura.

She reached up and cupped a shaking hand against Talon’s cheek. *“Thank you, Talon.”*

“My pleasure, Justice.”

Pride surged through her at hearing him speak her true name. He had helped her reclaim it, and she sent him a brilliant smile filled with all the gratitude and love she felt for him. He smiled back at her, then his eyes closed and he collapsed against her.

Ignoring the concerned murmurings from the others, she caught Talon against her and lowered them both to the floor. Even though they were completely drained of energy, she wasn't worried. With their mission completed, they could rest while their friends watched over them.

Talon had given her the closure she'd needed, so she was finally able to let go of the past. Now, they could focus on a bright future together filled with light and love. Settling against his chest and listening to the strong beat of her keeper's heart, she let her own eyes drift shut, secure that her nightmares had finally come to an end.

EPILOGUE

SURROUNDED BY THE familiar chaos of a packed bar, Justice surveyed the crowd of people in Exodus with a newfound appreciation. The last thing she had ever expected when she'd first walked through the doors of the sanctuary was to miss the place so damn much after being away for a few months.

It was their first night back on Earth, and the entire bar had been closed to the public in honor of Justice and Talon's bonding celebration. The place was packed with all of their friends and his family, making it an interesting mix of people that had gathered together. Only Talon and Justice could successfully integrate a group of assassins with business moguls, bartenders, former slaves, and a handful of the most powerful magical beings in the universe, and not have it turn into an awkward mess.

Life was indeed strange sometimes.

It had been a little over two months since the conclusion of the mission on Beta Station 4. They had completely destroyed the slave network on the station, while the other two teams had successfully rescued the captives and eradicated the camps. A lot of the rescued captives had moved directly to the new refuge on Xenthian, while others had returned to their old lives.

It had taken some time to detain and question everyone connected to the group, but it had been well worth it to take their time and scan them. Otherwise, they wouldn't have been able to find a secret third camp that had been set up by a group

of elites who had intended to create their own business to challenge the Tarins' network.

After recovering the client list and operative roster, they had reluctantly handed it over as part of the official report. Talon had made sure to keep a copy despite being told not to. He and Justice had wanted to make sure each and every name on that list ended up paying for their crimes. They'd also planned on rescuing all the captives who had been sold.

If the Alliance hadn't followed through on their promise to take care of it, then Talon's team would have personally handled the rescues...as well as the punishment of the guilty. Fortunately, the Council of Regents had taken Talon, High Commander Matt Malloy, and Commander Olivia Tavish's reports seriously.

Upon receiving the reports, they had immediately sent out dozens of Strike Force Teams across the various planets and space stations. They'd given the urgent rescue missions the high priority level they'd deserved. They had also punished plenty of the guilty, even those with powerful connections.

They'd had no choice once information about the slave network had gone public.

That's why it paid to have a smart-ass hacker on the team.

Beta Station 4 had been a mess after the explosion, but it would have been far worse if the shield had actually failed. Many of the businesses had to close while repairs had been made in the atrium. Alpha Station: X21 had willingly taken in anyone who had been displaced, though that had been a temporary measure.

There had been some talk about just decommissioning the old station, but that idea had been scrapped when Dragon Warriors Zarik, Kayn, and Rycor Vyper had shown up at their sister's insistence. Since they had been traveling in the area, Jade had asked the trio to stop by the station to check on Justice and Yumi.

The Dragon Warriors had used their magic to repair the damage caused by the explosion, but they had also made an assortment of upgrades at the station that had left the residents stunned with awe. They had also been able to speed up Laken's recovery. She'd been badly burned in the explosion, but after they had healed her, she'd been as good as new.

Instead of heading directly back to Earth, Talon, Justice, and the rest of the team had made a few stops along the way. Their first stop had been to the D'Aire home world. It had been years since Justice had been to that planet, and it had been nice to visit and pay her respects in honor of her family.

While the planet had been a beautiful place to visit, Justice hadn't felt a real connection to it. That had relieved her...and also made her feel a little sad. It wasn't her home. The truth was home wasn't a place for her—it was a person.

Her home was wherever Talon was.

Their next stop had been to New Vega, where she had met Talon's sister, Mya, and her three Krytos mates. Mya was a sweet, caring female, and it had been fascinating to hear about the details of her conversion. Becoming a Krytos sounded like a painful experience, but it had been necessary to save her life. Justice couldn't imagine how difficult it was to handle three massively possessive mates when she had a hard time dealing

with her one, but she figured it must work for them since they seemed blissfully happy together.

Justice had also met Kahla Adaro, who was the younger sister of Rogan and Lucian, the owners of Exodus. Justice and Kahla had immediately hit it off, and along with Laken and Yumi, the four females had become close. They had terrified most of the males around them, but Talon had simply been happy that Justice was making friends.

Justice had been nervous about meeting the rest of Talon's family, but that part of things had gone better than she'd anticipated. Luckily, she hadn't had to meet them privately. Instead, they had all attended the party so the Exodus crew could act as a buffer for her.

Talon's mother was a lovely female who had been warm and welcoming, and his two fathers had been friendly and interesting. Even Talon's youngest brother, Conner, had made it to the party. He and a few of his friends from the academy had attended, and it was clear to see that the younger elites were impressed as hell by the way they watched everyone in attendance with wide eyes.

Justice had even ended up liking Talon's oldest brother, Jax, more than she'd expected. Jax, Serra, and Sullivan Archer were a good, balanced unit, and their daughter, Kiara, was an adorable little baby. However, she had liked the trio a whole lot more before they had shoved their baby into her arms and taken off.

Looking down at Kiara's sunny smile, Justice tried not to move for fear she would damage the tiny human somehow. Jax and Archer had just pulled Talon aside for a private word,

leaving her with Serra and the baby. Unexpectedly, Serra had shoved the baby at her before dashing off to the bathroom.

If someone didn't come rescue her soon, someone was going to pay dearly.

And by someone...she meant her keeper.

Talon snorted out a laugh through their bond. *"I might as well enjoy this while I can since I'm going to end up paying for it anyway."*

"Why in all the worlds would anyone leave me with their tiny human?" Justice growled. *"I question your family's sanity now."*

Before she could complain again, the baby was plucked out of her arms by Donna Spartan-Rollins. Justice let out a sigh of relief and smiled at Talon's mother. Kiara cooed and clapped her tiny hands together as Donna playfully bounced her around.

"Grandma to the rescue! Go have fun, sweetie. It's your party, after all."

Justice didn't need to be told twice.

She fled away from the crowd, needing a private moment to recover from the sheer terror she'd felt. She felt more comfortable holding an explosive device than she did that little baby, even if that tiny human was her niece.

It was getting late, but the celebration was still rocking. They'd had a delicious meal, followed by a delightful dessert table and an open bar that everyone was enjoying. The younglings would be leaving soon, then the real party would begin.

Justice made her way out to the jungle garden out back and stood under a night sky filled with stars and a bright moon. So much of her life had changed in such a short time. After she'd lost her family, she had tried to accept that she would spend the rest of her days living a lonely life of seclusion.

But now that she'd found her keeper, she would never be alone again.

"Nights like this are meant to be enjoyed," Jade Vyper said as she suddenly appeared next to Justice. "It is a vastly different view from space, is it not?"

Justice had to force herself not to startle. Jade had a habit of transporting in and out when one least expected it. "It really is," she admitted. "How was your trip home to Ilius?"

"It was nice to see my mother and fathers, though it is no longer home. Strange how that works," Jade murmured. "Once you find your mate, terms like home and family suddenly hold different meanings."

Since Justice had just been thinking the same thing, she simply nodded. No one could keep a secret around Jade for very long, not that it was her fault. She didn't go digging around in people's heads for fun. At least, Justice didn't think she did.

Jade simply knew things.

It could have been a basic Dragon Warrior skill, or perhaps it was because she was part Ilius. Either way, she had an uncanny way of reading people and situations.

"I finally have a chance to speak to you in private."

"Is something wrong?"

Still looking up toward the night sky, Jade shook her head, making her long purple locks dance in the breeze. “Nay, there is nothing wrong. I am glad you have chosen to use your real name, Justice.”

“I am, too. I’m not sure if I ever said it to you directly but thank you for allowing me to heal here. This is a good place. It’s—”

“A family,” Talon said as he stepped outside and joined them. “This is your family.”

“Aye, it is our family.” Jade smiled and placed her hand on Justice’s shoulder. “Enjoy your evening, and honor to your mating.”

With that, she disappeared again.

Talon blinked in surprise. “What the hell was that?”

Justice shrugged. “Dragon Warriors love being cryptic sometimes.”

“I know, but—” Talon let out a loud gasp and grabbed hold of her arms, turning her to face him. “Holy shit, she healed you.”

“Wh-what?”

“Your scar. It just...disappeared.”

Justice’s hand flew to her face, her fingers searching for the familiar scar, but it wasn’t there. “She touched my shoulder. Jade never touches anyone but her mates unless she has to.” Tears of gratitude stung her eyes. “I said I would keep my scars until I could reclaim my name.”

“What about your wings?”

She met his gaze and braced herself for the agony of releasing her wings. When she called them forth, there was no pain. All she felt was pure joy as two majestic white wings burst from her back, tearing through her tunic. Closing her eyes, she let the tears fall.

She truly was free from her past now.

“They’re beautiful, my love. My one, my only,” he whispered, resting his forehead against hers. “You are beautiful, keeper of my heart.”

“I love you, Talon. Thank you for helping me get here.”

“Here in my arms is where you were always meant to be.”

She sent him a watery smile. “Hold tight, keeper. Let me take you to the stars.”

Talon pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her. She flapped her wings, once, twice, then with a jubilant laugh, launched them into the sky.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laurie Roma mainly writes contemporary, romantic suspense, fantasy, and sci-fi romance. She can usually be found tapping away on her keyboard, creating worlds for her characters while she listens to music. Of course, her playlist depends on her mood...but then again, so does her writing. She loves to hear from her readers, so be sure to reach out!

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