



GHOST  
Unit

Knowing  
HER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
MICHELLE HOWARD

# **Knowing Her**

Ghost Unit

**By Michelle Howard**

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# One

“Tell me again what you were thinking!” Kjar’s advisor blasted as soon as he entered the office.

Steeling his nerves, he recited everything that had gone on in the training. Everything wrong. When he finished, he said, “Trainee Naan was at fault. He didn’t follow proper procedures and caused the incident that nearly killed Trainee Muroe.”

His advisor sighed and clasped his hands together on his desk. Regret tightened his features. “While, I agree that Naan’s actions were...ill-advised, it didn’t warrant the level of aggression in your reaction.”

Kjar sat back stunned. The Jutak Academy was the training school for Enotia’s elite military force. When he’d gotten accepted, he’d thought it meant doing the right thing, striving for excellence and being mindful of those you could harm.

Naan, a fellow trainee, in the program geared toward pilots in the air assault division had made a grievous error in an attempt to be cocky. He’d flown an X-striker jet in a haphazard pattern, crossed into another flight lane and almost caused a head on collision with Muroe in his X-striker.

Kjar and the other trainees watched it from the ground, unable to do anything but stare in shock at the blatant rule breaking.

After they landed, Muroe climbed from the cockpit, pale and shaky. Before Kjar could speak, the other trainee asked their instructor to be withdrawn from the Academy.

It was a loss. Muroe would have made an excellent pilot and a superior Jutak warrior. Naan, for his part, had climbed from his striker and jumped to the ground, grinning. There was no remorse or shame for his actions in the air antics which had set Kjar off and into a tirade.

“No one cares, Rulayin,” Naan said, walking by with a smirk. “When I’m a Team Leader, I’ll get to do whatever I want.”

That blithe statement spoken in arrogance had led to him punching Naan in the face. The blow caused the other man to hit the ground unconscious.

Thus Kjar ending up here in his advisor’s office. “My actions fit the consequences for his behavior.”

His advisor shook his blond head, blue eyes direct. “That’s not your decision to make. You’ve been an outstanding student here. With your grades and ranking you’d make an excellent Jutak warrior. I’ve never seen a trainee take to flight the way you have. In simulation and out, it’s clear you have a magical touch in the striker jets.”

Kjar relaxed a little upon hearing the positive feedback.

“But,” his advisor emphasized, “his papan is a high level member of the Alliance and it’s out of my hands.”

Kjar stiffened, not understanding. “What are you saying?”

Giving him a somber look, his advisor said, “You’re out. I’m sorry, Kjar.”

“I’m out?” The words didn’t make sense. His fingers clenched in his lap.

“You assaulted another trainee. Standard procedure requires the matter be investigated. It was concluded that there wasn’t probable cause for the physical altercation you initiated.”

Kjar stood abruptly, ignoring his chair which clattered behind him. “There are rules and regulations. Naan broke them. I followed them.”

“Your reputation has preceded you. You’re known for not respecting authority figures, thinking you know better than your instructors and this marks your second physical altercation since you started at the Jutak Academy. To be frank, neither of you should be allowed to continue.”

Kjar barely managed to withhold a flinch at the dry rundown. He did question his instructors but only because their blanket statements about how aircrafts performed in the air weren't always accurate. "So that's it?"

His advisor steepled his fingers together and shook his head. "I'm sure Naan won't manage to graduate either if it eases your mind at all. He received a penalty in his file as well. One more and he's done."

Stunned, Kjar could only stare. Then displaying the lack of respect for authority mentioned, he swiped everything off of the desk between them. The clatter and crash of items falling to the floor did nothing to ease his blind rage. Since there was nothing more to say, he stormed out, everything he'd worked for gone.

Three days later, he was no closer to knowing what to do. Being a pilot had been his goal for years. To right the wrongs of the past as a Jutak warrior would have exceeded his goals.

Perhaps his reaction had been extreme but Naan's actions had struck too close to Kjar's feelings regarding the faulty shuttle pilot responsible for his father's death.

His choices were now limited. Return to Volvian where only sadness awaited or stay on Enotia. At a loss for what to do next, the comm he received caught him by surprise.

"This is Kyele Bastien. I wanted to talk to you about an opportunity."

"Kyele Bastien?" He recognized the name immediately and snorted. Why would the former Jutak warrior be reaching out to him? "Is this a joke?"

Unless it was to reinstate him to the Academy. He tensed and straightened in his seat. Maybe they'd realized he was too good to let go.

"This is not a joke, I assure you. I'm contacting you about a covert unit I'll be heading. You'd be an asset," Kyele continued.

Though it pained him, Kjar was never one to shun honesty. "You might want to go to the next name on the list. I've been

ejected from the Jutak Academy.”

A rough chuckle filled his ear. “That’s exactly why you are an ideal candidate.”

Kjar frowned and pressed a hand to his forehead. Kyele Bastien had a distinguished reputation and long history with the Jutak warriors. He’d served under the leadership of a Unit Leader who had no equal. Torkel Alonson. “What are you proposing?”

He listened carefully as the other man outlined the details for an organization that would operate from Enotia on behalf of the Alliance and as support to ERS, the Emergency Rescue Squad. It sounded too good to be true after his dismissal from the Jutak Academy.

“Why me?” Kjar asked. “There has to be others you could ask. What brought me to your attention, Bastien?”

The other man didn’t shy away from answering. “It’s good you ask. The objective of the missions Ghost Unit will undertake won’t always be...clear. I’ve seen the comments from your instructors and your advisor. There will be times when decisions have to be made that require those willing to do what’s necessary, if not what’s right.”

Kjar took a moment to wonder if he’d been insulted. No matter what his advisor said or thought, Kjar wasn’t reckless. His integrity wasn’t up for debate and he wouldn’t step into something that would go against the core of who he was. “And you think that’s me?”

The former Jutak countered. “Don’t you? Meet me and we can go over the details. I think you’ll be surprised, Kjar N’de Rulayin.”

There was nothing to lose. “Send me the information.”

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Kyele ended the comm and stared sightlessly at the wall in front of him. The Volvian had been doubtful but at least had agreed to hear him out. All of the men he’d contacted were leery but he had the feeling they’d come around. A smile creased his cheeks. Torkel was right. He wasn’t ready to settle

yet. Getting this group to put aside their differences to work together excited him.

“Kyele?”

He turned slowly at the soft feminine voice behind him. The woman’s gaze was drowsy, her cheeks puffy with the remnants of sleep, her red hair tousled about her head. She wore one of his shirts, the white fabric draping her curves in an enticing way.

Gold eyes brightened when they landed on him standing in the corner of their main living space and his heart clenched at the sight of her visible love. He extended his arm toward her and she sped across the room to snuggle into his side.

He pulled her in tight and cradled her against him. Placing a kiss on top of her head, he whispered, “Why are you up, tesa?”

Her fingers teased their way up his bare chest, sending shivers down his spine. “It’s not fun in bed if you’re not there with me.”

Grinning, he turned them toward the bedroom she’d come from. “Let’s see what I can do about that.”





# TWO

*Six years later*

“The team is down and several Jutak warriors are injured. The hostage is still being held in the building. Time is of the essence and shock bombs are set to explode at any moment. What is the logical next step?” Instructor Ilamon asked the class from her position in the pit at the front of the room.

There was silence as those in the session for Strategy and Planning pondered the question. Jaycie tapped the buzzer mounted on her desk and the red dome illuminated in a signal for the instructor.

Instructor Ilamon nodded at Jaycie, her nut brown skin gleaming beneath the overhead lights as she smiled. Blue stripes bisected her face, denoting her heritage as a member of the Trin tribe from Ruandin.

“It would mean an emergency evac. The team has to save themselves,” she answered confidently.

“I see.” Instructor Ilamon’s expression shifted, grew pensive as she stared at her and Jaycie wondered what she’d done to draw such an expression. After a moment, the instructor’s gaze cruised over the class and she pointed at another student. “Alright. Anyone else?”

From several rows behind her, a male voice said, “The hostage needs to be rescued. It’s the point of the mission and why the Jutak warriors are there. If the ambassador is compromised, any chance at goodwill between the two tribes falters.”

Jaycie restrained the urge to snort and tapped her finger on her desk silently.

“Specifics, Weyn?” Instructor Ilamon probed.

He shrugged and slumped low in his seat. Wanting to laugh at the inane response, Jaycie covered her mouth with her hand and pretended to cough.

This was a tough course but one of her favorites. If she scored high enough, it would solidify her chance to graduate and become the first female Jutak warrior.

“Alright. Do we have anyone else who’d like input?” Ilamon asked.

“Yes,” a deep voice called out. “The injured Jutaks should lay low and let the others go back, complete the mission and save the hostage.”

It was easy to recognize the voice of her nemesis. Grier Ssamu. Between the two of them, they held the top spot in every class of this year students at the Academy. In the words of her maman’s native language, Grier was an ass.

After she’d refused to sex share with the Chamele six months ago, he’d made it his mission to harass and irritate her. Usually, she could ignore him but her patience was short due to another man plaguing her thoughts and trying to force her into a decision she wasn’t ready to make.

Ilamon hummed under her breath, brown eyes lighting up. “Nice. Anyone else?”

Silence. Jaycie risked a glance to her right. Her friends, Toren and Justice, weren’t seated that far away. Blond with black eyes and dark brown horns that curled at the sides of their heads, the twins looked enough alike to fool others into thinking they were identical.

She stared, hoping they’d turn in her direction. They studiously refused to look her way. Ugh. They were still annoyed about her surpassing them in the weaponry class earlier today. Toren came close but Justice needed work. She bit back a smug grin and faced forward.

Instructor Ilamon moved to the podium and activated the holo screen. Behind her, a scenario like the one she’d covered was re-enacted. It was exactly as their notes explained. Two Jutaks injured, the other three trying to help stabilize them, the hostage being held by the target they’d been sent to capture.

“First, we’ll start with Trainee Bastien’s suggestion,” Ilamon said and clicked a few buttons on the data pad she

held.

Jaycie held her breath as the Jutaks abandoned the mission and escaped, leaving the hostage to his fate. The ship took off safely, the building blew up behind them and then a message appeared on screen.

*Result: Mediation talks failed due to ambassador's death. Civil unrest begins for several years. Loss of life significant.*

The class hooted and laughed. Inwardly, she winced. There hadn't been another alternative though. She still believed her response was the best.

"Now, we'll do Trainee Ssamu's suggestion since Trainee Weyn didn't have details for his."

The two injured Jutak warriors stayed behind while the other three stormed the building. One dismantled the shock bomb while the others went inside to rescue the ambassador.

*Result: Ambassador negotiates treaty. Peace settles the country for the first time in generations.*

A single, loud cheer came from the back. Ssamu. Ass. Jaycie bit back the curse laden rant she wanted to give voice to.

"That's it for class everyone. See you tomorrow," Instructor Ilamon called out.

Snarling, Jaycie gathered her comp and comm unit. Since she was four rows up, she stood and made her way to the aisle.

An obnoxious voice from behind her said, "Abandon the mission and save yourself. That's your answer to everything, Bastien. Hate to be on your team."

She faced Grier and glared. His dark hair was slicked back from a narrow forehead. Almond shaped brown eyes bore into hers. His skin was currently a pale shade of yellow but like most Chameles changed color with his moods.

The green Academy uniform fit his trim figure to perfection. If he wasn't such an arrogant target, some might find him attractive. "I'm not worried, are you?"

He huffed and bumped her shoulder roughly to pass. “You’d have to graduate for me to think about being worried. You won’t be the first woman to do that, Bastien, no matter who your papan is.”

Breath coming in fast, she stared as he stormed down the stairs with a group of others laughing at her.

“You alright?” Justice asked, coming up beside her.

The comment from Grier had knocked her off course more than she wanted to admit. She offered a weak smile in his direction, trying to ignore Grier’s words. “I’m fine.”

Toren squeezed her shoulder and eased by. “I have to get to another course. Catch up later.”

She and Justice were done for the day and took their time going down the steps.

“Trainee Bastien, a moment of your time, if I may.”

Instructor Ilamon spoke as they neared the podium at the bottom, her tail whipping about in agitation. Justice winced and hurried out the door. She scrunched her nose. Coward. Then turned toward the instructor. “Is there anything wrong?”

Instructor Ilamon braced an elbow on the podium behind her and spoke frankly. “I expected more from you. I’ve been watching and waiting this entire course to see a spark but it’s not there.”

“I-I’m sorry?” Her pulse skidded and Jaycie’s defenses rose. What was she talking about? Her ratings were at the top.

“If I’m not mistaken, you need this course to finish Jutak Academy.”

She nodded slowly. “Yes. I’m already far ahead enough that my grades in the other subjects qualify me for completion. Yours is the last but it’s been full every session.”

Ilamon tipped her head to the side and studied Jaycie. “My class *was* full when I noticed your name on the waiting rolls to get in. Expecting to be impressed, I approved your entrance.”

She didn't know what to say to that revelation. If...no, *when* she passed Strategy and Planning she would be the first female to ever graduate and make it as a soldier for the elite Enotian military. A Jutak warrior like her papan. Few had tried before her but none had gotten as far.

"I wanted to be a Jutak warrior when I was a little girl," Ilamon stated suddenly.

Shocked, Jaycie could only gape. Her instructor wasn't old at all but she in no way resembled a typical soldier. Suravi Ilamon carried herself with grace and elegance. She was professional, strict and one of the best instructors at the Academy.

Ilamon laughed at her reaction, bringing the stripes on her face into prominence. "I was young and impressionable. The scenario I used today is loosely based on an incident that occurred when I was a little girl. The Bexe and Trin had been warring and my father, Ambassador Ilamon, was in charge of overseeing the upcoming elections."

She paused as if waiting for Jaycie to jump in but she didn't know what to say. She was familiar with many cultures thanks to growing up in a Jutak compound among her papan's peers.

She knew Marenians, Ceratons, Serpines, Argorans and had friends from Garulax. She didn't know anything about the war between the two races her instructor mentioned.

"Hmm, they really don't discuss their missions." A pleased smile stretched Ilamon's face and she continued. "I was abducted and a Jutak team saved me. More specifically a Jutak warrior came into the bedroom where I was held, killed my abductors and took me home to return me to my parents.

"To my childish mind that soldier was the greatest hero I'd ever met and I decided then and there to be like him. A Jutak warrior."

Jaycie didn't have to ask if she'd made it. No female had. "What does that have to do with me, Instructor Ilamon?"

Ilamon's lips pressed tight and her expression grew stern. "That soldier was Jutak Kyele Bastien and if he and his team had made the decision you made in class today, I wouldn't be here. My tribe the Trin would have been decimated by the Bexe."

A chasm opened in her chest and Jaycie's skin grew heated. "I—I"

Her instructor shook her head in disappointment. "I also act as an advisor for placement of teams. If you can't get beyond your win at all cost attitude, I won't be able to recommend you to move forward. And that would be a shame, Trainee Bastien.

"I think you have the makings to be an excellent soldier. But not if your every solution involves saving yourself and abandoning those who really need you. Being a Jutak isn't only about having the top grades, it's about the ability to be a team member."

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Throughout the day, Instructor Ilamon's words weighed on Jaycie. She'd been blindsided by the harsh critique after only receiving glowing accolades from her prior instructors. Because of it, she was still wide awake in her bed in the dorms, unable to shake the accusation.

Did she have a win at no cost attitude?

She admitted to being driven. Perhaps overly so in her goal to be a Jutak warrior but it was all she had. She could never measure up to her papan's reputation and success in the military. She wasn't as strong as her brother, Viktor, who'd inherited the full abilities of their paternal Spectar heritage.

And her maman. Joni Miller had survived life on Earth, a terrible abduction she never spoke of and had more courage than anyone else Jaycie knew. She could never match that. Her maman kicked ass.

*'Who taught you to fight? You're good.'*

Words muttered to her in an impressive tone a year ago. At the memory of the dark, delicious voice, shivers rolled down

her spine. Kjar N'de Rulayin. Someone she should have stayed far away from the moment their eyes met.

Except she'd been intrigued and challenged by the look in his gaze the day she'd been caught sneaking into her papan's facility to spar. She hadn't expected his new team to discover her presence. Her papan had *not* been pleased by that.

She and Kjar's paths had crossed a few weeks later after that initial meeting. Viktor had once more snuck her into the training room and promised to come back to get her in exactly two hours. She didn't always go there just to see her papan. The equipment at the Ghost Unit building was superior to anything at the Academy and she didn't have to worry about running into anyone like Grier or his crew.

*'Look who snuck in again.'*

She spun around at the sound of the amused voice while she'd been practicing her hand to hand combat sequences. Her arms dropped to her sides as she stared.

Long hair trailing over his shoulder in a single white braid, Kjar sauntered in and closed the door behind him. He was shirtless, giving her an up close and personal view of a chest and torso lined with muscles and ripples on a long, lean body.

Black loose fitting drawstring pants swayed about his bare feet as he approached. Her gaze snagged on his groin where the material clung and the definite bulge present.

*'Interested in one-on-one or scared your papan will find out?'*

His verbal taunt and the smirk on his face were the impetus to get her to agree.

*'Sure. If you think you can keep up.'*

Adrenaline fired through her veins at the idea of fighting someone new. She was fast. Faster than average because that part of Spectar *was* in her blood.

She'd battled with her maman, her papan and her brother as well as classmates. Her papan held back for obvious reasons and Viktor claimed he could never hurt her but her maman...

Joni Bastien had put her through her paces and always included knives, her weapon of choice in combat. A year ago, she'd managed to pin her maman to the ground and press a blade to her throat. Instead of being upset, her maman had laughed and hugged Jaycie tight. "My baby is like her daddy."

The words had meant more than she could say.

*'No rules, full out?'* Kjar asked, stopping across from her on the padded mats.

More excitement. Her heart thrummed faster. The Academy didn't let them go full out. Too many abilities among a wide range of races. She knew Kjar was Volvian but that was the extent of her knowledge about him or what he could do. This was her chance to face an opponent of unknown capabilities.

Feigning nonchalance, she hitched her shoulder. *'Sure.'*

That night she'd held back, pushing but not overly so until he'd stopped mid-strike and said, *'Are you done playing?'*

The knowing glint in his eyes fueled a responding spark in her. Exhilarated at the opportunity to have someone who appeared to be on her skill level, she'd increased her efforts.

Then he'd stopped again, his look impressed yet smug. *'Why don't we up the ante? Winner gets a kiss?'*

She laughed in his face though her nipples tightened beneath the exercise shirt she wore. His audacity was arousing. Thinking he'd win or that his kiss was a worthy prize amused her. *'What if I don't want a kiss?'*

*'You will.'* His smile widened and he went after her with a combination punch and kick.

Sweat dripped into her eyes, her muscles stretched and pulled from the extended workout and her pulse beat a vibrant tattoo against her skin. When she spotted an opening from his rapid dodge to the left to avoid her frontal snap kick, she'd moved in.

Only to be pulled short by a thick coil around her neck, yanking her back. She stumbled and dropped to one knee



while reaching up.

Kjar leaned over her and glanced down. His braid extended in an unbreakable rope around her neck. Eyes wide, she blurted, *'You have got to be kidding?!'*

He'd used his hair like a whip to wrap around her throat. She'd never heard the likes. Slight pressure caused her to stagger to her feet. Slowly, she was pulled inexorably close to him until they stood chest to chest.

Each panting breath from him flowed over her face and heated her skin. No other signs of exertion on his part while she struggled to slow her wheezing lungs. They'd been at it for a while.

His lashes were impossibly long and the same bright white as his brows and hair. Gray eyes seared her with their intensity and though she wanted to pull away and break the hold, she found herself trapped and too curious about what he'd do next to move.

*'You favor your maman's manner of speech,'* he murmured.

She'd heard it before. Her friends spoke the way she did, a mix of Enotian and the Earth slang they'd grown up hearing from their mamans. Still, she didn't expect that comment from him. Everyone who recognized her last name immediately associated it with her papan and thus assumed she was like him. *'What do you know of my maman?'*

The braid around her throat eased its pressure, the end sliding in teasing strokes across her shoulder blade. It took everything in her not to give way to the shivers working up her spine.

*'I looked you up, Jaycie Bastien, first female to be a Jutak warrior.'*

With that declaration, the braid slivered away, freeing her and he took a step back. Stunned, she rubbed at her neck, wishing she'd taken the opportunity to touch the thick strands to see if it was as soft as it looked and felt coiled around her.

Wait. His words penetrated her daze. *'I'm not a Jutak warrior.'*

He cocked his head to the side and eyed her from head to toe. The heated look did more for her than the last male she'd sex shared with. *'You will be.'*

The confidence uttered in those three words should have warned her she was in danger of losing her heart.



# THREE

Later that night, Jaycie was still upset by Instructor Ilamon's words. When she got wound up, she needed to talk. She thought of calling her best friend but Shiloh was off visiting her Seppi Nikol on Marenia. Again

She sighed and rolled onto her back. If she called her papan he'd want to know what was wrong and if she hinted at problems, he'd want to know every detail and the two of them had an unspoken agreement that he wouldn't pry or try to fix things for her. And by fix it she absolutely meant murder and mayhem.

Her papan wasn't the calmest when it came to her or her brother. Forget her maman. He went crazy if her maman exhibited the smallest sign of upset.

Another sigh. Fuck, she'd never get to sleep like this. Reaching for her personal comm, she tapped the code to enable the security encryption Shiloh had created for her. Her friend constantly came up with new ideas and asked their close knit group to test them before she felt comfortable making the technology public.

Although not really public since she used an anonymous account to sell her work and hadn't told her parents what she did on the side yet.

Viktor answered on the first buzz. His face appeared on screen, creases lining his cheek and his head mashed on the pillow he lay on. Dark hair stuck up in tufts about his head, drawing a smile from her. She'd tease him about that later.

"It's my little shadow. What do you need? Planning to sneak onto papan's base again?"

Hearing his voice soothed the growing tightness in her chest and she kicked her legs up and entwined her ankles in the air. "Hey to you too and no, I don't want to sneak into papan's work."

In the beginning, she'd done it a lot but after the way things changed with Kjar, she'd been avoiding going there. Thinking of him brought on a reminder of their problems and she promptly blocked it out.

“Also don't call me little shadow any more.” He'd given her the moniker because she'd been obsessed with following him everywhere when she was little.

Viktor's rich chuckle spilled over the line, his green eyes aglow with amusement and her smile stretched wider. She loved her big brother and talking to him always brought a sense of comfort.

“What's wrong then? Are you having trouble achieving your life long dream?”

She rolled her eyes at the ceiling. It wasn't like it was secret that she wanted to be a Jutak warrior. As a child, she'd been fascinated by her papan's work and watching him with the others in their extended family had only increased her desire to grow up and be an elite soldier too.

Her maman hadn't liked that at all but she hadn't done anything to dissuade her. As soon as Jaycie was old enough, Joni Bastien had made it a point to start teaching her combat techniques. They'd sparred together from the time she was five and cried when her papan wouldn't let her have her own knife to play with.

Her mouth twisted, she'd been quite stubborn even then.

“Jaycie?” Humor absent, her brother's voice deepened. “What's going on?”

Concern and a tinge of anger filled his tone. Viktor would destroy a world for those he loved. An. Entire. World. His intensity sometimes frightened her. It was as if he didn't have a measuring stick to balance the emotions he felt. He was all in once you held a place in his heart.

“If you don't answer me and tell me what's wrong, I'll be there before you can end this comm,” he snapped.

And he meant it. Unlike her, he could travel great distances in a blink.

“I’m fine. No need to rip dimensions apart and step through the universe,” she finally joked.

Viktor snorted and shifted to lie on his back. He propped his hands behind his head and she assumed he’d moved her to hands free comm. Another bit of tech devised by Shiloh. “I don’t rip dimensions and have no idea how one would step through a universe.”

She grinned. “And yet you do.”

Not really. But very few Spectar had the ability to travel the way her brother did. Like their papan, he could change into Spectar form which consisted of a mist-like appearance, create gale force winds with his mind, absorb into another individual’s physical form and a host of other things she couldn’t touch on.

“Tell me your troubles, little shadow,” he coaxed.

Tears of frustration burning, she blurted everything. Instructor Ilamon’s reprimand and her fear. The fear was a big one because she was used to being strong. Her parents had raised her to be that way and never failed to voice how proud they were of her.

“Now I’m scared I might fail,” she finished and knuckled her eyes to swipe away the stupid tears.

“You might fail,” he agreed and her heart clenched. “But you might succeed. None of what happened in that class will define who you are long term. Who you’re meant to be, Jaycie.”

The breath sighed from her chest and the growing knot in her belly eased. This was why she’d commed him. Viktor knew what to say to settle her worries. “Thank you, Vik.”

His nose curled up. “You know I don’t like that.”

Smug and feeling more relaxed, she teased, “You don’t say anything when a certain someone calls you that.”

“Is that all you wanted? Can I go back to sleep now?”

Of course he wouldn’t comment on what she said. Her brother may think he was keeping it a secret but you’d have to

be an idiot to miss how he felt and she was far from an idiot.

She'd leave it alone until he decided to talk about it. It wasn't as if she wasn't keeping a fairly big secret of her own. "Goodnight, big brother. Love you."

"Goodnight, little shadow. Love you."

\*\*\*

Kjar held back his growl of frustration and pounded at the holo sparring partner in front of him. He dodged around, targeting strike points and working out his anger the only way he could. Sweat dripped down his face and his hair strained against the braids and ties he'd used to hold the length down.

*Punch, jab, kick.*

He spun around and lashed out, shifted to the side and struck again and again. He wasn't sure how long he was at it but when he finally stopped, gasping to catch his breath and heart pounding, he knew it still wouldn't be enough.

His heart ached. Resisting the *knowing* was inconceivable for a Volvian. His race believed in claiming your one when you found them yet here he was. Alone.

"End program," he snarled, unwrapping the protective gel gloves on his hands.

Tossing them in a bio waste container in the corner of the training room, he tipped his neck from side to side in a futile effort to loosen his muscles.

Nothing worked.

He wouldn't be content until he had *her* in his arms, in his bed, and in his life. If she had her way, that wouldn't happen any time soon. If ever.

It was the latter that drove him to the training room night after night for weeks. Never had a Volvian male not claimed his one the moment they met. Never had a one turned away from the *knowing*.

The hair at his scalp jerked and tingled, the pressure on his head bordering on pain. He reached up and patted the strands

to confirm none had come loose from the tight braids and hair ties he'd woven throughout to keep it contained.

That was another trait of Volvians. Their long white hair had sentient like qualities and was directly linked to the *knowing*. Ever since he'd crossed *her* path, his hair had become unruly. Straining, searching, always seeking her touch.

A touch he yearned for to the depths of his soul. The wild strands responded and grew to an outrageous length when they met the other person to complete them.

He'd met his one and she'd refused him. The memory of her rejection brought on a fresh wave of pain. After all his years of sexual exploit, he'd been brought low by one woman. The conversation as he shared his feelings with her still had the power to sting.

*'I need to tell you something.'*

Jaycie unlaced her boots and slid them to the side of her hip where she sat on the mats after their sparring session. Dark red hair was pulled back in a knot she'd tied atop her head, strands falling about her face in a way that distracted him.

She glanced up and her mouth quirked on the side, gold eyes lit with curiosity. Her face was flushed from their match. *'What is it?'*

He drew near and squatted beside her. *'My race believes we cross paths with one soul completely compatible to our own. We call it the knowing.'*

A delicate red-gold brow arched. *'The knowing?'*

Nodding, he geared himself up to what he wanted to say next. They'd met in secret for the last several months. Mostly to spar, occasionally to talk. A part of him had recognized her the first day he saw her. Their time together and his hair growing past his waist one night while he slept had solidified it.

Jaycie Bastien was his one.

*'So what about this knowing?'* She'd finished with her boots and massaged the arch of her foot. His gaze dropped.



Narrow and with long toes, her feet were like the woman. Elegant, strong.

More certain than ever, he claimed her with confidence and pride. *'You're mine.'*

Jaycie was perfect for him. He loved her strength, her courage and her conviction.

But the moment he spoke, he realized he'd gone about it the wrong way. Jaycie stiffened and the congenial expression she'd worn tightened. *'What?'*

He took a deep breath and said it softly. *'You're my one, Jaycie. The other half of me. My soul will never find another who resonates with mine.'*

She rose jerkily to her feet and grabbed her boots. Panic flashed across her face. *'I don't know what kind of joke you're playing, but you're not funny.'*

Heart pounding, he stood and tried to impress upon her the sincerity of his words. He cupped her jaw in his hand. *'It's not a joke. It's you, Jaycie. Only you for me.'*

She smacked his hand away and took a step back. Her chest rose and fell with her frantic breathing. *'I'm not your one. This was...this was just a thing. You helped me spar and I appreciate it but—'*

*'Just a thing?'* he interrupted, voice lowering to dangerous levels. Anger was a slow beating pulse inside of him. The knowing was a gift. His hair tore wildly away and looped around her wrist to hold her still. He closed the gap between them and caught her shoulders in his hands. *'This isn't just a thing.'*

And to prove it, he kissed her as he'd longed to do every time she made her late night visits.

“Kjar?”

The memory faded. He looked up and stiffened at the sight of the man coming through the training room door. His Unit Leader, Kyele, entered and glanced around. A frown pierced

his dark brows and his lips firmed. “What are you doing in here so late?”

Kjar shook away the residual pain caused by thinking of the past. “Training.”

No alert had gone off on his personal comm so he didn't think he'd missed a meeting or update on the ex-Jutak they were tasked with eliminating.

Kyele studied him with the piercing green stare that made every member on their team uncomfortable. Maintaining that gaze took everything he had but he held it until Kyele nodded.

“I was on my way out and saw you in here. Do you have a moment?” Kyele asked.

Kjar hiked a brow in surprise. “It can't wait until morning?”

Folding his arms across his chest, Kyele asked, “Did you want to have this conversation in front of everyone?”

He bristled and his senses went on red alert. What exactly did that mean? “Depends.”

Kyele came in closer. “Something's going on. You don't have to tell me if you're not in a place to share as long as it doesn't jeopardize the mission. But you need to be very sure, Kjar. Going after Kumar requires everyone to be at their best. He's dangerous and already proven he'll kill to get away.”

Kjar's instant response was to deny any problem only to realize Kyele would see it for the lie it was. He was pretty sure if he revealed his issue involved his daughter, Kyele would kill him.

His Unit Leader didn't share or discuss his family with members of Ghost Unit. Not once in the six years since Kjar had joined the shadowy military group that operated between the lines. Well, aside from the time they'd caught Kyele sparring with Jaycie in their training room and he'd warned them to forget the incident immediately.

Wouldn't Kyele be shocked that he'd had more contact with her afterward. A lot more. Intimate contact.

“I won’t be a hindrance on the mission. I’m fine,” he finally said.

Kyele’s gaze went to his hair and he resisted the urge to reach up again. He’d braided the waist length strands in a multitude of thick sections in order to contain it. It was becoming a futile effort. Somehow his hair always managed to slide free and was even more intractable of late.

Of course he knew why. Jaycie. It always came back to Jaycie and her refusal of the bond.

“I don’t know a lot about Volvians. Your focus has been off and your hair—”

He had to shut this down before he revealed something that wasn’t solely his to share. “Won’t be a problem.”

Kyele snorted. “You have no way of knowing that but your brash attitude is one of the things I admire about you.”

He fought to hide his reaction to the faint praise. Being admired by Kyele Bastien was huge and he wouldn’t pretend otherwise.

Blowing out a breath on a heavy exhale, Kyele said, “I guess I’ll have to take your word. Let me know if anything changes.”

“Sure,” he lied and watched him leave.

The moment the door closed, Kjar’s head dropped to his chest. His heart thudded in delayed reaction. For one brief moment, he’d wanted to confess. Tell Kyele that his daughter, Jaycie, held his heart.

If he did that, he didn’t have to worry about Kyele murdering him, Jaycie would take matters into her own hands and do it herself. A sliver of hair teased at his forehead and he didn’t bother swiping it away.

How much longer did she expect him to pretend they weren’t meant for each other? Hadn’t been lovers for weeks now?



# FOUR

“Jaycie!”

At the sound of her name being called, Jaycie slowed down and glanced over her shoulder. Coming down the Academy hall toward her with eager grins were Justice and Toren. Justice strode in the lead.

Others might have difficulty telling them apart but not her. Having grown up with them, she knew Justice had a tiny dark blemish in the inside of his right forearm and Toren had a scar on his knee from when Shiloh pushed him down for telling her she wasn't Marenian because she didn't have horns.

The twins parted when they reached her, Justice going to one side of her and Toren the other. She restrained the urge to smirk at their protective posturing.

“Only a week left until final selections,” Justice said.

Toren tugged on her ponytail. “We're going to be Jutak warriors.”

She returned their excited smiles but inside, fear ate a hole in her gut. She had the grades, she had the recommendations. She just needed a successful rating in Strategy and Planning. If Instructor Ilamon moved her forward, Jaycie would be the first female graduate.

If Instructor Ilamon decided she wasn't a good fit, all her dreams would come crashing down. Her heart pounded and sweat broke out on her temple. The pressure was almost too much but she kept moving down the hall with them, pretending a calm she wasn't close to feeling.

In the words of her maman: *'Fake it until you make it, Jaycie. Courage is sometimes faking like you weren't scared.'*

“How about we go away? Take a break,” Toren suggested.

She stopped abruptly amidst the streaming trainees moving around them. “A break?”

Justice laughed and hooked an arm around her neck, tugging her back into motion. “The concept does exist, Jaycie.”

“Yeah. Too much studying makes us dull,” Toren added.

“Hmph.” She couldn’t remember the last time she’d taken a break. Most of her time was spent around her goal in becoming a Jutak warrior. Weapons and combat training, studying Enotian history, military tactics or past missions. Study, work, study, work.

Her gaze narrowed. Maybe Justice and Toren were right. “What are you thinking? And nothing crazy.”

“We would never suggest anything crazy to the perfect trainee, Jaycie Bastien,” they said at the same time with wicked amusement dancing in their eyes.

Groaning, she elbowed Justice, ducking from under his hold and shoved Toren. Before she could run, Justice hooked an arm around her waist and lifted her off her feet. She started laughing and Toren snatched her bag from her loose grip and took off running down the hall.

She yelled in between spasms of laughter as Justice brushed a horn against her cheek in affection and charged after his brother. They were in hysterics by the time they left the Jutak Academy behind and hopped a train to the shuttle station.

“Random madness rules,” Toren stated then made a point of covering his eyes with one hand and stabbing a destination on the location screen with his other fingers.

She and Justice groaned together. Not Oslero. “It’s a tropical planet.”

Toren dropped his hand and his lips twitched. None of them were particularly fond of the heat. “We’ll make the most of it. Laze around, eat bad food and not think about our schooling.”

He had a point. “Fine. But if I burn, I’ll blame you.”

The reddish blonde hair she'd inherited from her Earth born maman came with skin that didn't often embrace the sun without a protective cream slathered all over. Some things they could buy when they got to Oslero since they hadn't brought any belongings with them but the cream was hard to find.

"Deal." Toren rubbed the top of her hair and she punched him in the side.

Once they arrived at the out of the way tourism spot, she realized it was exactly what she needed. Toren and Justice were practically family which meant lots of laughter between them.

Lounging by a waterfall in this isolated section of the beach, she stretched out in her water suit and watched Toren dive into the lagoon and come up in a spray of foam.

Farther out, Justice stroked lazily in the waves, his golden hair gleaming in the sun and highlighting his darker horns.

The guys were right—being away from the stress of the Academy left her with a clear head for the first time in a long while. Unfortunately, without her studies to distract, her thoughts inevitably strayed to Kjar.

She remembered how he'd researched Earth endearments then tested them on her to see what fit. They'd been in bed together after sex sharing for the first time in his rooms at the Ghost Unit base.

Fingers trailing up her bare arm while he lay behind her, he asked, "*Do you favor Spectar or the human Earth terms of affection?*"

Kjar was always careful to include both sides of her heritage, never assuming one way or the other. Of course, she didn't share that despite an implanted translator, she spoke many languages fluently.

Frowning, she focused on how she felt about it either way. "*I like both but Earth words offer a lot of variety. Though some of it doesn't exactly translate or make sense.*"

"*Hmm.*" He kissed her shoulder and rolled her over to face him.

She stared into his silver eyes, streams of hair held back in a bun at his nape. *“Why don’t you let it down?”*

He didn’t ask what. The little she’d gleamed about Volvians since they’d started meeting one another implied they didn’t like their hair bound yet she rarely saw Kjar with his down and loose any more.

*“Volvian hair has sentient qualities. It would be a problem for me unless you want to accept the **knowing**?”*

That again. It had taken her days to speak to him after his declaration. She didn’t believe in souls resonating or whatever he’d called it but had missed the friendship that developed between them.

Eventually, he’d convinced her to return and talk face to face. Instead of the debate she’d expected, they’d ended up in bed together.

*“Jaycie, have you changed your mind about committing to me?”* he asked.

She hastily distracted herself by running a hand over his chest. Kjar snorted and leaned in close. *“I thought not. Back to my question. What do you think of baby?”*

Laughter exploded from her and she placed a hand over her mouth to muffle the sound. His lips twitched as he muttered, *“She definitely doesn’t like baby.”*

*“It’s...it’s just that it means newborn in Spectar and the same word translates to tiny being in Enotian. I don’t think I can handle you calling me newborn or tiny being.”*

At his appalled look, more laughter sprang from her until her belly ached. Kjar sent her a mock glare. *“Maybe I should say them in the language they are meant to be. Baby.”*

She froze. His English inflection was perfect. Still not something she wanted anyone to call her. Kjar’s lips firmed. *“Not that one then.”*

He stroked her hair back from her face and kissed her forehead as he whispered against her skin in her maman’s native tongue, *“Honey.”*



Smothering a smile at being called a food snack, she lifted her leg over his thigh and nestled in close. The sex sharing had been explosive. Months of flirting and teasing had led them here. Well worth the wait and expectation. She ran her hand over his broad shoulders, admiring the play of muscle beneath his skin.

He leaned back to see her expression and arched a brow. “No?”

“No,” she said, smiling up into his stark features. He looked so dedicated to his endeavor she couldn’t resist and leaned up to kiss the side of his jaw.

His eyes closed and he tugged her in close, falling backward. Letting out a squeak, she settled atop him and pushed herself upright into a straddle over his hips. Her moist center rubbed against his hardening cock and she couldn’t resist rocking back and forth. Once. Twice.

“Not yet.” He gripped her hips, holding her still. “We’re working on something.”

She didn’t care about endearments or what he called her. Being in this position aroused her and after all the teasing and dancing they’d done around one another, she wanted more. Pursing her lips, she complained. “Why is it important?”

His thumbs stroked the indentation of her waist before his hands glided up her torso and back down. She held back a moan. “Because *you’re* important.”

“Kjar,” she murmured, unsure how to respond.

He was constantly saying things like that to her. When they sparred, he complimented her form and offered encouragement. If they spent time talking, he seemed genuinely interested in what she had to say and earnestly listened to her views.

She’d only been important to her family and the friends she’d grown up with. She didn’t know how to handle it with someone else.

If she crossed paths with newcomers, their reactions were always the same. Awe because of her papan, fascination

because of her maman, or wariness because of her brother.

That didn't take into account her saleyo known far and wide as The Butcher. To be honest, she was a little intimidated by her paternal grandfather too. Only Viktor seemed comfortable with the stern general.

*"Darling,"* Kjar murmured, kissing her on the nose.

The word caused an instant reaction. Cringing, she reared back. *"Ewww."*

Laughing, he cupped her breasts and thumbed her nipples. She gasped and arched back. The position caused her to slide on the cock thickening between her legs. She grew wetter and rocked over his hardness. Forget nicknames, she wanted to come again. *"Kjar."*

*"Not yet."* He denied them both the pleasure they wanted.

She braced her hands on his chest and glared. *"This is silly."*

He locked one hand on the back of her neck and pulled her face down to him. His lips were a gentle tease on hers as they moved in a sensuous side to side, tasting her. Her tongue ventured out and tangled with his, sucking him into her mouth.

Moving her hips in a subtle dance, the tip of his cock notched at her entrance and she pressed down to allow his shaft to pierce her. His corresponding groan made her shudder and she shifted her grip to caress his shoulders. Kjar broke the kiss, eyes heavy lidded. *"Sweetheart."*

The moment he said it, she thrust down and cried out. He filled her to the hilt, long and throbbing within her core.

*"Fuck, that's it."* He grabbed her hips and slammed her up and down.

*"Kjar, Kjar,"* she moaned, tossed her head back. She rode him hard, feeling each stroke. Her internal muscles clenched with her impending climax.

Beneath her, he arched up, his powerful thighs moving under her as she bounced on his lap. Sweat beaded the side of

her face and she couldn't control the ripples running up and down her spine.

Panting, she ground down and was rewarded with Kjar's sharp intake of breath. His head went back, placing his neck in prominence. The muscles in his jaw strained and tendrils of hair escaped the knot he wore to whip about the pillow in a frenzy.

*"Fuck me, sweetheart. Fuck me so good."*

*"Close,"* she whimpered and dug her nails into his chest.

One of his hands slid to the front of her groin. She was so wet, his fingers easily slicked through her folds. When his thumb strummed her oversensitive clit, she fell forward on a scream.

The orgasm came in waves. The first powerful hit had her pressing her heels into the bed and scrabbling for purchase as she lost control, pumping for every drop of pleasure. The second wave sent stars and flashing lights across her vision before she collapsed.

Ragged grunts filled her ears as Kjar found his release and held her tight to his chest. Gasping for air, she lay there. The rapid thump of his heart pounded beneath her ear. His hand rubbed her back in soothing circles and she melted against him.

This felt natural, right. And that frightened her.



# FIVE

Ice cold water doused Jaycie's face, snatching her from the past. "What the...?!"

Toren stood over her, squeezing his sopping wet shirt. Rivulets of water dripped down her torso. Glaring, she swiped back her hair and flicked her fingers at him. "Go away. I was relaxing per instructions."

"Had to check on you. You were staring off into space."

A blush worked its way up her chest and into her face. "Mind your business."

"Ho, ho!" He arched a brow and cocked his head to the side. "Were you thinking of a man?"

He sounded too intrigued with the idea. Considering he and Justice had worked their way through half the female population at the Academy, he couldn't say anything to her. Still, caution demanded she tell him nothing. The lie tripped off her tongue. "No."

"A woman?" he prodded when she wouldn't say more.

"Go. Away."

Smirking, he began walking backward, "I'll find out. Justice will ask Nikole who will get it from Shiloh."

Ugh. Justice and Nikole had sex shared briefly and remained friends afterward. She didn't worry though. Shiloh was good at keeping secrets, not that Shiloh knew about Kjar. No one did. She'd kept that part of her life to herself which was another sticking point for him. He didn't like hiding their connection.

Toren pointed to his discarded boots. "Shiloh gave me those. She'll tell. She likes me best."

Jaycie jerked upright, stared at the prototype boots he and his brother had tossed to the side casually when undressing to their water suits and her mouth fell open. They were known as jumpers with hidden spikes in the soles. "Hey!"

He took off running back to the lagoon and jumped in, swimming with hard strokes. Shaking her head, she grabbed her comm to call Shiloh and beg for boots she didn't need on principle but it buzzed in her hand.

Her maman's code. She answered immediately. "Maman, what's wrong?"

"Maybe I wanted to talk to my daughter. Why does anything have to be wrong?" her maman countered.

Laying back on the blanket, Jaycie found herself smiling at the sky above. She wanted to see her maman's face. "Activate visuals."

"Aren't you at school?"

Despite the question, the screen on her comm changed and her maman's image appeared as she accepted the request. Same red hair and gold eyes like her with only a few lines around her mouth from smiling.

There was always laughter in her home growing up. Usually from her maman teasing her papan which would lead to him chasing her straight to their bedroom.

Her nose scrunched. TMI memory instantly blocked. She focused on her maman's familiar face instead. "I'm taking a break with Toren and Justice."

"Good. You study too hard and don't allow yourself enough down time," her maman chastised.

She rolled her eyes. Heard it all before. "Hmm."

"Don't hmm me, Jaycie Alia Bastien."

"Maman, really," she drawled.

Another grin as her maman leaned in close to the screen. "You look tired. Are you resting?"

"Yes," Jaycie responded dutifully. It was the same no matter how long or often she talked to her maman. At least she knew from Viktor their maman treated him the same way.

"Are you being careful?"

She stiffened. Her maman only got this specific if her papan was working on a serious mission. “I’m fine. Is everything okay? I can be back on Enotia in an hour. Or call Viktor and be there in minutes.”

“No, no. Enjoy your break. I’m going to comm your brother next. Apparently, he and your papan had another disagreement.”

The sharp look her maman added told her everything she needed to know. There would come a point when her papan would have to realize Viktor’s heart was given and he wasn’t going to change his mind or lose interest.

Cerise was it for him. She only hoped her friend felt the same way but Jaycie had no intention of getting involved in any of it.

“Mmm,” was her noncommittal response.

This time her maman rolled her eyes and switched subjects back to Jaycie. “How are things with that ass, Grier? Is he still antagonizing you?”

One thing her parents had taught her as a child was to ignore those who sought to belittle her or undermine her confidence. At the Jutak Academy, she’d run into plenty of those types. She was a female, she rated higher on marksmanship than ninety-five percent of the current enrollees and...she was the daughter of a legacy Jutak warrior.

It was never going to be an easy experience for her. There were dozens like Grier and more she’d cross paths with at some point. “I’m not letting him bother me.”

“You were upset when you reached out to your papan,” her maman pressed.

Of course her papan had shared their conversation about a situation with another trainee. She’d ended up handling it herself and had the bruised knuckles to prove it.

Jaycie shrugged. Reaching out to her papan had been a knee-jerk reaction afterward and she shouldn’t have worried him. “I’m better. In another week, grades will post and I think I did it, maman. I think I’m going to be a Jutak warrior.”

Joni Bastien's pride gleamed from her eyes. "I never doubted you."

She hadn't. Not once. "I love you, maman."

"Love you too."

They ended the comm with promises to talk again. Eager to reach out to Shiloh and annoy her about giving the Hardusho brothers prototype boots instead of her, she entered the first digit of her friend's contact code when her comm buzzed in her hand again.

This time her heart leaped at the identity of the caller. She debated answering but the desire to speak with him overruled caution. Selecting audio only, she accepted the comm. "Hey."

"Jaycie," Kjar dragged her name out.

She'd heard him speak to others but only with her did he use that softer cadence, an intimate husk that turned her on so fast. "Hey."

"How are classes?" he asked.

"Fine." She cleared her throat to remove the raspy quality. "Things are going really well."

"Have you thought about what we discussed?"

Closing her eyes, she blew out a breath. She knew he'd bring that up. The more they sex shared, the more insistent he'd gotten. It was becoming a point of contention. "Not really."

A low rumbling growl traveled across the line. She clenched the fingers of her right hand into a fist and opened her eyes. She didn't need this now. Her gaze zeroed in on Justice and Toren. They were farther out and she could barely see them.

"Then your answer is still no?" His tone shifted, grew cold.

"You know how I feel about this." She'd told him she wasn't ready, might never be ready. It hadn't been easy rejecting him.



“And *you* know how I feel.” He didn’t raise his voice, Kjar rarely yelled. At least not at her. But there was no missing his growing dissatisfaction with her attempts to put off the commitment he demanded. The *knowing* as he insisted on referring to it.

“This isn’t a good time to talk. We’ll both get upset,” she stalled.

“We’ve been sex sharing for a while now, sweetheart. So yes, I’m upset that you’ve been avoiding me and refuse to consider a relationship.”

Her heart pounded and the perspiration trickling down her back wasn’t only from the heat. As she sat up and pulled her knees to her chest, she threaded her fingers through her hair and pressed her palm to her forehead. “Why does it have to be more? Can’t we keep going like this?”

His snarl vibrated across the line. “You want this to be strictly fucking? We get together for one reason only and part ways?”

“What I want is for you to give me space!” she blasted, then glanced up to make sure the guys hadn’t heard her. They were shoving each other under water and roughhousing.

“You’re my one. How long do you expect me to be able to control this?”

Keeping an eye on Justice and Toren, she whispered harshly, “I need a little longer. Why is that so hard for you to understand? What if you’re wrong? It’s a forever commitment according to you. No changing if you’ve made a mistake.”

He wanted her to believe in something she didn’t fully understand. From the moment he’d dropped his revelation on her, he’d been adamant about wanting her and confessing to feelings that scared her. No, terrified her.

Love was all consuming. She’d seen it growing up with everyone from her papan’s unit. The Jutak warriors and their Chosens would sacrifice everything for one another.

She wasn’t sure she had that in her right now. To give her heart completely meant putting her dreams second. Nibbling

her bottom lip, she pressed one hand to still the bubbles in her stomach at the silence on the comm. Then Kjar snapped, “The *knowing* is never wrong.”

His anger was unreasonable. She couldn’t deal with him right now. Between Ilamon’s words, her concerns about failing and worry about everything in her at this point, she didn’t need his pressure on top of it.

“Maybe it is this time,” she bit out.

Hurt. She felt it through the comm though she couldn’t explain how. She’d hurt him deeply with her rash statement. A heavy sigh followed and she wished she could call the words back.

Finally, Kjar said, “Be prepared. You have the time you want and then I’m going to claim what belongs to me. No more hiding.”

He ended the comm without saying farewell or bye. Her throat locked as she lowered the comm to her side. There had been no softly whispered words of encouragement about the Academy or concern about her safety. Their late night talks and sparring sessions always ended with him saying things that tugged at the strings of her heart.

Until now. Was she wrong to delay starting a permanent relationship with him?

“Jaycie, watch! You’re the judge, time us.”

Turmoil swirled in her gut as her gaze jumped to the waterfall. Justice and Toren tread in place at the bottom of a sheer rock cliff off to the side of the giant spray of foaming water.

Before she could ask what they wanted her to time, they shot silk from their wrists and began the treacherous climb. She froze. It didn’t matter that as half-Ceraton, they possessed their papan’s ability to secrete a web-like substance that helped them adhere to any surface.

Each time she witnessed them climbing beyond a reasonable height, it sent a wave of trepidation through her. She hastily got to her feet and drew closer to the water’s edge,

her argument with Kjar forgotten in the face of her friends' danger.

They reached the top and turned to wave at her. She shook her head at their antics.

“Who won?” one of them yelled.

Telling them apart at this distance was impossible. She cupped her mouth and called out the lie, “Justice!”

The one on the right, Justice she assumed, cheered and soon they were rapidly climbing down. She made her way back to the blanket. When they reached the bottom, they swam past the waterfall and ran up to her, dripping water everywhere.

Toren shook his blond hair over her, his smile a bright slash across his face. “Best break ever, right?”

“I really needed it,” she agreed.

Justice threw himself down beside her. More water droplets splattered her and she glared. Not one to let a glare stop him, he poked her in the side then stretched out on his back with his hands under his head. “We have to go back tomorrow but for now, no Academy talk or anything else.”

Pushing thoughts of Kjar to the back of her mind, she laid down on her front and folded her arms under her chin. “Agreed.”

Toren did the same on the other end of the blanket. “We’re gonna be Jutak warriors.”

“Fuck yes, we are,” Justice said.

Jaycie found herself grinning as her eyes drifted closed.



## SIX

Kjar sat through the meeting, fighting his annoyance with Jaycie to focus on what he was hearing. A kill order had finally come through for former Jutak warrior, Kumar A'ka. He'd killed a teammate, killed a sex share worker and threatened to kill the Jutak Commander Torkel Alonson. There was only one way for this to end and all of them knew it.

Not only did they have to deal with that but there was a possibility Ghost Unit's records had been infiltrated.

“What about Varu? Lothar's alleged son?” Dorian asked.

Apparently, Lothar, one of the greatest criminal minds to ever have live, had another son no one knew about. This just kept getting better and better.

Every gaze shifted to the tall Marenian standing in the room. Damiian Drex was an Enforcer sent by the ruler of Marenia, Majad Nikol Wulven, to assist in their mission.

Damiian tossed a holo cube on the table. The moment it hit, an image sprang to life several centimeters above the surface. The large male had brownish-gold horns curving from the sides of his head. Light brown hair with streaks of blond fell to his shoulders and his eyes were a golden hue that made him think of Jaycie.

“I don't think I've ever seen a Marenian with that coloring,” Rook said.

Kjar studied the unusual features and agreed. Marenians tended to be dark-haired and dark-eyed with horns varying in tones but rarely on the light end of the spectrum.

“Bane's sons come to mind but it is rare,” Kyele said.

“His mother was from Earth. A sex slave Lothar used at an auction and abandoned at one of his many sales. He never knew she gave birth to his son,” Damiian told them. “My intel says the mother did her best to hide the child for fear Lothar would come back and take him. She claimed he was a hybrid of another race.

“Her story worked because she’d been sold several times and ended up living in the far reaches of Alliance territory. Since Marenia wasn’t a part of the accord back then, it was easy to keep his parentage a secret.”

“Why target Torkel after all of this time?” Seraphina asked.

Damiian aimed a stylus at the holo-cube. The image changed to show Varu standing next to a striker jet wearing a level 4 nano suit and carrying a deadly LX-76 laser rifle.

High end, expensive stuff for someone after the Jutak Commander which made him a dangerous enemy.

“It’s not just Alonson he wishes to destroy but Nikol Wulven as well. He blames both of them for Lothar’s demise and dismantling his empire. He hopes if he successfully ends Torkel Alonson, it will draw Nikol out, giving him the chance to topple the Majad and rightfully rule Marenia in his stead. He wants to take the planet back to what he refers to as the great days.”

Unimaginable. If that happened it would set the Alliance back and bring with it a return to sex slave auctions. A practice which had been banned and outlawed on every known planet. Kjar stared at the others and said what they were all thinking. “Holy fuck, he’s crazy.”

“It still doesn’t make sense to me. Why not go after Nikol then? If his end goal is to replace the Majad, why bother with Torkel Alonson?” Seraphina asked.

For all her savvy, life on the run and in hiding as an assassin had kept her from information that was now general knowledge everywhere.

Hahn eagerly leaped into the conversation to answer. Of course he would. He could espouse on a number of topics and history tended to be a favorite. “Two reasons. First, in recent years Marenia has adopted a similar philosophy to Spectar and doesn’t allow unknown ships in their airspace.

“If you attempt to get close to their borders without advance notice and approval, you’re greeted by several teams

of striker jets whose only purpose is to blast you into bits. No questions asked.

“Second and slightly more important than the first, when Nikol finally acknowledged his hidden relationship to the Jutak Commander, he made it very clear any slight on Alonson would be taken personally and handled immediately. By death.”

There had been boasts and threats of harm toward Torkel after the public awareness of the two being brothers. Each of those individuals had been found dead within days.

Shortly after the deaths, the Alliance had formalized Marenia’s entrance into their protective fold and none had dared to see if the Majad’s legal change in status had altered his thoughts on the matter. Nikol’s reputation had been brutally earned and it would be foolish to test him. Varu targeting the two showed his recklessness.

Seraphina’s gaze jerked sharply toward Damiaan. “Has your Majad given you any formal direction?”

Kyele answered her. “Damiaan’s focus will be hunting down Varu. Our focus is Kumar.”

Then his gaze encompassed the room. “After the incident at The Dark Twisted last night, we know Kumar is running scared. He thought he had the upper hand with his knowledge. Instead, Zsamei was able to stop him from finishing what he planned.”

“We still need to find Kumar. We don’t know where he is,” Kjar pointed out.

Hahn grinned. “Oh, but we do, Kjar. We do. I have a lock on Seraphina’s transmitter and it’s not at The Dark Twisted. It’s been moving all night and went stationary a few hours ago.”

The glint in Kyele’s green eyes shifted and his smile held a hint of cruelty. “Ghost Unit, prepare to leave shortly.”

As he proceeded to outline the mission, Kjar listened with his attention split. His mind was occupied with his last conversation with Jaycie and he grew angry all over again. He

didn't understand how she could refuse what was right in front of her face.

Having his emotions tear him up like this wasn't a feeling he enjoyed. Weeks into months they'd played this game. He'd been upfront about his feelings, told her she was his one and she continually ignored it.

After everyone walked out, he sighed and pushed up from his chair, adjusting the weapons he wore. Her goals would always come before him and her denial of the *knowing* meant he needed to make a decision. He couldn't keep going on this way and it was impacting his performance on the team.

The others were already looking at him strangely and he could see the questions in their eyes. Only their respect for one another's privacy kept them from pushing. Although, Hahn would probably be the first to crack and confront him.

Another sigh broke from him. If only Jaycie wasn't buried so deep in his heart already. It reminded him of his parents in some ways. He'd watched his father spiral and waste away after his mother, Selia, died.

A small part of him had hoped his mother not being Volvian would save his father. The decline had been gradual but as soon as the shedding started, he'd known that wasn't to be. Later, larger portions of his father's hair fell out and he'd smiled at Kjar and told him not to worry.

But he had.

Volvians mourned hard and while some managed to pull themselves out of the despair, his father hadn't. Selia had been that much a part of him and without her, he'd been empty. When he died in a tragic shuttle accident a few months later, Teiran's once thick white hair barely touched his ears and the lifeless strands had long since stopped moving of their own accord.

"Kjar, you good?"

He glanced up to see his Team Leader, Rook, watching him from the doorway. Offering a nod, he straightened and moved away from the table.



“Everything alright?” Hahn came to the door and strained to peer over Rook’s shoulder inside.

Snorting, Kjar made his way toward them and shoved thoughts of Jaycie to the side. “Ready to go.”

Rook eyed him a moment longer before stepping back and letting him pass. Outside, Kyele watched them as they loaded up in the black hover car waiting out front.

“Where’s Dorian?” Rook asked.

Kjar glanced out the back window and saw their other teammate arguing with the dark-haired woman he’d brought to their base. Zsamei Kreene owned The Dark Twisted and had allowed them to set up a mission in her place of business.

Dorian leaned close in her face and said something no one could hear. She blanched and responded. He grabbed her around the waist and pulled her into his arms. It was clear the two were arguing over something. Hahn yelled out the front passenger window. “Dorian. Kiss and roll. We got to go!”

Kjar grimaced. As usual, Hahn’s tack was nowhere to be found. Dorian kissed Zsamei and then rushed toward the hover car. He jumped in the back next to Kjar and slammed the door. Rook sped off and switched to hover mode to increase their speed as they rushed off to the location on Kumar.

Glancing at Dorian, he noticed the frustration on his face. From what Kjar gathered, there was a relationship growing between Dorian and Zsamei.

“Is Madame Kreene alright?” he asked. Losing her employee and confronting a killer was a lot for anyone.

Dorian grunted and shifted in his seat to face forward, folding his arms across his chest. “No.”

Kjar stiffened and studied his teammate closer. There was a grim cast to Dorian’s expression. Typically the quiet one in their unit, it wasn’t unusual for him to maintain his silence on certain subjects except in recent weeks he seemed to have... softened for lack of a better word.

The only thing to bring about such a dramatic change in a man was a woman. First with Rook, who went against orders repeatedly to protect Seraphina before she officially became his mate. Now, Dorian was exhibiting similar behavior—aggression and an overprotective demeanor toward a woman connected to one of their missions.

“If you want to talk...,” he reluctantly offered. He had his own issues with Jaycie and probably wasn’t the best reliable source.

Dorian tipped his head in his direction and smirked. “The better question is whether *you* want to talk about what’s going on with you.”

For one brief moment he was tempted. Tempted to share about the *knowing*, about his relationship with Jaycie and her resistance. Then reality struck. The only thing she’d asked when they started sex sharing was that he not tell anyone about them.

He couldn’t break the trust she’d placed in him. No matter how desperately he wanted to. Turning his head toward the window and watching the scenery fly rapidly by, he held his silence.

“That’s what I thought,” Dorian muttered.



## SEVEN

“We’re here,” Rook announced, pulling the hover car behind the cover of trees farther down the street from the house where they believed Kumar to be. “Hahn, scout ahead and see if you can tell if the target’s still here. Confirm the tracker’s live and transmitting.”

“On it.” Hahn slid out and ducked away.

Rook turned over his shoulder to face them. “Dorian, get in position. If you get the chance, take him out.”

“Affirmative.” Dorian opened the door and vanished.

Stealth expert motherfucker. Rook opened the door, shoving his helmet on and tugging up the collar of his nano suit. “You’re with me, Kjar.”

Kjar pulled on his helmet, slid his laser over his shoulder and followed. Within moments, everyone was in position.

“*Hunter Three, clearance to move in on target?*” Rook asked through his ear comm.

“*Jammer employed, can’t confirm, Hunter One,*” Dorian responded from a position on a nearby roof.

“*Hunter Four, status?*” Rook asked.

Hahn’s response came in an instant. “*Nothing on my end. He’s in there. I had audio clicks earlier.*”

Crouched behind a wall, Kjar settled next to Rook. They only needed one chance, a clear opening for Dorian, the sniper of their group, to take the shot and it would be over.

“What do you make of this latest development? Lothar’s hidden son?” Rook asked while they waited.

Kjar couldn’t see his face clearly through the helmet to read his expression. He took a moment to answer. “Discovering Varu Hasteen’s existence makes me question what else we might be missing.”

“With the Majad involved, I don’t think it will end well for him. Half-brother or not.”

They waited a few more minutes, tension building. Kyele’s command came through with the go ahead over their comms. *“Approval to move in, Hunter One. Extreme caution warranted.”*

*“Affirmative, Unit Leader,”* Rook said, rising in a rush.

Kjar covered him and followed close on his heels as they held their lasers at the ready and headed toward the single-level rental residence. No one else was around and the quiet brought with it a low hum of danger. The strands of hair at the back of his head tugged against the braids coiled on his head.

Rook quickened his pace and Kjar loosened his helmet to relieve some of the pressure on his hair.

*“Halt, Hunter One. Movement noted at the rear,”* Hahn suddenly said in their comms.

He and Rook froze in place. Pulse a steady throb, he waited for the next piece of information. Hahn had the better vantage point from one side while Dorian had a different view on the rooftop behind them.

“I don’t like this,” he muttered in an aside to Rook.

“What do you mean?”

He scanned the area, trying to sense what bothered him. Everything about this set up sent warning flares through him. His hair vibrated against his scalp and he had the sudden urge to pull back.

Then everything happened at once. It started with a familiar rumble under his booted feet. Before he could signal Rook to turn around, the front door blew. An eruption of fire accompanied by a loud boom blurred his vision.

Shock and pressure hit him full force. The blast of heat sent him flying backward and he landed on the ground with a bone jarring thud. His helmet shattered. Something caught on the side of his head and ripped free.

Bile rose at the back of his throat. Unimaginable agony tore through his head and blood spurted from his nose. Jaycie. It was his first and last clear thought as white hot pain burst inside of him.

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Agony. Gut wrenching pain unlike any she'd ever felt before woke Jaycie from a sound sleep. She jerked upright and grabbed her head. So much pain.

*It hurts. It hurts.*

She tried to stand and fell to the floor, scattering her shoes and the clothes she'd worn the night before.

*Hurt.Hurt.Hurt.*

The mantra repeated itself until the waves of torment ceased abruptly. Gasping, she braced her hands on the floor and rose shakily to her feet. She glanced around the dimly lit room. Nothing was off, no one attacking her. Not that they would have gotten by Toren and Justice sleeping in the room next door.

Making her way to the bed, she sat on the side as her body continued to tremble. What had that been? She touched her head and stroked through the waves of her tangled hair. Nothing. No tenderness or soreness.

Maybe it had been a bad nightmare. She carefully laid back on the covers and stared at the ceiling. It could have been a manifestation of her worry about passing the Academy. Except, it hadn't felt like a stress dream. It was very vivid and the pain...she rubbed at her chest to loosen the tightening sensation left behind.

This had been something more but she didn't know how or why. She couldn't escape the incessant need to reach out to Kjar. After a brief mental struggle, she commed him. It buzzed repeatedly, but he didn't pick up. Maybe he was still mad at her from their last conversation.

Her brows furrowed in thought. It didn't feel right. Not that he hadn't missed her comms before. She understood the nature of his work as a Ghost Unit soldier.

If he could, he'd answer, otherwise, he'd comm her later. He *always* commed her later.

Unable to settle, she stayed up all night with the awful sensation roiling in her gut. The next morning, she checked and there were no messages or comms from Kjar.

Adrenaline dumped into her system in a steady stream as she jumped up to shower and dress. At the morning meal, she wanted to go, to be somewhere. Her hands itched, blood pounded through her veins and her every nerve was sensitized.

“What’s wrong with you today? You’re out of sorts,” Justice asked, shoving food in his face.

Leg tapping under the table, she shook her head. How could she explain the weird dream? “Nothing. Just some things on my mind.”

They finished the meal and decided to extend their stay by another day.

“We only have the final exam for Strategy and Planning left. Once tallies are done and they announce the passing trainees, we’ll be selected for our Jutak Units. There will never be another chance to rest like this,” Toren cajoled when she and Justice hesitated.

“I’m open to either. Staying or going is fine with me,” Justice said, “It’s up to Jaycie since we all came together.”

They wouldn’t leave without her. Torn, she absently agreed. That night she paced in her room. Kjar hadn’t reached out yet. She considered contacting her papan but didn’t want to draw his attention.

By morning, she still hadn’t heard from Kjar. She threw herself in a chair and commed Shiloh. “I need a favor.”

“Ooooh, interesting. I have a favor to ask too so I agree to whatever you want.”

Shiloh’s whimsical response pulled a reluctant smile from her. “This is why you’re my best friend.”

“Ha! Viktor’s your best friend and that’s okay because he’s your brother,” Shiloh countered. “What do you need?”

Jaycie didn't hesitate. "Can you hack Ghost Unit records? I need to find out something."

"What?!"

She chewed her thumbnail and begged. "Please, Shiloh, it's important or I wouldn't ask."

"Does this have anything to do with the recent threat?" her friend asked.

Jaycie jerked and stood up, pacing the confines of her room once more. Was her papan in danger? Worrying about him was an integral part of her childhood but her maman had always reassured her that he was the best at what he did.

"What threats?"

"Seppi Nikol is sending us home with an armed escort and guards. Your papan sent the team to reinforce security at my parents' place and Seppi V'hor returned to help."

That was news and her brother hadn't mentioned anything. He had to know if V'hor was involved. "What about Cerise and the Supreme Matire?"

V'hor's maman, Peshla Dahreel, was the ruler of his home planet. He'd recently returned to live there for the first time in years with his Chosen, Eva, and their only daughter, Cerise.

"I don't think he's staying long. Only to help my parents."

Shiloh's words only added to her anxiety and the silence from Kjar. If it involved Seppi Torkel and Tante Faye, her papan would get involved and if her papan got involved, it meant Ghost Unit would be involved. "Do you know what the threat is?"

"I only caught a bit. A former Jutak warrior and something else. Something big enough to send Seppi Nikol raging."

Jaycie flinched. Though he'd always been kind to Shiloh and Nikole, she admitted to being intimidated by Torkel's half-brother, Nikol Wulven.

And she shouldn't be considering she was the granddaughter of General Azar, a man known as The Butcher



for a massacre he'd committed in retaliation for the loss of the first woman he'd ever loved.

“Alright, I'm in Ghost Unit's system and wow, Seraphina has made a lot of upgrades. It was tough bypassing Hahn's security in the past. She's added a few tricky things,” Shiloh mumbled. “Security isn't my strong point but I'm impressed.”

Her tone implied fascination which was the highest compliment. Shiloh was a tech genius. She could take an idea or think of something and create technology to match. There were numerous prototypes and products she'd turned into a lucrative business.

“Focus, Shi. Access medic reports and let me know what you find.”

“On it.” Shiloh hummed while she worked and in less than a minute gasped. “Oh, no.”

“Is it my papan?!” Jaycie demanded. Her heart raced and her body temperature spiked. It couldn't be. Her maman and Viktor would have contacted her.

“No,” Shiloh muttered, wooshing sounds in the background as she worked. “Rook was seriously injured.”

Kjar's Team Leader. Her nails bit into her palms, fear growing. “What else?”

“Kjar N'de Ru-rul-la—”

Her lungs seized and she barely managed to say, “Rulayin.”

“Yes. That's it. You're good.”

“What about him, Shi? What about Kjar?” she demanded.

Shiloh paused. “Do you know him?”

“Shiloh, later!”

“Right. Um, okay. It's bad, Jaycie. He sustained a lot of injuries from an explosion. Something about...a section of his hair being severed? That's an odd way to phrase it. He hemorrhaged on site but it sounds like Dorian Uchu managed to stabilize him for an emergency evac.”

His hair. She couldn't breathe. Jaycie couldn't breathe as Shiloh listed more injuries. Kjar's hair was an integral part of him. She *knew* that.

"He hasn't regained consciousness. The medics have him heavily sedated and he's on a lot pain inhibitors," Shiloh continued, oblivious to the shock she'd dealt her. "There's a weird addendum to this I can't understand. Follicle damage extreme, growth needed to heal. Why would anyone need hair growth to heal?"

Because of his Volvian heritage. She leaned her back against the wall and fought to get herself under control so she could think. If his hair didn't grow back what did that mean? Would he remain unconscious?

What if he died? Panic exploded and she slid down the wall to her haunches and crammed her free hand into her eyes.

"Is that all you needed, Jaycie?" Shiloh asked.

She licked her suddenly dry lips. "Yes. Thank you, Shi."

"Not a problem. I'm on my way home but I want to ask you about helping me with a project. I might need help sneaking off planet."

That was the last thing Shiloh needed to be doing. "Is that a good idea if someone is targeting your papan?"

"Shit, you're right. Maybe I'll need Viktor's help."

And he would. Shiloh and Raze tended to drag Viktor into their mischief and he went along willingly.

"I have to go," Jaycie said, standing upright. The compulsion to get to Kjar beat like a steady drum against her senses.

"Bye."

"Later."

Jaycie hurriedly packed her meager belongings and banged on Toren's and Justice's door. Justice opened it and her gaze dropped to his naked cock before she spun around. "Justice, put some clothes on!"

“I was sleep,” he snarled.

His steps faded and she waited until he clomped back. She peeked over her shoulders and thankfully he’d thrown on pants. Toren stumbled into the room with his blond hair smashed on one side. “What’s going on?”

Turning to face them, she said, “I have to go back to Enotia.”

Their pitch black gazes darkened. “What’s wrong?”

“Is it our family?”

They spoke at the same time. She shook her head. “No, this is personal. I need to take care of something.”

“Exams are today. If you miss, Instructor Ilamon might fail you, Jaycie.”

Her dream. Her dream would be shattered if she didn’t complete the Academy. Blinking back tears, she said, “I won’t miss it. I’ll be there in time but I have to go. Now.”

Toren grabbed his things and started tossing them in his bag. “We’ll all go.”

Justice strode toward a back room. “I need five minutes and I’ll be ready too.”

Her chest sagged. No questions asked. They would leave with her.



# EIGHT

At the shuttle station back on Enotia, Jaycie argued with Toren and Justice who refused to leave her alone. “Tell us where you’re going and we’ll think about leaving.”

They wore matching adamant expressions and she growled. “I can’t.”

They stared.

“Viktor will be with me.” She’d sent an urgent comm to her brother in a coded message known only between the two of them.

She wasn’t sure if he was on Serpine or Spectar but she *needed* him and he’d come. Viktor always came for her.

Justice folded his arms over his massive chest. “We’ll wait.”

Not bothering to argue, she turned away and worked to calm her pounding heart, her only thought to get to Kjar.

“Jaycie, what’s going on?”

She spun around and her brother walked toward her in a sure stride she’d recognize anywhere. She ran toward him and his arms wrapped around her. “I have to get into Ghost Unit.”

He patted her on the back and spoke to Justice and Toren. “Thanks. I have her.”

She didn’t hear what the twins said in response. During the entire trip here, she couldn’t shake her last conversation with Kjar. Their argument and her lack of belief in them being destined partners played over and over in her head.

“Hold on, little shadow.”

Gripping his shirt in her shaking hands, she gritted her teeth for the familiar jolt of sensation and the light film of sweat on her brows as she battled the brief moment of disorientation.

“Here,” he whispered.

Stepping away, she glanced around and realized he'd transported them directly to the medic center at her papa's base. Her heart dropped as she met Viktor's green stare. "How did you know?"

He shrugged, his gaze sympathetic. "You're like me. When we give our heart, we only give it once."

She hugged her brother quickly then whispered, "Thank you."

He nodded and misted before her eyes then was gone. No matter how many times she witnessed it, she didn't understand how he did it.

Turning, she headed for the silent still figure in the room. The door eased open and closed behind her. No one else was in here.

Machines beeped around her and there were monitors tracking things she didn't understand. The port at Kjar's neck stood out like a gruesome display, sending a continuous stream of meds to keep him under.

If Shiloh hadn't discovered the report, Jaycie wouldn't have known he was hurt. No one would have contacted her because on the surface they weren't connected. They were nothing to one another in the eyes of others.

Standing over his bed, she bit down on her knuckle to still the shocked cry. Kjar was larger than life, his clever wit, his sparkling eyes and his mesmerizing smile were a part of him. But in this moment, he was a faded version of himself.

As if a vital part of who he was had been shut off. What if he died?

She swallowed back a wave of fear at the thought. Seeing him like this was hard. One side of his hair barely touched his shoulder in comparison to the rest of the waist length waves.

She crept closer and touched the back of his wrist. Aside from the shortened strands of hair on one side, he seemed fine.

His hand moved beneath hers and she froze. When he didn't wake, she leaned down, inhaled his scent mixed with

the bitter tang of medication and whispered, “Hey, I’m here.”

On the shuttle ride over, she’d learned a little more about Volvians and held her breath. A Volvian’s hair would supposedly respond to their one.

“Come on,” she muttered. “If I’m your one, prove it.”

He’d told her that over and over, almost made her believe him and right now in this moment she really, really needed it to be true.

The strands stretched in the air as if reaching for her. She leaned back and watched as the length followed. Before her eyes, the shortened section grew and grew and grew. Her breath caught in relief and a shaky smile twisted her lips.

She eased back further as his hair continued to grow. She stroked the waves once the damaged part reached his hips to blend with the rest of the straining length bound in hair ties. It was the softest thing she’d ever touched.

When they were in bed together, she didn’t often allow herself to do this for fear it would reveal how much she loved it. Stroking his hair was one of her favorite pastimes.

Suddenly, the ties broke and the multitude of braids began to untwist rapidly. Before she could move away, a thick section of hair wrapped around her wrist and held her in place. The grip was firm, solid strands coiled directly over her thumping pulse.

Kjar’s eyes snapped opened. When he saw her, a slow smirk formed. “Hey.”

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“Hey, I’m here.”

Kjar heard Jaycie’s voice from a distance. His head hurt. He strained to make sense of the words.

“Come on. If I’m your one, prove it.”

What did she mean? She knew she was his one. He’d told her repeatedly. The *knowing* was never wrong.

His hair tingled and he tried to move but the strands were like a dead weight. Why did he feel as if he'd gone toe to toe against his Unit Leader in a sparring match where he'd come out the loser?

Had the other man found out he'd sex shared with his daughter?

He struggled to surface from the fog clouding his mind. His hair shifted, stretched then looped around something and tightened.

Opening his eyes, he met a familiar gold stare. Jaycie. His beautiful Jaycie. She'd come to him after all. Relieved the distance between them was no more, he smirked. "Hey."

"You scared me," she choked out

Straining, he squinted to see her clearly and what he saw threw him off. Tears hovered on her eyelids. "Jaycie?"

She continued to cry and it damn near broke his heart. Jaycie didn't often cry. More of his hair looped around her torso in response to her pain and with tensile strength lifted until she was in the bed beside me. Within reach.

He eased his arms around her waist and caressed the indentation of her spine right above the dip of her firm ass. "What is it, sweetheart?"

She buried her face in his chest and cried harder, the wet soaking his medic gown. Medic gown? He looked around and recognized the medical equipment, a port in his neck.

It all came back to him. *The blast! Kumar!* His pulse skipped then sped up.

Holding her tight, he searched for his teammates but the two of them were alone in the room. He needed answers. Brushing a soothing hand over her tangled hair, he asked the most important question, "Rook. Do you know what happened to Rook?"

Sniffing, she sat up but didn't move from his arms. She smelled of sun and flowers and her skin held a golden sheen as if she'd been outside for an extended period of time.



“Rook’s fine. The two of you were caught in an explosion. His injuries were healed by the medics as soon as the team returned here but you were in worse condition. Your hair...” Her voice trailed off and she didn’t finish the thought.

He adjusted her beside him in the bed and a cursory glance assured nothing was amiss with the thick white length. It flowed around Jaycie, sections caressing her wrist and arm, another part looped around her torso and more strands sought to touch every inch of her.

Desire reared its head and his cock sprung erect. Her gaze lowered and she gasped. A warm flush rushed over his face. He turned onto his side and the medic gown gaped, doing nothing to hide his hardened state.

When she looked back up, her eyes glazed and there was a bright tinge to her cheeks. He instantly recognized the signs of her arousal. Too desperate to be with her, he didn’t question her presence here. He removed the port from his neck and set it on the bed beside them.

“What...w-what are you doing?” she asked.

He slowly lowered his head, his only thought to kiss her after their time apart. She sighed into his mouth the moment their lips connected. Soft, warm, giving. Everything that was Jaycie. He twisted further onto his side, rolling her under him.

“Kjar.”

His name was a whisper, so slight he would have missed it if they weren’t entwined in one another’s arms. He kissed her again, nipping at her lips, her tongue. She moaned and he lowered himself atop her body. Lush curves greeted him. He nuzzled the side of her face. “I need you.”

Her hands pressed into his shoulders and she leaned up, rubbing against him. Her lips touched his ear. “I need you too.”

Dragging in a deep breath filled with the scent of her, he eased away. Her nails clutched at him but he kissed her inner wrist and murmured, “Not going anywhere.”

He sat up and his hair reluctantly loosened, unraveling enough to free her to move. He ripped the stupid medic gown off, tearing it in the process. Jaycie pushed upright and swiped at the hair falling about her face.

“Let me.” He slid her pants down and jerked her shoes off.

With her bottom half bare, he knelt between her legs and made himself comfortable. His hair took the opportunity to tangle around her further, looping around her upper thighs and spread her wide.

Jaycie reached down and buried her hands at the roots. Every nerve in his scalp came alive and tingled. He closed his eyes and groaned at the sensations filling him. Jaycie touching him, Jaycie opened to him, taking in the scent of her arousal with every inhale.

The ends of his hair constricted, touches of red immediately reflecting on her taut skin. She whimpered and the sound soothed the hungry part of his soul desperate for the contact.

“Kjar.”

Her urgent whisper pulled at him. Opening his eyes, he stared at the center of her. Tiny dew clung to the pale folds of her groin. He inhaled once more, drawing in deep the light musk of her and parted her plump flesh gently. She jerked, her hips going up sharply.

With one hand, he palmed her smooth belly to hold her down and pressed his mouth against her opening. Jaycie hunched forward on a sharp cry. Moisture burst in his mouth, sweeter than anything he'd ever tasted.

When her ankles hooked about his neck to lock him in place, he buried his grin in her damp folds and proceeded to remind her why they belonged together.

Her legs quivered and she cried out in ecstasy over and over. His hair loosened its grip to lash her thighs, flick the tips against the pink peaks of her nipples. Her moans echoed around the room as his tongue slicked up one side and down the other.

When he finished with her, there would be no doubt that she was his.

And he was hers.



## NINE

Orgasms came in all shapes and sizes; small twitches, shaking, rocking, trembling limbs. Sometimes they were large waves crashing into a body, leaving you limp and weak. Other times they were gentle bursts rolling through you on a fine line. Under Kjar's skillful touch, Jaycie had experienced them all.

She grabbed the edge of the sheet and stuffed it into her mouth as she screamed and climaxed from the amazing tongue work he performed.

"K-kjar," she gasped as her body settled back on the narrow bed with a thump.

Her lashes fluttered. Above her, features strained, Kjar shuddered and held himself still. He'd put her first again. Made sure she found her pleasure before he took his. She shoved at him weakly. Glancing down, his brow hiked but he moved to the side of the medical bed and lay on his back.

She glided her hands over his damp chest, surrounded by sensations. Varying lengths of his hair trailed and wrapped around her body. Her arms, hips and shoulders constantly stroked and touched by the white tendrils. It was at once reassuring and tender.

With her gaze locked on his, she eased down. Lower and lower she went, past his broad chest, flat stomach and hips. She stopped right above his straining cock. Silky skin over hard muscle.

Gripping the thick length in her hand, she stroked and smiled at his rough groan. "Relax."

He snort laughed but she caught his fingers twitch before settling on the sheets. She lowered her head and lapped at the rounded tip. His thighs stiffened, locked in place.

Focusing on his pleasure with the same intensity he'd given her, she licked and sucked. Fine tremors shook his frame and she grinned before drawing him deep into her mouth. She

kept her hand moving up and down on pace with his rocking hips.

“Faster,” he muttered. “Harder.”

Tightening her grip and adding a twisting motion, she took as much of him as she could and felt the flutter of her throat as the head passed her threshold.

Kjar groaned but his touch was careful as he cupped her jaw and lifted her head slightly to look into her face. Their eyes met and the emotion there caused her to falter. His gaze darkened, seeing her reaction.

On a snarl, Kjar surged up and flipped her over onto her back. He slammed his cock home into her warm channel. She held on tight, wanting it all, every bit because deep inside, in a place she didn't want to acknowledge, she knew this was it. The end.

Tears burned and her throat clogged but she held on and when her second orgasm raced through her, she closed her eyes and let it eclipse every thought for the moment.

Afterward, they lay together quietly, the machines around them beeping out of rhythm from being disconnected. Kjar's hair swirled around her in layers, providing a heavy weight to her teetering emotions. “We should get dressed. Someone's going to come in and check on you.”

He smoothed his hand over her shoulder, the other firm around the back of her neck. “Soon.”

She cleared her throat. “I have to leave.”

His hair constricted, drawing her gaze to his. The silver stare questioned. She forced herself to push and he finally released her. Silken tendrils slid over her naked form.

“What's going on, Jaycie?”

“I have to get back to the Academy.” She searched for her clothes and found them twisted in a tangle on the floor. Sliding from the medical bed, she bent over and picked them up.

Behind her, the bed creaked from Kjar's weight. He stood up, the knotted muscles of his calves in her view. She lifted

her head and stood to face him.

“So that’s it? You come here to check on me, now what?”

Clutching her clothes to her chest, she swallowed. “You were hurt. I needed to see you. I didn’t kn-know if you were alive and I was afraid to comm my papan.”

Thinking about how frantic she’d been brought back those terror filled moments.

“Ahh, sweetheart.” Kjar’s gaze softened and he grasped her wrists lightly. Her clothes crumpled to the floor forgotten. Happiness and relief glowed from his eyes, along with an emotion she refused to identify. His hair rose in flowing streams in the air behind him. It was a startling display. “Are you accepting the *knowing*?”

And that quickly everything crashed in on her.

How did she tell him?

Her heart pounded with a truth she didn’t want to speak, the decision she was being forced to make. In the end, she got out one word. “Kjar.”

Just his name. She watched his expression fall and her heart seized with pain. Her hand extended then fell when he turned away. Swallowing, she reached for her clothing.

A pile of clothes waited for Kjar on a side table. He moved toward the folded stack. Dressing quietly, neither of them spoke but the gazes between them overflowed with an entire conversation that had no words.

Finally, he stood before her fully dressed in casual clothes. The shirt hugged his physique and the pants draped loosely around his hips. “If you say no this time, it’s over. I won’t bother you again. I’ll accept that what’s in my heart is mine alone.”

Her breathing hitched at his words. Silent tears trekked down her cheeks and she didn’t know what to do. She couldn’t say yes and the thought of saying no to this man who’d supported her and clearly believed she was it for him tore her apart.

Knowledge flared in his gaze and she bit her lip in response.

“I see,” he said at last, walking toward her. He caressed her jaw, lips curved down and sadness reflected on his face by the answer he read in her expression. “It’s alright to say no, sweetheart.”

“I—I.” Her lips trembled and she choked back a sob, unable to say what she needed.

Kjar slid his hand from her face to grip the back of her neck tight and drew her in close. He pressed his mouth to her forehead and kissed her as he spoke against her skin. “Safe journey, Jaycie Bastien. You are loved, sweetheart but I can’t do this any more.”

Then he stepped back and let her go.

*He let her go.*

The first cry slipped free. Another brush of his hand across her shoulder, his thumb caressing the edge of her collarbone. “You should leave before I hold you again. And fair warning, if I do, I won’t let go so easily the next time.”

She was breaking *his* heart. It was clear to see yet he attempted to make it easier on her by keeping things light. She owed him the same level of strength. Forcing her shoulders back, she met his gaze directly. “Thank you, Kjar.”

He cocked his head to the side in inquiry.

“For everything. For seeing me.”

For holding her, loving her, supporting her and a host of other things it wouldn’t be in her best interest to mention.

Without saying anything else, she turned and left. Left so she didn’t change her mind and ruin both of their lives by giving in to something she wasn’t ready for.

She never heard the shattering of glass behind her or the roar of pain as he dropped to his knees in anguish.

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Gone. His one was gone. She'd left him and his soul cried out. The sheer pain of it weakened Kjar in a way he'd never experienced before. His hair rose round him in a swirling wave. He raked his fingers over his scalp and fought the despair trying to overwhelm him.

Was this to be his pay back for the years he'd been dismissive of the women he'd sex shared with? A part of him had never thought to actually find his one. He'd expected to be alone forever.

How had his father managed? If the loss felt this intense without a commitment from Jaycie, how much more desolate had his father been with his mother?

It was a question he'd never have the answer to but Kjar pushed upright, determined to stand strong. His feelings for Jaycie wouldn't change. They wouldn't magically go away. He could only endure and hope his death when it came was quick.

Because death was the only thing that would end his suffering without his one by his side.



# TEN

Noise and laughter filled the air at Jaycie's parents' home. Friends and family had gathered to celebrate the news of her, Justice and Toren officially becoming Jutak warriors. She still couldn't believe it had happened.

The experience seemed surreal. From her frantic rush to Kjar with her emotions in a wreck to racing back to the Academy then bursting through the class door to take her finals. She'd struggled through questions formerly easy to her, stomach twisting in knots and heart in pieces.

After her exam, Instructor Ilamon called her down to her office and sat at a sleek gray desk. Her somber gaze studied Jaycie before she spoke. "You were late today, Trainee Bastien. I thought you understood how precarious your position was."

"I did. I do," she stumbled. Rubbing her damp palms together, she added, "I had to take care of something first."

Instructor Ilamon reared back in her seat, shock plain on her face. "More important than being an elite soldier? I can't imagine. Do you know how many would love to be in your position?"

Jaycie froze. Was that censure? Perspiration formed on her temple as she fought how to answer. Her entire life had been working toward this moment and Instructor Ilamon had the power to end her dreams right here. She'd known the risk though.

There was no way in this world or the next where she would have ignored a severely injured Kjar and had the ability to do something about it.

Straightening in her chair, she met the brown eyes watching her closely. "There was an...emergency. A f-friend needed me. Someone I was very close to."

Possibly loved but she shied away from that admittance.

“And you chose going to this friend over being on time for my exam?”

It was an indictment. She could feel her dream slipping through her fingers. This was why she'd walked away from the Ghost Unit base and the offer in reach. Emotions created problems like this, being pulled in two directions and struggling with priorities.

A lump formed in her throat and she couldn't respond. All she managed was a nod.

Instructor Ilamon folded her hands on top of the desk between them. “I see. Knowing your chance of being a Jutak warrior was impacted by this decision to help your friend, would you do it again, if given the chance?”

*Yes.* There was no other answer. Jaycie nodded again. If her presence in some way saved Kjar, she didn't regret her actions.

“Well, I must say I'm surprised.” Instructor Ilamon sighed and leaned back in her chair, eyeing Jaycie. “You passed my class, Trainee Bastien and because you put another's needs above your own, I'm approving you to move forward. You are the first female Jutak warrior to ever serve for Enotia. Congratulations.”

Shocked. Utterly shocked.

Eyes wide, she stared at Instructor Ilamon as the words filtered through. Breath wooshed from her chest. In a daze, she'd left the Advisory office, unable to believe she'd done it.

Her comm buzzed, breaking her free of the memory. Jaycie eased away from the crowd to take a quick look.

*Congratulations, Jutak Bastien.*

Her heart thundered in her chest from the one line message and familiar pain tore through her. Of course Kjar wouldn't forget to recognize her accomplishment.

She huffed out a rough breath. Her papan had been Jutak Bastien. Now she held the title. She'd wear it with pride.

Lifting her head, she took in everyone here. Former Jutak warriors along with their Chosens and those she considered family came out to wish them well. V'hor and Eva, Torkel and Faye, Bane and Mischka, Jaron and Sasha, Arak and her maman's best friend, Sylvie. So many more.

Even the Majad had sent her a gift. Her papan didn't think the duel edged, black matte Marenian knives were funny but her maman's eyes had grown covetous and she'd made grabbing hands before her papan turned her away from the box.

The need to comm Kjar rose. She wanted to see his face, see the glow in his eyes and hear the congratulatory words in that voice of his. A reverent tone she'd grown accustomed to and took for granted.

Her finger hovered over the contact icon then she slowly lowered her hand. No. It wouldn't be fair to either of them since she wasn't changing her mind. She typed a response as simple as the one he'd sent her.

*Thank you.*

"What are you doing, Jaycie? Come on!" a voice called out.

She lowered her comm and slipped it into her pocket before turning with a strained smile. Nikole, Shiloh's younger sister, linked arms with her and held up a glass.

"You know soku will have you singing at the top of your lungs after the second glass," Jaycie said with a smirk.

None of them could tolerate the beverage, inheriting their earth mamans' intolerance for the Enotian energy drink.

"Don't care." Nikole leaned in close and slurred slightly. "I think Raze is planning a prank. Watch yourself."

Her gaze immediately scanned for the crazy cat shifter, spotting him seated next to Cerise with his arm stretched around her shoulders and his face tucked into the base of her neck.

*Fuck!* She searched the crowd of people in her parents' yard then locked on a muted, angry, green stare. "Be back, Nikki."

She made her way toward her brother and stopped in his path before he could move in on his target. "*Not* today."

Or any day.

At least he stopped though they both knew he could have easily misted around her or transitioned directly next to the object of his rage. Viktor's dark brows rose and his tone was chiding as he said, "I was only going over to say hey to old friends. It's been a while."

Viktor had been gone for two years while serving in the Spectar army under their saleyo, General Azar. An arrangement their maman had only went along with if he agreed to spend a year with her own father and brother back on Earth first.

Her maman was no fool, she sensed the disquiet brewing in her oldest and hoped to balance his struggle with his dark nature. This was the first time he'd really had the chance to be around everyone else aside from the brief instant at the transport station when he'd taken her to Kjar.

"You were going to do more than greet Raze," Jaycie muttered, risking a glance at the two now engaged in animated conversation.

Viktor tipped up his glass in a salute toward her and asked in a musing voice, "How long do you think it took his claws to grow back?"

She whimpered under her breath. "Viktor! We were little. He didn't mean to scratch Cerise."

The incident occurred when they were children. Raze in his shifted Argoran cat form had chased a giggling Cerise in an Earth game of tag which they'd played often. Cerise had tripped over a divot in the ground at the same time Raze went to pounce. He'd tried to pull back, scrambling backward and one of his hind claws had slashed across Cerise's thigh.

Her scream had been chilling. One minute Viktor was tussling with Toren and the next he'd pinned Raze to the ground by his throat and ripped his claws from his back foot. Blood had been everywhere as Raze howled in pain. The look in Viktor's eyes had been frightening and if not for her papan intervening and wrapping his arms around Viktor as he misted them away, she wasn't sure what would have happened.

The next day Raze had been apologetic. He adored Cerise and considered Viktor one of his best friends. It had truly been an accident and their parents had smoothed it over. Raze even made the most of the attention by not going to the medic to heal and exaggerated his limp for a week.

There was nothing he could do about how quickly he actually recovered, however, since his Argoran genetics sped up the process.

"Mmm," was her brother's response as he took another sip of his drink.

Her eyes widened and she snatched the glass of soku from him and dumped the contents on the ground. "Are you crazy? You can't drink soku!"

While the rest of them got silly drunk off the drink, Viktor got quiet. Too quiet and her maman had warned him not to drink it after he'd frightened her the last time.

"What are you two talking about?" Justice joined them and threw an arm around her and Viktor's shoulders as he came to stand between them.

Jaycie shook her head and forced her grimace into a smile. "Celebrating."

Justice released her to smack a palm to Viktor's chest. "We're Jutaks! Can you believe your sister actually did it?"

Finally, Viktor broke his stare from the two, who'd yet to notice his intensity and his shoulders lowered, a half-grin curling his lips up. "I always knew. You and Toren were the real concern."

Instead of getting offended, Justice roared with laughter, drawing a few others over to their circle. Toren came first,

then Seppi Jaron's daughters, Alaina and Taya. Shiloh strolled over with Nikole. Shiloh kissed Viktor on the cheek and ruffled his hair. "So good to have you back."

"It's good to be home," he answered with ease though his gaze unerringly went back to Cerise and Raze.

Jaycie blew out a breath and caught her maman's concerned eyes. Standing next to Joni, her papan sent sharp glares Viktor's way. Glares her brother ignored as usual.

Needing to prevent a fight breaking out, she gripped her brother's forearm and tugged. Fortunately, he chose to follow. She got him as far as the edge of the grassed area before he dug his heels in.

Planting herself in front of him, she poked his chest and said what they all knew. "She's leaving again today, Viktor. Her place is on Serpine. She's set to be the next Supreme Matire with Seppi V'hor's maman ill. You know that."

"How did you do it?" he asked suddenly instead of responding to her words.

Taken aback, she frowned in confusion. "Do what?"

"Turn your heart off." He gave her his full attention and his green eyes blazed in a way she only noticed her papan's do when he spoke of her maman. "How did you walk away from a love meant to be yours?"

"Because, see, it doesn't matter where she goes or what she does, I was meant for Cerise and she was meant for me. So tell me, little shadow, how did you turn your back on Kjar?"

The words slammed into her like an unexpected blow. She staggered back and regained her balance. Her toes curled in her shoes and she blinked away the blur of shock. "That...that was different. Kjar and I were never going to be long term. He'll move on and realize this was a phase."

Viktor tipped his head to the side and folded his arms over his chest. "You really believe that. Huh. He's Volvian. There is no moving on when they identify their one but I guess that's what you have to tell yourself."



He snorted and turned away. She caught his wrist. “Vik!”

Spinning around, he roared, “Don’t call me that!”

Conversation halted, the silence echoing with Viktor’s words. Before she could apologize, her maman’s voice rang out. “Viktor, enough.”

“Sorry, maman.” Her brother ducked his head in respect toward their maman but when their papan headed in their direction, Viktor misted away and her hand fell empty to her side.

Her papan closed in on her, expression fierce. “What was that about, Jaycie?”

As if he didn’t know but one thing she refused to do was betray her brother. If her papan hadn’t confronted her about Kjar yet, it meant her brother had held her secret and she’d do the same. “Nothing. He’s worried about me being in the Jutaks.”

He stared, causing her to shift in place as she’d done in her childhood faced with her papan’s displeasure. “Keep an eye on him when you can. Darkness like what your brother carries can eat a soul alive.”

When he turned to walk away, she murmured, “Would it be that bad, daddy?”

He stiffened. She rarely used the Earth term, more comfortable with the Enotian language. She truly didn’t understand why it bothered him where Viktor’s affections lay.

Her maman came over and kissed her papan, murmuring in his ear. She didn’t hear what was said but her papan never answered her as they rejoined their friends.



# ELEVEN

*Three months later*

“We’re up, Jaycie, let’s go!” Justice banged on the jamb of the doorframe to her room.

The blaring alarms were hard to miss. Ignoring him, she checked the fit of her nano suit to confirm there was no damage to the integrity from their last mission. They’d only returned a few hours ago and were being sent out again already.

“Hurry up, Bastien!” Toren called as he trotted past the door.

She glanced up as she shoved her feet into her jumper boots, a grad present from Shiloh. “I know!”

They loved ribbing her even though she was the most punctual one on the team. Grabbing her laser, she darted through the doorway and into the hall with the others. She easily caught up to Grier, Justice, Toren and Darik, the last member of their team, Raptor Squad.

Tasked with covert missions in space, Raptor Squad also allowed her to separate from her papan’s legacy. A little.

Her Unit Leader came running out and matched her strides in the transport bay. Caadin glanced at her, his blue eyes narrowed. “No problems with the mission parameters, Bastien?”

The new threat centered around a Marenian named Varu Hasteen. He was launching attack after attack at various places within Alliance territory. The latest was a research center. Raptor Squad’s role would be to go in to clear the way and escort the staff safely out to be relocated at another facility.

“None. We’re to go in, provide air support and return to base.”

“To the point as always, Bastien.” Caadin was a good Unit Leader with years of service and she’d learned a lot under his

tutelage.

It helped that he wasn't overly familiar with her family history and didn't ask her questions about growing up around *the* Torkel Alonson.

The hangar connected to their base was busy, bodies running in organized chaos. Justice clapped the shoulder of her nano armor. "You steady?"

Excitement sent flutters through her belly. It was something they asked each other before every mission. The rush of flight and active mission status sent a thrill through her. "Steady. You?"

"Good to go." He winked and tossed her an arrogant grin.

She rolled her eyes and tapped Toren's butt as he shot past her. He looked over his shoulder without slowing and waved. Darik and Grier received professional nods of courtesy from her as they leaped up the ladder mounted at the sides of their individual striker jets.

The sleek black design formed a semi-circle with dark red stripes as accents along the front rim. High tech aircraft and the best to be had. Jaycie climbed into the snug cockpit and her harness dropped down and clicked in place.

As the tinted dome lowered, she connected her ear comm and checked in. "*Raptor One steady and ready. Check in, squad.*"

"*Raptor Two, steady and ready,*" Toren said.

"*This is Raptor Three and I'm steady and ready,*" Justice's voice boomed.

She smiled and received confirmations from Grier and Darik next. She entered the ignition sequence and the jet started with a smooth vibration beneath her seat. Overhead speakers announced, "Raptor Squad, clear for take off."

The retractable ceiling soundlessly slid back, opening the building to the sweet orange and purple Enotian sky. Two women in bright yellow jumpers, signaled them onto an

approved path. Jaycie shot forward on the track first and soared into the air the moment she cleared the roof.

Behind her, the rest of the squad took to the air in formation. If there were times she thought of a silver-eyed, white-haired soldier, she blocked them.

Even if her heart ached a little more each day.

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Kjar flexed his fingers around the comm he held and resisted the urge to reach out to Jaycie. The ache to be with her grew daily. Forcing himself to stay away these last three months was torture.

But, he refused to return to the way things were between them before. He wanted more and the *knowing* wouldn't settle for less. The fury that resided within him was an equal match to the love he held in his heart for her.

She'd walked away from him, from what they could have had together. Essentially moved on as if what they'd shared meant nothing. Letting her go had been the most difficult thing he'd ever done and his wish for a speedy death was almost in reach. With the way he felt, it wouldn't be much longer.

Tossing the comm onto the table, he let his hair down from the multitude of braids and watched the white length tumbled about his shoulders. The strands in the back rose around his face and flicked at his cheeks then stretched full length beyond his waist.

Sighing in relief, he closed his eyes and breathed deeply. To have your hair pinned and braided constantly was anathema to Volvians.

Their hair was meant to be free, free to emote in a physical representation of things they didn't often say. Not quite a separate part of them, their hair often gave away their thoughts. Ropy sections could attack in defense of the Volvian or stroke a lover in affection. All of its own volition.

The nature of their hair made them an oddity among other races, their past littered with abduction and stories of experimentation to understand the how or why. There was no

definitive answer. From the moment of birth, every Volvians hair responded to stimuli with a sentience no other could replicate.

For his people, hair represented another sense like hearing and vision. Kjar could feel the texture of things his hair touched. Sensations were magnified ten-fold if his hair stroked something.

Not to mention a lover's touch. He shivered. The feel of a woman's hands gliding through the white strands was enough to cause even the strongest Volvian to orgasm. He'd know since it happened once with Jaycie.

Opening his eyes, Kjar met his somber stare in the mirror. Upon closer inspection, there were more sections of hair thinning than he'd expected. He reached for a brush and ran it through from the roots at his scalp to the ends.

Strands broke away to drift to the floor. Another pile he'd have to dispose of for the second time today. The shedding was worsening. The longer he was without Jaycie, the more his hair would decline.

Uneven strands flowed and snapped about in a clear sign of frustration. He jerked the brush through a vicious tangle on the end. Behind him, his hair rose in the air like an angry cloud and flicked at his cheeks in retribution for the rough treatment.

He blew out a breath. His hair was only part of his failing. He was irritable and short with those around him as well. All because of one woman and her stubborn refusal.

Another hunk of hair broke off and slid over his shoulder to land in his lap. The white length shriveled until only a gray gnarled mess remained. He swiped it away and set the brush down.

Standing, he buried the pile of gray from the floor at the bottom of his trash and proceeded to the arduous task of braiding the length. He created a single rope down the middle of his head then rolled the end into a knot at his nape. Several pins jammed throughout kept it in place. For now.

At some point today, it would attempt to unravel. Seeking, constantly seeking and searching for the other half of his soul to connect with and stroke in affection. It was the nature of the *knowing*.

His hair longed for Jaycie as much as he did.





## TWELVE

The ceiling rumbled threateningly and chunks of rocks fell from above. Jaycie ran fast but not too fast due to a muscle spasm in her right thigh courtesy of a stunner blast from a technician who'd panicked and shot her. Thinking about it made her growl under her breath.

At least they had the microchip she, Justice and Toren had gone back inside to retrieve while the others on her team had gone ahead to escort the rest of the staff at the facility out.

Workers at a technology center had miscalculated the components of an explosive device they were working on and blown a portion of their underground station, trapping them inside. Her team had been the closest available and sent to help with evacuation.

Toren and Justice kept pace with her, despite the very real possibility of them all being trapped down here. "Leave me, guys. I'll catch up."

They shot her an incredulous look. Another cramp in her leg caused her to slow. Toren planted a hand on her back and shoved her forward as he snarled, "Your papan won't let us live to draw another breath after we tell him we abandoned you."

His twin snorted, dodging around another corridor in the underground shaft. This place was a maze. Two more turns should see them near the exit. "Not to mention our papan would rage if we were so lacking in honor."

They had a point. Seppi Bane would snap. He and his Chosen were overly protective in general. None of the children could fall or cry without one of them rushing over or dragging them to see the medic. She drew in a gulping breath and tried to keep up with the brutal pace they'd set.

"Not gonna die on my first mission in charge," she muttered aloud.

The promotion was only a week old but she'd been in the acting role for over a month now. How embarrassing would it be to get crushed in a tunnel collapse before having the chance to celebrate?

Without the injury this would be nothing for her. Her speed was a strength.

"Don't even think it," Justice said.

At least the other members of her team had gotten through. Grier, her nemesis, and teammate commed her now, "*Where are you, Bastien? We need to burn and leave. This rock is gonna blow.*"

Panting as she skidded to a halt near the ladder mounted to a slick wall, she said, "*On our way out. Are the strikers clear?*"

The jets were together at an outdoor flight pad for incoming and outgoing vessels. As long as they didn't take damage, their way out of here was secure.

*"Affirmative."*

She loved being on the same Unit as Justice and Toren. Grier had been an unexpected surprise.

It never crossed her mind that he wouldn't sign up to be a part of ground troops and undercover missions. No such luck. He was in the air squad with her, certified as a stealth striker pilot.

He was a good teammate, if a bit aggravating. Especially after she'd received the rank of Team Leader. But she'd done good work and no one could deny the success under her leadership. Their striker team was already receiving numerous accolades.

Turned out, her passion was fighter jets and she'd made her own name with her prowess in the air.

"Go, go, go!" Justice muttered from behind her.

She gripped the bars and climbed the rungs as fast as she could. The moment she reached the top, Toren and Justice

launched themselves up with the aid of their silks, bypassing the ladder.

In front of them was the last barrier to the outside. She slammed her palm on the key lock and the door slid open on a torturous grind.

Behind her, another ominous rumble accompanied the ground trembling beneath her boots. Her heart sped up. The place was going to cave in and the section they were in would go under right with it. Justice and Toren exchanged a look, then each grabbed one of her arms and dove through the doorway.

“Run, Jaycie! Run!”

Digging deep, she put on a burst of speed, grateful the stun seemed to be finally wearing off. When they realized she could keep up, they released her arm and charged forward. They arrived outside, the domed barrier failing at the same time.

In the distance, Darik and Grier waited by the strikers. Close. Almost there. Residual numbness pierced her leg but she ignored it. If she stopped, she was as good as dead.

“Down!” Toren yelled.

She dropped instantly and the two men fell beside her. Glancing over her shoulder, she stared in awe as the facility behind them tumbled. Explosions rocked the ground, a tremendous shudder rolled beneath them and then any sign of the tech lab vanished.

Standing, she brushed the grit from her nano armor. Nothing remained of the huge facility except a giant crater. Toren clasped her shoulder and grinned down at her. “Congrats, Team Leader. Another successful mission.”

She rolled her eyes. “Ebo.”

But a part of her sat up and swelled with pride. She’d done it. The youngest, fastest Jutak warrior to reach Team Leader status. She couldn’t wait to tell...Kjar.

Following Justice and Toren toward the striker jets, her mind went to the man she couldn't stop thinking about. Her days and nights were filled with memories of Kjar. The way he touched her, the way he looked at her if she caught his gaze. As if she was his everything.

Emotions tumbled around in her chest and she drew a sharp breath. She hadn't expected not seeing him to hurt this much. She'd reached out to him once, late at night when her feelings had gotten the better of her.

*“What do you want from me?” she'd cried out in the face of his stern glare on the comm.*

*“You know what I want.” Then he'd ended the connection.*

“Jaycie?” Toren's voice snapped her attention back to the present.

She stood by her striker jet. Hopping in the cockpit, she pulled off a stiff grin. “Let's clear out.”

The others followed suit and they soared off into the skies, heading back to Enotia. There was no place for Kjar in her life if she was to dedicate herself to being the best Jutak warrior.



# THIRTEEN

Kjar's comm chimed with a reminder alert. He strode from his rooms and hurried to the lower level conference room. Hahn joined him in the hall but didn't speak. Unusual. He eyed his teammate but nothing seemed out of place.

They entered the room together. Seraphina, Dorian and Rook were already seated with Kyele leaning against one side of the table at their approach.

As soon as they sat, Kyele spoke. "We have reason to believe Varu has amassed a small army in his vendetta against Torkel Alonson and Nikol Wulven."

"I thought our involvement with that was over with the Majad's enforcer in charge," Rook stated from his end of the table.

"Damiian has a team investigating Varu's whereabouts and has reached out for assistance. The Alliance has requested that the Jutak Units partner with Marenia on a joint mission until he's caught."

Kyele's words didn't shock Kjar. He'd expected something like this as matters with Varu continued to escalate. Lothar's son had destroyed a satellite station and crew within Alliance territory then boldly launched an assault against an off world Marenian research colony, both unprepared to defend themselves.

Each attack was deliberate to draw attention to his actions, a blatant in your face declaration of intent and a dare to come stop him.

"What are we doing to end his terror?" Dorian asked. "As long as he's out there, Zsamei can't safely return to her place of business."

Zsamei and Dorian had made their relationship official and she currently lived with them in their military facility. Counting Rook's mate, Seraphina, they now had two women residing here.

The change was subtle but noticeable. Perhaps because he'd briefly touched what they had. Rook and Dorian appeared happier and smiled more often. Well, not Dorian. Smiles were rare from him unless directed at Zsamei who he'd bonded to.

"I spoke with Zsamei and she understands. Until Varu has been apprehended, she is in danger. Kumar was linked to Varu and the infiltration into our system points at Varu as well," Kyele said. "The Alliance agrees that he can't be allowed to gain more suppo—."

A comm buzzed loudly, cutting off his words. Everyone glanced around but Kyele's gaze narrowed and he withdrew his. The conversation was short, his expression darkening until he finally ended the comm.

Eyes narrowed, he met their gazes. "Ghost Unit's been called to assist a downed Jutak team. The Jutak warriors were to provide air support but when one of their members was struck down, they sent out an all hands alert and request for help. We're closest."

Hahn jolted and his brows shot up. "We don't do air support. Kjar's the only one certified as a pilot."

"Really?" Seraphina leaned around Rook to eye him. "I never learned but it was on my list of things to do."

Kjar inclined his head. He'd trained at the Jutak Academy on multiple aircrafts with the intent to join a strike force team. After Kyele invited him to join Ghost Unit, he'd completed his certs to fly.

Kyele shot Hahn an irritated look. "This will be a ground assault. Provide sufficient coverage so the Jutaks can get to their jets."

"What about ERS?" Dorian asked.

Emergency Rescue Squad would usually go in when a Jutak team was down.

"One of the Jutak pilots is injured. They can't wait for ERS to arrive."

Time was of the essence. The end of Kjar's braid began to unravel and he absently took a pin from his pocket and jammed it in place.

"Understood," Rook said. "When do we leave?"

"Now."

They rose instantly, heading for the door as Kyele called out, "Remember, Varu is playing a deadly game and no cost is too great to him."

The shuttle took them to the safest place within range of the last known position of the Jutak team. Uncertain of the rugged terrain and Varu's men, they couldn't risk landing. That meant this would be a fast cord drop from shuttle to surface.

Standing by the exit as their pilot looked for an ideal location to hover, Kjar tightened the straps on his nano suit. The protective armor was designed to withstand up to level 4 damage from weapon fire which they were sure to take if Varu had an armed group here.

*"Ground missiles identified and destroyed. Prepare to rappel,"* their pilot said over the intercom.

Rook tapped his ear comm. *"Copy."*

Next he eyed each of them, gaze taking in their positions and readiness. When they reached the designated drop, Rook called out. "Line check, Ghost Unit."

Kjar tugged on the cord hanging from the ceiling of the craft and checked the attachment on his harness. Everything appeared solid. "Hunter Two good."

"Hunter Three good."

"Hunter Four good."

Their confirmations rang out down the line where they stood in front of the closed sliding doors. Rook rapped his fist on the side of the panel in a practiced signal to the pilot. The doors opened and wind immediately whipped inside.

After a final check with his Team Leader, Kjar wrapped his legs around the line as he slid to the ground in a quick drop.



Rook, Dorian and Hahn thudded to the ground beside him almost in sync.

*“We are a go,”* Rook said as he disconnected the cord from his harness.

Four lines retracted back into the shuttle as the aircraft veered sharply to the left and flew off. The pilot would come back on their orders to retrieve them for the evac.

*“Nothing stops us from getting to the Jutak warriors. Understood?”* Rook spoke into their comms in a firm voice.

*“Affirmative,”* they replied.

Immediately, laser fire speckled the ground around them. Shouted commands rang out. Kjar turned as a stream of armed invaders poured over the hill from the east.

*“Incoming on our side,”* he snapped in their comms.

Huddled together, they hunched low and ran. Hands clenched on his weapon, he met Rook’s gaze. They’d need to be fast to get to the Jutaks. The other man took the lead and signaled them forward with a wave of his arm.

Dorian muttered curses in their comm and Hahn laughed. Shaking his head, Kjar fired at will, gunning down the targets chasing them.

*“Where are the Jutak warriors?”* Rook barked at Hahn.

*“They can’t be far.”* Hahn tilted his head toward the remnants of a crashed striker jet to the far right of them.

After gazing at the smoking wreckage, Rook deliberated for a split second. *“What about trackers? Do we have access?”*

*“Giving access now.”* Kyele’s voice came through on comms from his monitoring point at their base on Enotia.

A ping sounded in their ear comms. Never slowing his pace, Rook glanced down at the thick black band on his left wrist. *“Dead ahead.”*

They charged forward and drew to a halt when they came over the rise. There were several buildings directly in front of

them. One without a roof, one that looked like an abandoned hanger with shattered windows.

“*Which one?*” Kjar asked, trying to identify which building would be the most likely for the soldiers to hide.

Behind them, their attackers had regrouped. He counted in his head. *One, two, three.* Three forces moving to converge and block the path to the hanger. That had to be the location. Shifting direction, Kjar took off running toward the middle building.

“*Give us cover, Hunter Three,*” Rook commanded as he raced behind Kjar.

Without hesitation, Dorian stopped, spun around and dropped to one knee. “*I’m on it.*”

Invaders started falling in the wake of Dorian’s sniper capabilities. Those he didn’t hit scattered. That should buy them some time. They arrived at the entrance to the hangar and Hahn tugged at the handle. “Locked.”

Not an issue. Kjar moved into place, already slapping a red disc to the side of the panel. “Clear.”

He backed up with the others. Behind him, Dorian continued his rapid-fire shooting. He trusted the other man wouldn’t let anyone close to them without yelling a warning.

Red circles pulsed on the explosive he’d set. *Hurry, hurry.* Adrenaline poured through his system as he waited. Within seconds, the shock grenade blew and the handle flew off, leaving a perfect smoking hole next to it.

“Move in,” Rook ordered.

Inside, there were four strikers lined up side by side at an angle. A small insignia on the curved wing of each beneath the slashing red stripes across the top denoted it as belonging to the Jutaks but no signs of the pilots who’d flown them.

Dorian burst through the door. He shoved the face shield of his helmet up. “I took out most of the attackers but they keep coming. We need to clear this place and move out *now!*”

The space was large. Racks running up to the ceilings filled with boxes and other items he couldn't identify. The soldiers could be anywhere. Rook scanned the area and called out, "This is Ghost Unit. We were sent to help a team of Jutak warriors. Please come out, we need to leave."

Something moved, the scuff and scrape of heavy machinery. They turned as one and a tall figure dressed in black came forward followed by another, and another until three men stood before them. The fourth leaned on the shoulders of the fifth.

Kjar froze and his skin chilled at the sight of the red hair spilling about the uniform clad shoulders.



# FOURTEEN

Jaycie couldn't believe it when she heard the voice call out Ghost Unit. Of all the teams sent to rescue them. Justice and Toren glanced her way and grinned.

“What are the odds?” Justice asked.

Darik moved from their hiding space. “Should we trust them?”

“Yes, yes. Absolutely,” she said.

Moving forward at a slower pace, she gritted her teeth. Grier leaned against her and his arm was dead weight about her shoulder.

When he'd wrecked his striker, she'd turned around immediately and ordered the others to go on. They were outmaneuvered by the surface to air explosives.

Instead, the team had turned with her and landed in the hanger. By the time they reached Grier and his destroyed striker, a group of armed men started to attack.

Outnumbered and not willing to have the weak vantage point for ground confrontation, they ran back to the hanger. Unfortunately, the risk of flying through more missiles was too high without help. Grier gasped as he limped along. “You know them?”

Her shoulder strained but she forced her feet to move forward. “Yes. My papan's team.”

Grier stopped abruptly. “You sent for your papan?”

If he had the strength to mock her, he wasn't bad off. She snorted and pushed him to move again. Discussing her missions with her papan was a huge no-no. “Of course not.”

Per protocol, she'd activated the emergency beacon the moment she saw Grier's striker go down. Her Unit Leader had been succinct and informed her the fastest available team would be sent. It could have been the Emergency Rescue

Squad, another Jutak team or...Ghost Unit apparently. Though she'd assumed the latter highly unlikely.

"We have to hurry."

She recognized Rook's voice. Steps rushed in her direction but when she looked up it wasn't the Ghost Unit team leader. Kjar closed the distance between them, hand going around the back of her neck in a tight but gentle grip as he whispered harshly, "Are you hurt?"

She shook her head, afraid she'd babble if she spoke. His lips pressed tight and his gaze went from Grier then back to her. "I can help."

He eased his shoulder under Grier's other arm, taking most of the pilot's weight from her. She hid a sigh of relief and shook out the tingles in her free arm. Another sharp glance from him but he didn't speak.

In fact, it was impossible to read his expression. After the initial surprise of seeing her, a mask had fallen over his face.

"Where are the researchers?" Hahn asked, looking over her team.

She stopped and braced her legs. Grier was heavier than his lean appearance implied. "We were able to make sure they got to their cruiser as planned. If they hadn't taken the striker out, we would have been on our way back to Enotia."

More of Grier's weight dipped onto her. Her legs bent and she had to stiffen and push up.

"Sorry. I'm good," he said.

His coloring had gone a sickly shade of pale blue. She couldn't recollect seeing blue on him before. "Be honest, Grier."

"Your concern is noted but it's only my arm."

She stared and went with her gut. He'd be fine. At least his force field chute had deployed from his pack and protected him for the most part when he ejected from his striker.

“I’ve got him.” Toren came over and slid his weapon to hang over his back.

He reached for Grier and she gratefully stepped away, subtly massaging her tense shoulder. On her other side, Darik took over for Kjar, who continued to watch her with that closed look.

Ignoring him for the moment, she faced Rook and inclined her head. “Thank you for coming.”

The corner of his mouth curved up. “Wasn’t expecting to see you, Jutak Bastien.”

A flush worked its way over her face and her chin tipped up. “Team Leader Bastien.”

Hahn whistled. “Well done.”

“Congrats,” Dorian said.

Pleasure trickled down her spine. Although she’d spent months on the force now, there were still times when she wanted to pinch herself. A content smile on her face, she made the mistake of checking for Kjar’s response.

“What’s ETA on shuttle return?” he asked in a clipped tone to Rook.

Rook tipped his head to the side, listening to something she couldn’t hear in his ear comm. “Ten if we can hustle back to our rapid drop zone.”

“Wait.” She shook off her shock and surprise. “We can’t leave. There were ground missiles which took Grier out.”

“We’ve taken care of those,” Hahn answered with a broad grin.

Better and better news. “Excellent. We need to take the strikers. Toren, Justice, Darik and I can fly out of here. Grier needs observation and clearance from a medic back at base. He can return with your team on the shuttle.”

She expected push back or protest but Rook only nodded. From his position at the door of the hanger, Hahn interrupted.

“Ah, we might have an issue with that plan. There’s dozens more outside making their way here.”

Grier cursed. “This is my fault.”

It kind of was. If he hadn’t veered off and had stuck with their flight pattern none of this would have happened. True it was a mistake but mistakes cost lives.

She ran through options and came up with the most viable one to see them through. “The strikers seat two. We can ride double to your shuttle landing zone. There’s five of us and—”

Her words trailed off and Rook filled in. “Four of *us*. But someone has to take care of the intruders blocking the way or they’ll shoot up the strikers before you get in the air. I can stay behind and double back to the landing zone.”

She shook her head. His team needed him. They’d come because one of her people screwed up. “I’ll stay. It makes more sense.”

“In what way?” Kjar interrupted. “We all know how your papan would react if something were to happen to you.”

His voice was cold. Colder than it had ever been when talking to her. She blocked the hurt. There was no room for emotion. Not now. “This isn’t about my papan. Out here I’m a Jutak warrior.”

His gaze flickered. She faced Rook. “I’ll stay. I can race to the shuttle pick up spot.”

“You’d run?” Hahn gaped at her as if he couldn’t imagine.

She withheld a smirk but Toren laughed outright. “She’s half-Spectar. You haven’t seen fast until you’ve seen Jaycie run.”

A glint of approval appeared in Rook’s eyes. “Good idea. You heard, Jut—Team Leader Bastien. She’ll stay and meet us.”

Back on her footing, she began rattling out instructions. “Doubling up in the strikers is the best solution. Darik, you and Rook are together. Justice take Dorian, Toren you have Hahn. Grier can fly wit—”



“And I’m with you, *Team Leader Bastien*,” Kjar finished.

Team Leader Bastien. Not Jaycie or sweetheart as he’d been prone to calling her. A part of her heart stuttered in dismay.

Then he continued to crush her with his next words. “We both know despite what you think, our Unit Leader would expect you to be protected regardless of your standing as a team leader.”

There was not a drop of emotion in his silver-eyed gaze as he spoke. She studied his fierce countenance and knew there was no arguing this point. Even if it was true. Her papan was going to go crazy when she checked in with her maman after this.

Clearing her throat was difficult. “Fine. You’re with me. We’re going to go full blazes so I hope you can keep up.”

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Kjar knew he’d pushed the issue. He didn’t care. If she’d disagreed, he’d have followed behind her anyway. It had nothing to do with Kyele and everything to do with his own fear of Jaycie alone in a territory with armed insurgents while Ghost Unit left her to fend for herself.

When Jaycie went to have last minute words with her team, Rook came over to him. “You sure about this?”

His Team Leader had picked up on the strain in the exchange with Jaycie but didn’t probe closely. Rook more than anyone understood how emotions clouded a mission. “Yes.”

Rook’s lips pressed tight. “I don’t like sending the two of you off alone.”

“Dorian took out a lot of them. Unless they have unlimited reinforcements, we can handle the rest.”

Rook’s brows shot up. “You’re that comfortable with her covering your back?”

Whatever the issues between them, there was no hesitation in his confidence with Jaycie’s competence. Getting the news she’d become a Jutak warrior hadn’t surprised him at all.

“Stop worrying or I’ll think Seraphina has turned you into someone’s mother.”

Horror flashed over his Team Leader’s face and it was worth the punch to his side. Expression serious, Rook added, “Take as many out as you can and make the rendezvous. Remember, the shuttle is en route and you have a limited time to operate in.”

It was a little over a mile. Thanks to their intense training under Kyele’s scrutiny, he could do an eight minute mile easily. “It’s fine. I can keep up with her.”

He’d sparred with Jaycie long enough to know how fast she was but felt comfortable in his ability to maintain a decent pace with her.

Rook clapped him on the back. “Keep comms open in case you need us. Once her team is in the air a safe distance away, they can provide coverage.”



## FIFTEEN

Once they had their plans confirmed, Jaycie raised her helmet and face shield. She commed Justice since he'd be her contact from the air while she and Kjar traveled by ground. *"Don't let Grier put a scratch on my striker."*

Despite the arm injury, Grier should have no problem flying her jet. Justice's chuckle came over the comms. *"Copy that."*

Standing back, she watched as Kjar's team climbed into the strikers with her team to ride double. The jets started with their familiar low whine. She hurried over to the double doors of the hangar. One swayed by the hinges from the explosive Ghost Unit had used to get in.

She swung it opened now and leaped back to clear the way.

Justice shot out first, Toren on his thrusters. Next, Grier with a cocky finger to the temple salute aimed her way. Darik shot out last, clearing the doors easily.

Scattered laser fire targeted the strikers but she and Kjar laid down a round of blasts that gave them the best chance to get through. As soon as she confirmed each of her teammates were far enough in the air, she stepped back into the safety of the hanger.

Kjar came toward her, hefting his weapon and aggression in every stride. He wore the same blank expression. It had the same impact of earlier and weakened her resolve. Stiffening her spine, she eyed him in his nano armor. The black synth leather molded to his frame to perfection.

Coming across men taller than her was a rarity since she'd inherited her parents' height but Kjar had her by a few inches. It was the first thing she'd noticed the day she met him.

His hair was in a single long braid, a thick knot resting on his nape. The style drew the eye to his pitched brows, the sharp blade of his nose and the angle of his cheekbones. His

gray eyes were dark and piercing, no hint of emotions revealed in the shadowy gaze. “Let’s go.”

Breath whistled between her lips. She’d missed him but clearly he didn’t feel the same. Not that she could blame him.

As soon as he stood at her side, he pulled up his helmet and lowered his shield, blocking his face behind the black tint.

“Sync comms, first,” she said.

It would enable them to communicate with one another and not have to resort to yelling on their hectic race.

He nodded and lowered his gaze to his wristlet. She caught a glimpse of the small black swirls on the inside of his left wrist. The design contained tracker ink in case he was separated from his team or lost his regular tracker. He’d once told her that each member of Ghost Unit had one.

*“Hunter Two live,”* his voice came across her comm.

Controlling a shiver at his deep voice whispering in her ear, she replied, *“Raptor One live.”*

She wished she could see his face. It was the first time she’d shared her comm sign outside fellow Jutak warriors. Not even her parents knew.

*“I’ve sent you the coordinates. We have ten minutes and counting to get to the drop zone.”*

She could do that easily. Back tucked on one side of the door, she signaled him to take the other side. *“On my count.”*

To her surprise, he deferred to her leadership and didn’t protest at her instructions. *“Affirmative.”*

*“Three, two.”* She braced on her back foot, held her laser at the ready and prepared to launch through the door. *“One!”*

Hunched over, they burst through the doors together. She kept her speed reasonable until the first blasts of laser fire rang out.

*“Pick it up, Bastien, or we’re both going to be dead.”*

Kjar's words sent a rush through her veins. She tossed a quick look to her right. He'd positioned himself at a protective angle between her and the blasts. Glaring would be a waste since he couldn't see through her face shield.

Using both weapons in his hands, he fired back rapidly but the men storming after them were gaining ground. She counted at least a dozen in the mad rush toward them.

*"Can you keep up?"* she commed, fearful of leaving him behind. She could up her speed in a way that would make her papan proud. To do so meant the risk of leaving Kjar behind and she wouldn't do that.

*"Yes."*

His simple answer had her putting on an added burst of speed to test. Kjar easily matched it. Taking him at his word, she reached into her core and tapped into a part of her as intrinsic as breathing.

Dirt spewed beneath her feet in a cloud and the world around her blurred. In this state, she was unmatched by many. More than her human maman, more than an Enotian but less than a full blooded Spectar.

Wind whipped around her helmet from the speed she used and her heart swelled with not having to hold back. It wasn't often she allowed this part of her Spectar heritage free.

An area by her feet exploded with a shower of rock and grass from a blast too close for comfort. Hunching lower, she shot over her shoulder and was rewarded with a shattered scream.

Every time she saw one of the blue nano suits chasing them, she fired. Her aim was excellent and she didn't miss a single time. She gained ground, widening the distance between her and Kjar.

*"Four left,"* he reported in her comm.

When he fell farther back, she started to slow.

*"Keep going,"* he snapped and dropped to one knee.

\*\*\*

Kjar knew he had to take out the last four giving chase, otherwise they'd draw them to the drop zone and the others. Between the two of them, they'd already cleared over half of Varu's men. When Jaycie started to slow, he barked, "*Keep going.*"

Her helmet prevented him from seeing her expression but her shoulders went straight up at his sharp command and she spun around. Cursing, he lifted his laser and waited for the one he'd tracked to show himself. There. He fired and the man dropped.

Jaycie crouched nearby. Worry for her nipped at the edges of his mind and his Volvian heritage insisted he send her on but he also knew his one. There would be no sending Jaycie anywhere against her will. Stubborn defined her.

Glaring was pointless but he tried anyway. Without looking his way, she bit out, "*Stay focused and worry about yourself.*"

Rather than get frustrated at her obstinance, he directed his attention to the armed men attacking. "*There are four remaining. They've taken cover behind the building with the broken door.*"

"*I see them. You take the left and I'll cover those on the right,*" she said.

"*Affirmative.*" Blood pounding, he narrowed his gaze and zoomed through his laser rifle scope. A flutter of movement on the edge. He fired.

A barrage of lasers zapped around them. Jaycie didn't flinch. Stretched out on her front beside him, she appeared calm and steady. When wasn't she though? Throughout the time they'd been together, her demeanor had always been lighthearted, quick to laugh. Easily riled, yes, but able to move beyond an argument in a blink.

The only time they had actual discord between them was when he'd pushed the issue of a bond. She didn't want to settle and wasn't ready to commit. While part of him understood that, it didn't make it any easier to deal with the heartbreak

she'd dealt him. There would be no one else but Jaycie for him.

But she chose being a Jutak over him and the thought caused a spurt of anger to simmer beneath his skin.

*"We're almost at the drop zone, Hunter Two. How far out are you?"* Rook asked in his comms.

Kjar calculated the distance and muttered, *"Five."*

If he sent Jaycie ahead, she'd be fine. Speed was something she had aplenty. He turned to find her watching him. She'd raised her face shield and her mutinous expression dared him. His hair tugged within the braid, eager to reach out and soothe.

Muting his comms, he raised his face shield and said, "The moment we clear them, it's a straight race to the drop. You don't slow down for me or turn back."

Her lips pressed tight. He gripped her shoulder, the first time he'd touched her in months. Resisting the urge to stroke, he added, "This is non-negotiable, Jaycie."

His reasoning wasn't strictly based on her father's reaction if something happened to her either. In fact, it had nothing to do with Kyele and everything to do with Kjar's inability to let anything happen to her while he was around.

"Fine," she spat.

He dropped his hand and adjusted his laser. "Let's do this."

It was unfortunate Varu's men thought it was safe at that exact moment to move forward. As soon as they came from around the building and attempted to rush them, he and Jaycie began firing in a spray pattern. He laid scatter fire on the right and she handled the left.

Bodies collapsed where they stood, screams cut off abruptly until the four remaining were no more. He surged to his feet and Jaycie blasted by him, wind slapping his face from her speed. Maybe one thing had changed. The Jaycie before would have throttled her abilities to wait for him.





## SIXTEEN

They reached the drop zone in exactly five minutes. Jaycie ripped off her helmet and wiped back the falling strands of hair from her ponytail. Her team waited, each standing next to their strikers and Kjar's teammates as well.

"How is everything with Ghost Unit?" she asked Kjar for lack of anything better to say as they approached the group. They were still out of hearing distance.

"I can't discuss my work with Ghost Unit."

Her fingers clenched at her sides and her feet moved on automaton as they drew near the others. She wouldn't let his words bother her.

Just block him, focus on completing the mission and getting back to base.

*That's it, Jaycie. Nothing more.*

Except.

She couldn't let it go. Her mind zeroed in on his abrupt response. It was harsh. Overly so and he knew it. "My papan leads Ghost Unit. You can tell me about it."

"You don't have clearance," he said in that same tone.

Arctic. It sent a chill down her spine. "You know that's not why I asked."

"What do you expect, Jaycie?" he snapped from behind her and the air between them bristled with tension. He came to a stand still and she stopped as well to face him. "You want me to pretend everything's fine? As if we don't have a past? Sorry if I'm not interested in that game."

*"Jaycie, you alright?"* Toren asked via comms.

She peered over her shoulder and noticed everyone watching her and Kjar. Fury a low pulse beneath her skin, she tapped her ear comm. *"We'll be a moment. Final details."*

*"Affirmative."*

She muted her comms and stared into Kjar's silver gaze. "So that's it, we can't be friends?"

He'd been her friend and now because she'd chosen her goals over a relationship, he wanted nothing to do with her?

The Ghost Unit shuttle appeared on the horizon. Kjar spotted it at the same time and moved to go around her.

"Kjar!" Was he really going to leave and that was it?

He glanced at her, the grim set to his features shocking. "I don't want to be your friend. Sweetheart."

He added on the last to be cruel. She knew that by the sneer on his face as he hurried forward to join his team.

Jaycie wasn't sure what drove her but she put on a burst of speed and cut Kjar off. She grabbed his arm. His bicep went taut under her grip. He spun around and glared down at her, silver eyes hard.

His jaw set, a muscle ticking at the side. "We will not do this here, Jaycie."

Confusion set in. It was the only rational excuse to explain her behavior later. "What's with you?"

Instead of an answer, he broke free of her hold and went to move away. She slid in front of him and dared him to go around again. His mouth firmed and his eyes darkened. He'd removed his helmet and his hair bulged, a thick section breaking free of the tie he'd used. The long white length whipped forward toward her. Kjar caught the end in his fist inches from her face.

She tipped her head back and waited, refusing to break his stare. Instead of explaining himself, he grabbed her shoulder with his free hand and pulled her in. Off balance, she fell into his chest. Her lips parted in shock and his mouth descended.

The kiss was wild, full of madness, heat and a surfeit of unspoken things. She closed her eyes and moaned at the touch of his lips on hers. Months faded away and it was if no time had passed.

Strands of Kjar's hair caressed her face, neck and twined around her arms. When she buried her fingers in the soft waves at the base of his neck, he shivered and brought her in closer. She rose on her toes, needing to remember what it felt like to be in his arms.

She'd missed him. Yes, it was her decision for them to part but that didn't take away from the loss of no longer having him in her life. Those moments *had* meant something to her no matter what he thought about her leaving.

Suddenly, Kjar ripped his mouth away from hers. "No. You can't have it both ways. I'm not doing this with you again, Jaycie. Come to me the way I want or not at all."

Stunned, she reluctantly dragged her hands from his nape, her nails scraping along the way. Passion flared in his gaze but he was resolute. She knew it by the way his lips pressed tight and he shifted his eyes to the side as he walked away.

He was right. She wanted one thing and he wanted another. Tears burned behind her lids. It was her childhood all over. The need to be enough, her desire to fit in with a family whose members achieved success effortlessly while she felt...less.

How did they manage love and having what they wanted without sacrificing a part of who they were?

This was why it couldn't work between her and Kjar. He'd want everything. She knew that without a doubt and there would be nothing left for her dreams.

Sighing, she hopped into the striker and gestured Grier to get in the back.

She wanted the impossible.

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As he forced himself to turn away from Jaycie, Kjar faced his teammates staring with varying expressions. Hahn was dumbfounded, Dorian stoic and Rook blatantly in shock.

In terms of mistakes, Kjar knew he'd made a big one letting Jaycie kiss him. If they talked, Kyele would discover

the secret she'd asked him to keep and all their effort would be ruined.

Jaycie didn't want her papan involved in her relationships and while it was hard, hiding his feelings for her initially, he'd understood her reasoning. He did *not* want to be on the bad side of his Unit Leader.

Her team on the other hand didn't seem to notice anything amiss. Or maybe they were used to seeing her kiss strangers. The thought disturbed him on several levels. He didn't want another to have a claim on his one.

"Do I want to know?" Hahn asked when he neared.

Kjar snorted. The shuttle hovered and four black cords fell out. Rook eyed him and asked, "Everything good?"

He could only nod. "I'm fine."

As close to it as he could be for now.

Thankfully, Rook accepted his answer. Each of them clipped the cords to their harness and the winch slowly drew them up. Kjar glimpsed Jaycie climbing into the cockpit with her injured teammate. Their gazes met and held. Her gold eyes gleamed and he had to force himself to turn away as he leaped inside the open door of the shuttle.

Once they were all seated and harnessed, Hahn asked him, "You do know who her papan is, right?"

Dorian groaned and leaned his head against the wall behind him. "Don't start, Hahn."

"Am I really the only one concerned about Kjar's imminent death?" Hahn appeared appalled at the idea.

The corner of Rook's lips curved up. Their Team Leader obviously found humor in this as well. Shooting each of them a glare, Kar said, "It's not what you think."

"It's never what anyone thinks!" Hahn shook his head as if disappointed.

In a more serious tone, Rook said, "We'll give our report to Kyele directly when we land. I doubt he was aware his

daughter's team was the one we were sent to rescue.”

The rest of the trip back was made in silence, taking the time to decompress from the mission. When they gave their debrief, Kyele listened intently, not betraying by a flicker in his gaze what his thoughts were about his daughter's mission intersecting theirs.

After Rook finished speaking, Kyele turned to the rest of them. “Is there anything else to add?”

Kjar glanced at Hahn. He wasn't worried about Dorian. It was Hahn who had an irrepressible ability to create havoc. His teammate met his gaze and kept silent though his eyes glittered with humor.

“Alright then, Seraphina was able to gather more intel on Varu.”

At that moment, Rook's mate entered the room and closed the door behind her. With short black curls framing her face and bright blue eyes, she came across as an innocent. A far cry from the accomplished assassin Kjar knew her to be, yet a fitting match for the gruff half-Argoran who'd made her his mate.

She also seemed to have settled into this look, not bothering to change her appearance in the last few days.

Seraphina smiled at all of them. “I've already sent what I found to Damiiian and he's moving on it. As we know, Varu has launched these attacks to draw Torkel out. I mentioned my idea to Kyele and he has talked to the Jutak Commander who has agreed to bait the hook per se.”

This was interesting. Kjar leaned forward in his seat. “What exactly would bait entail?”

He could tell by the expressions on his team's faces, they had the same question. Seraphina grinned. “Torkel is going to make plans to travel off world. The hope is that word spreads and reaches Varu. We don't think he'll be able to ignore the chance to go after Torkel directly at that point.”

It was risky unless... “Will Alonson really leave Enotia or is that part of the trap?”

Kyele spoke up. “He’ll leave. Everyone needs to see him departing to make this believable. That’s where Ghost Unit comes in. You’ll be traveling on the same ship undercover to guard him.”

“We think Varu will attempt to hijack the ship to get at Torkel or attack when he’s planet side at one of the two locations,” Seraphina added.

Still a dangerous undertaking. As a former Jutak Unit Leader, Torkel could defend himself if it came to it but on the off chance something happened to him, it would impact the entire branch of the elite military.

Alonson wasn’t just the Jutak Commander. He was a representation of what they stood for and his long standing career made him the goal every Jutak trainee strove for. Kjar should know because he’d been one of those students.

“How confident are we that Varu will take the bait?” Kjar asked.

Kyele’s smile was grim as he activated the holo at the center of their conference table. “Very. These are some of the transmissions he sent to Nikol Wulven.”

Kjar scanned the threatening stream of messages, each one more explicit with detailed graphic violence than the last. They couldn’t let Varu get anywhere near Torkel. Varu didn’t just demonstrate signs of being hot tempered, he was unhinged.

Perhaps this could work but they couldn’t afford a single misstep.

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As soon as the team left, Kyele called Joni. Fear latched like a vise to his chest. Without giving her time to speak, he asked, “Did you know?”

His Chosen sighed softly in his ears. “No, I didn’t know. Jaycie just commed me. She’s fine, but Kyele this is part of it. We knew something like this could happen. She’s a Jutak warrior.”

“Which *you* encouraged,” he snarled, dragging a shaking hand through his hair.

Shaking. When the fuck did he start shaking about a mission? He’d masked his reaction in front of the Ghost Unit but Joni would see right through him if he tried to pretend.

His daughter, his youngest, who’d followed him around jabbering nonstop as a baby had been within reach of Varu’s men and he hadn’t known. Hadn’t been there to save her. His heart stuttered out of rhythm and he had to lean a palm on the table before him to brace his weight.

“Of course I encouraged her to follow her dreams. I’m her mother. Also, she thinks her *papan* is the greatest thing ever so technically it’s *your* fault.”

He’d been prepared to launch into a tirade about why their daughter needed to switch career focus when her words penetrated. A flush worked its way over his cheeks. He’d never gotten use to Joni’s casual praise about him. Probably never would. “I need to talk to her.”

Reassure himself personally that his daughter was fine and alive. He’d lost his mother before he could walk or talk. Lost the man who’d fostered him the moment he reached maturity and never met his father until he’d become a parent himself. His family’s safety wasn’t just a habit for him, it was an imperative.

“Don’t upset her,” Joni warned.

His lips twitched. Protective *maman* through and through. “I’ll be home soon.”

Tone light, she said, “I love you.”

His very being swelled with the knowledge. She loved him. *Him*. A soldier no one had wanted and deemed a risk to dangerous to take a chance on. Despite what official records claimed, his greatest achievement in life wasn’t being a Jutak warrior. It was earning a place in this wonderful woman’s heart. “I love you always.”

Ending the comm, he entered Jaycie’s code. She answered in a sing-song tone, “I’m fine, *papan*. I’m not quitting the



Jutaks, papan. I love you, papan.”

Reluctantly, he found himself grinning and that sharp vise in his chest eased its deadly grip. “I heard the team report. Tell me everything they left out.”

He knew his men. They would have curated the events in the retelling. Not out of fear of him but fear *for* him.

As he listened to his daughter speak, he could hear the pride and sense of calm in her voice. She wasn't upset or scared about being trapped among a known threat. She'd reacted as an elite soldier should in that situation.

Before ending the comm, he said, “I'm very proud of you. And I love you always.”

“Thank you, papan. Love you too.”

When he ended the comm, he closed his eyes and breathed out deeply. Now if only he could be assured of his son's health and happiness so easily. Thinking of his first born, Kyele shot off a quick message to Viktor. They needed to talk.



# SEVENTEEN

A week went by and Jaycie couldn't get Kjar off of her mind as she sat cross legged on her bed. Seeing him had twisted her heart more than she'd expected.

The cold way he'd looked through her hurt in a way she couldn't describe. To make matters worse, the words he'd spoken as they parted had been harsh.

*"I don't want to be your friend."*

She heard it over and over again in her head like a punch to the chest, leaving her short of breath. He was right to push her away. It wasn't fair of her to think she could pretend nothing had changed between them.

It was clear he'd moved on and distanced himself from what they'd shared. Her breath shuddered and she clenched the comm in her hand. She still wanted to talk to him. Needed to. Their kiss had been explosive and brought back all the feelings she'd suppressed. She couldn't shake the memory.

Her mind warned her to stay away, to leave things as they were. But she couldn't. It wasn't about the sex sharing. She could get that from anyone. It was his presence. Being around Kjar was like being surrounded by a wall of strength. His arms always held her tight, his kisses always that much deeper.

He made her feel stronger with his actions and his words. Sometimes she almost thought he had more faith in her than she did. There had never been a moment's doubt in his mind she would become a Jutak warrior. The unwavering support had meant so much when she'd wavered.

Another shudder shook her frame. Giving in to the urge, she employed her untraceable security program by habit and entered his comm code. It buzzed several times. After a few minutes, she bit her lip. He wasn't going to answer. Her throat clogged with a sob and she forced it back.

Ghost Unit wasn't out to her knowledge. She'd spoken to her maman earlier and her papan was home. He'd never leave

base if the team was on a mission.

Which meant Kjar was ignoring her. The pain of it lashed at her senses. What had she thought would happen?

“Yes?”

His deep voice suddenly cut through her morose thoughts. Her heart skipped a beat and she pushed up in bed, shoving at the loose hair falling about her face. “Hey.”

“What do you want, Jaycie?” he asked in a neutral tone.

It hurt. Hearing the lack of warmth and care she’d come to crave ripped a hole in her chest. Now or never. She took a deep breath and exhaled softly. “I miss you. I know that’s not what you want to hear. I know you want me to be your one but \_\_\_”

“I don’t want you to be my one, you *are* my one,” he cut in.

Pressing a hand to her forehead, she said, “Right. Um, but you know I can’t...I can’t be that for you.”

She heard his soft sigh across the line as he said in a weary voice, “Then why are you reaching out to me?”

A lump formed in her throat and she had to try twice to get the words out. “Because I miss what we had. I miss *you*. I feel alone. I have everything I’ve dreamed of but I don’t have you. My friend.”

She couldn’t finish the rest of what she had to say because a single tear trickled down her cheek and she was afraid she’d start sobbing from the ache in her heart.

He held his silence for a moment before asking. “What do you want me to do with that, Jaycie? We’re at cross purposes.”

Her heart caved at his indictment. The pain was undeniable. She’d never felt so miserable in her life. “C-can’t we go back to how things were? Without it being more than two people who care about one another coming together?”

The moment she asked she knew it was the wrong thing to say. Whether she agreed or not, she understood how serious a

commitment from their one was to Volvians.

Kjar muttered several curses under his breath and the tears fell from her eyes faster. She muted her end of the comm so he wouldn't hear her pain as she muffled a sob.

“It's been three months. Did something happen to bring this about?”

His tone wasn't accusatory. It was the lack that hit like the blunt edge of a weapon to the temple. He was done with her. It was time to accept it fully.

Curling onto her side and rocking in a ball of misery, she stared blindly at the wall in front of her with the comm clutched in her hand. She was openly crying now and couldn't speak.

She shouldn't have given in to the need to hear his voice.

“Jaycie?”

More tears ran down her face to soak her pillow. She didn't bother wiping them away.

“Jaycie?”

She should end the comm. It was time to let her uncontrollable need for him go once and for all. The thought sucked the air from her chest and she sobbed as if her heart was breaking.

And maybe it was. There would never be another like Kjar in her life.

“Jaycie? Sweetheart, talk to me. I know you're still there but I can't hear you and it's worrying me.”

Hearing him call her sweetheart once more made everything worse.

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Kjar's initial reaction to Jaycie's comm was anger. He couldn't believe she'd called to offer him friendship. As if what he wanted to give her was worthless. His hair refused to settle from the moment he heard her voice and streamed about his face and bed in flowing waves.

When she said she missed him, missed what they'd shared, he'd thought for a brief moment something had changed. Instead, she wanted to go back to the way it had been. The two of them sneaking around, hiding their relationship.

And damn him for considering it.

“Jaycie?”

She'd gone silent.

“Jaycie?”

He sat up in bed and grabbed a wildly swinging braid from in front of his face. “Jaycie? Sweetheart, talk to me. I know you're still there but I can't hear you and its worrying me.”

More than worrying. She was strong willed and the only reason she'd go silent was to hide her emotions. Hiding emotions for Jaycie meant crying. She rarely did that. His gut clenched. To know she hurt as much as he did wasn't what he wanted. He missed her with every fiber of his being. He'd fooled himself thinking he could ignore this.

And for what? The separation was too painful. Too pointless when he could have her back in his arms, in his bed. Even if it was only temporary until his demise. All he had to do was compromise on the thing Volvians considered sacred.

“I agree,” he said softly. “Things can be like they were before.”

It wouldn't stop his decline. His hair would continue to shed unless she fully accepted his claim but for the time he had remaining, he wanted to spend it with her. In anyway possible.

“Don't cry anymore.”

“How do you know I'm crying?” The question was accompanied by a soft snuffle as she returned to the comm.

Hearing her voice eased the rising panic inside of him. Exhaling in relief, he settled back on his bed. “You're the strongest woman I know but hard on yourself.”

A hiccough of breath, then she muttered, “That’s not true at all.”

It would do no good to argue. For all her confidence, Jaycie didn’t see herself the way he did, so he changed the topic and redirected it to something she couldn’t refute. “You’ve done well for yourself, Team Leader.”

She let out a watery chuckle. “Did I finally manage to impress you?”

“You’ve always impressed me.” It was the truth. From the moment they’d met, he’d recognized her strength. Inner and outer.

“So, um...how have you been?”

How much to say, how much to reveal? He thought long and hard and decided it didn’t matter. Opening his heart again to Jaycie wouldn’t change the inevitable for him. There was no reason to hold back. “Better now. I missed you too.”

Her breath caught and he allowed himself a small smile. It still amazed him how unaware she was of her appeal. He knew a little of her history. Her papan, obviously. Her maman from Earth was rumored to be as tough as her Chosen and fierce in regard to her children.

Not to mention Jaycie had grown up living with Alonson’s Unit members and their family in a huge compound. It was an eclectic upbringing, especially on Enotia. She’d been surrounded by love and support which made her insecurities all the more surprising to him.

“I *am* sorry, Kjar,” she whispered.

His hair whipped about and he shoved the strands away from his face. There was no way he could listen to her list the reasons for her rejection of him again and survive this comm. “Where are you now? On or off world?”

With the threat of Varu looming, the Alliance was scrambling military forces from several worlds. The Jutaks would be a part of that measure.

Then there was Alonson. The Jutak Commander would be leaving soon to set the bait and hopefully draw Varu out. Ghost Unit would be leaving to accompany him.

“I’m planet side. We don’t have a call out for several days,” she said.

Kjar closed his eyes and focused on the sound of her voice. “Tell me more. Is being a Jutak warrior what you thought? How did you make Team Leader so fast?”

Three months was a rapid jump from soldier to lead status. Six years ago, he’d been a contender for the Team Lead role with Ghost Unit but admitted Rook made the better choice. He’d never tell the other man that though.

“You really want to know?” she asked and he could hear the excitement lacing her tone.

A grin curled his lips. “I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t, Team Leader Bastien.”

“Stop!”

She laughed as she said it and Kjar’s grin widened. “Tell me everything.”

He listened as she discussed her selection to the team she referenced as Raptor Squad. It was an air assault unit. Remembering his own plans from the Jutak Academy seemed so far away he could hear her speak on her experience without any envy.

He wished nothing but the best for her.

When she started to discuss the members of her team, he stiffened. He knew Justice and Toren were friends she’d grown up with and she considered the two men family. It was the dip in her voice when she said the name Grier that clued him in.

The Chamele was the one who’d been injured and part of the reason Ghost Unit had been called to get her team out. He’d grasped that much in the mission overview with Kyele.

“Why don’t you like him?” he cut in.



Her ramblings tapered off and he sensed her confusion.  
“What are you talking about?”

“Grier. You have an issue with him.” Kjar didn’t doubt for a second that he was right. His free hand clenched into a fist. If the other Jutak warrior hurt her in some way...

“I don’t necessarily have an issue with him. Grier is Grier. At the Academy, he made a nuisance of himself but being on the same team isn’t as bad as I thought when I first got the assignment.”

Truth. He could hear it in her tone. Setting his comm in front of him, he folded his hands behind his head to listen as she picked back up where she left off, going over her time as an elite soldier.

He was drifting in a relaxed state, her voice lulling him to sleep when she suddenly sighed. Finishing a funny story about her teammate, Darik, she said, “I guess I should let you go.”

He glanced to the side and checked the time. “It’s late. Will you be able to sleep?”

She laughed, the sound rolling over him in a familiar wave. “You know me too well.”

It hadn’t been hard to piece together her comms and visits always occurred late into the night. He’d assumed she didn’t sleep well and when he asked, she’d confessed to stress giving her trouble during the night. Jaycie really did put too much pressure on herself. Perhaps he’d added to that as well with his demand to be his one.

“Is that a yes or no?” he pressed. He didn’t like the idea of her going out on her next mission with insufficient rest.

“Would you mind...if I came by for a bit?”

He stilled, no longer moments away from sleep. His pulse sped up. “Now?”

“Yes. I can take a hover car and be there shortly. You’d have to let me in. My brother is busy.”

His heart leaped in his chest. “Of course.”



# EIGHTEEN

Kjar met Jaycie at the front door and ushered her in. They were quiet as they made their way to his room on the upper floor. As soon as he closed the door behind him, she felt a rush of adrenaline. He hadn't bothered to dress, wearing a pair of fitted shorts and no shirt.

His bare chest flexed as her gaze landed on his muscled abs and traveled lower. She raised her gaze only to find him watching her with those calm silver eyes.

Twisting her fingers together, she tossed a bright smile his way and rocked on her hips. "Hey again."

The corner of his lips twitched as he moved toward the open door down the hall. "Come on."

Her shoulders slumped in relief and she followed him into his bedroom. The covers were pulled back on the left where he'd probably been asleep when she combed. Her gaze flew around the space and everything was as she'd remembered.

Simple, colorless and without fanfare but comfortable.

Kjar sat on the edge of the bed and waved her to the other side. She hurried to the right and climbed in. He swung his legs up and pulled the covers over them.

Once she was settled, he curled into her and wrapped his arms around her waist. She closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. Kjar's scent immediately flooded her nasal passages and the irritating buzz that had followed her for months eased.

She drew in another breath and exhaled, allowing her weight to settle against him. Her arms bent in front of her and she planted her palms firmly on Kjar's chest. His heart thumped in a steady rhythm beneath them.

Nuzzling closer, his scent surrounded her as his hand glided up and down her back. The repeated motion drained the last of her frazzled emotions away as nothing else could.

This was why she'd come. Only with him did she feel this sense of peace. No demands, no expectations, no pressure. The three things that tended to run her life.

She should say something, share what she felt. Her lips parted to speak but Kjar tightened his hold and beat her to it. "Shhh. Sleep."

Going straight to bed had always been hard for her. Worrying thoughts and anxiety tended to keep her tense but in Kjar's arms she was able to let go. No need to be anything more than who she was. She nestled her head on the curve of his shoulder.

Being around him made her feel completely safe and this time proved no different. Before she knew it, her eyes fluttered and slowly closed. Every few seconds she jerked, remembered where she was and calmed.

"It's alright," he murmured in her ear. "I'm right here."

To reinforce his statement, thick waves of his hair locked around her arms, shoulders and hips until she was surrounded in a cocoon of white. It was as if a puzzle piece had been missing and now fit perfectly. Kjar. This time when she drifted next, sleep held her under.

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Kjar buried his face in the top of Jaycie's hair. He couldn't believe he had her back in his arms. His hair tightened around her and he tugged on the section looped around her shoulders in consternation. The strands eased their potentially deadly clutch but didn't completely move away.

Which was fine. His hair needed her touch as much as he did. The moment he felt her lose herself fully to sleep, the tension riding him faded away. He kissed the top of her head and she hummed under her breath.

A sad smile broke free. Having her here with him again was everything he wanted and...torture. But there was no way he could have refused her. So, he held her, running his hands over the indentation of her spine through her shirt until the tightness present eased.

To have fallen to sleep as quickly as she had implied an exhaustion he'd only witnessed in her one time before when they'd first started their relationship. She'd been worried about her brother but wouldn't tell him the specifics.

Throughout the night, she'd muttered, twitched and jerked in his arms until he'd slid his hands beneath her underwear and stroked her to climax. Breath had sighed through her parted lips and she'd gone limp in his arms, knocked out.

The method worked a few more times after that until gradually she'd come to him when she couldn't sleep and he'd hold her like this. Those quiet moments they'd shared had meant far more to him than the sex sharing. Her unexpected laughter and sense of humor were often a balm to his darker thoughts and frustrations.

Until he'd fully realized who she was to him, he'd been content with the way they carried themselves. There had been irritation at meeting in secret but he'd understood. It had been enough at the time.

He shook his head, dispelling the past. None of that mattered any more. He stroked a hand down her back again, reveling in the freedom of the contact. Another hum of contentment came from her and he closed his eyes to murmur against her forehead. "I love you so much, sweetheart."

She didn't hear him nor did he expect her to but it gave him pleasure to say the words.

Wanting to enjoy every moment they had remaining, he stayed up until the sun of Enotia crested the horizon and thin strips slashed through his window. With regret that their time was at an end, he nudged Jaycie carefully and forcibly removed his hair from around her.

Reluctantly the length slivered away, stroking every inch of her body bared by the short sleeve shirt and exercise shorts she wore. Her moan was like sharp spikes of pain in his heart, leaving rips behind.

"Mmm. This is a good dream. I don't want to wake," she whispered huskily with her eyes still closed.

He smoothed the hair back from her face. “No dream. You have to leave before your papan arrives for the day. He gets here early.”

She groaned and rolled onto her back. Her arms flopped wide, her breasts thrust up against the material of her shirt. Her eyes sprung open as she pursed her lips. “I know. Maman complains about it.”

Splayed in his bed as she was, Kjar couldn’t resist. He leaned over and kissed her. She smiled against his mouth, then her lips parted and her tongue teased along his. Her arms came up and wrapped around his shoulders, yanking him down.

He braced his arms at the side of her head to control his descent and deepened the kiss. His cock hardened and he muffled a groan as Jaycie undulated beneath him.

Pure ecstasy. Her fingers delved into his hair and her nails raked against his scalp. The resounding effect was akin to being struck by lightning. His hair flared out and he broke the kiss to arch in pleasure. “Fuck!”

Jaycie laughed and teased him more by running her fingers through the length from root to tip. He couldn’t ever remember her touching his hair this freely. Even when he’d left it out from the braids and ties she’d been hesitant and restrained.

“I’ve wanted to do this for so long,” she said.

“Why didn’t you?” he asked as he rocked against her.

She gasped and her lashes fluttered. A becoming red flush spread over her cheeks and Kjar couldn’t resist. He reached up to cup her face and brushed his thumb over the slight crease from his shoulder. She shifted and bared her teeth.

He jerked his hand back with a laugh and rolled away from her. Jaycie dove forward and tackled him. Caught off guard, he fell backward and grabbed her at the waist to keep her momentum from sending her tumbling over the edge of the bed.

White streams of his hair latched onto her forearms. Strands stroked her shoulders, the ends caressing her

collarbone and throat. Hovering over him, she smirked. “Good catch.”

He rolled his eyes and lowered his hands, squeezing the round globes of her plump ass. Staring into her amber gold eyes, he realized she hadn’t answered his question. Was there more he was missing?

Something told him it might be why she didn’t want to be his one. He locked his hands on her upper thighs to hold her in place. “Jaycie—”

A comm buzzed. Her head jerked up as she asked, “Mine or yours?”

He listened. When it buzzed again, he stiffened. “Mine.”

Jaycie made to move from her straddle on his lap, but he squeezed her legs, wanting her to stay. She settled back down and he stretched his free hand beyond him to grab at the device on the small stand at his bedside. His fingers hit the edge and missed.

“I got it.” Jaycie leaned forward, her breasts pressing into his face as she stretched. He groaned and thrust up uncontrollably. She straightened and held out his comm in her hand with a wicked glint in her eyes. “Here you go.”

He glared and accepted it. There would be pay back for that. “Rulayin.”

“Seraphina may have found a hint on where Varu has been hiding. Kyele is coordinating with Damiiian. If confirmed, one of those locations will be included in Torkel’s visits.”

It was Rook.

“Do I need to come down now?”

He kept his gaze on Jaycie as he asked, absently caressing her hip. She watched him closely, the pulse at her throat thumping against the hair lightly coiled around her neck. There was no sign she appeared disturbed or bothered by the way his hair streamed around her body.

“No. Kyele wants us to hold off on this morning’s meeting. He’s going to speak with Torkel and update him. If this doesn’t

play out, we move forward with the original plan to leave in three days time.”

“Affirmative.”

Kjar ended the comm and dropped it on the bed next to him. Jaycie arched a reddish brown brow. “No meeting this morning?”

“No.”

“Hmmm. What should you do with all this free time?”

Growling, he flipped her over until he was on top. “I know exactly what I want to do.”





# NINETEEN

Jaycie relaxed into the bedding as Kjar settled between her thighs. He tugged at her shirt, his eyes glazed with a familiar hungry look. Running her tongue over her bottom lip in enticement, she whipped her shirt over her head. His gaze darkened as he took in her bared breasts and she laughed.

There had been no time to do anything more than grab a shirt and bottoms. She wasn't wearing any undergarments. The corner of his lips twitched when he eventually lifted his eyes. "I'll never tire of looking at you."

He cupped the full weight of her breasts in his hands and lightly squeezed. She gasped. The smug grin on his face had her pulling at the tie on his shorts. He moved from her to pull them off and surged back over her.

She shivered from the contact. His bare chest rubbed her hard tipped nipples, causing her to release a breathy moan. "Ohhh, Kjar."

"I love hearing you say my name," he murmured, kissing her chin, her cheek then lastly landing on her lips.

Her mouth parted and she wrapped her arms around his neck. The kiss was soft, hard, and deep. It was light, dark and dangerous. It was all of those things in the warm press of Kjar's lips to hers.

The burn of passion flared and she rocked against him. His cock brushed between her warm center and her lids fluttered. When he eased back, he said, "Jaycie."

Just her name in a soft husk. Closing her eyes, she buried her face in his neck and inhaled. The scent of Kjar. A light tinge of manly sweat mixed with hints of the unique cleanser he used that reminded her of hot nights and safety.

He slid his arms beneath her shoulders and crushed her to his chest. "My Jaycie."

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It was bliss. The next two nights Jaycie spent with Kjar were full of hot kisses, passionate embraces and erotic whispers. The sex sharing was great and often left her beyond drained. She was getting the best sleep lying next to him.

But it was more than being physical with Kjar that made these last few days bliss. Their time together filled the dark hole inside of her that had been there since she was a little girl. The more she had of him, the more she wanted.

When she asked to come by, he never refused her and because she didn't want to let him go, she stayed until he woke her with the sunrise. On the third night, he said, "Ghost Unit leaves for a mission and I'm unsure how long I'll be gone."

Seated on his lap chest to chest, she massaged the knotted curvature of his shoulders beneath the nano armor he wore. "I knew something was going on soon. My papan has been working late."

Thus delaying her arrival to the base for her visits to Kjar. She had to wait for her papan to go home before she'd risk coming here. It wasn't easy getting anything past him.

Kjar nodded. "I didn't want you to accidentally do one of your surprise visits if you didn't hear from me."

She snorted. That had never happened. She always made sure he was here before coming. "I've looked up Volvians you know."

He didn't appear surprised but his brows arched as he made a little sound. "Mmhm."

She trailed a finger down the column of his throat. "You don't have silver skin. Volvians have silver skin and long white hair. You don't."

There was so much about him she didn't know. Things she'd dared not ask before in case she got too close. Yet none of that seemed to matter any more. Here she was seated on his lap.

Kjar's lips twitched. "Good research."

It wasn't. What she knew was minimum at best.

He stroked her hips as he continued. “My mother’s to blame. She wasn’t Volvian. When she and my father met, he said the *knowing* hit like a blast of lightning.”

“Your mother?” He rarely brought up anything about his family. In fact, this was the first time he’d mentioned his parents.

His hands tightened on her waist. “Selia N’de met Tieran Rulayin when he was on a trip off world.”

“I thought your people don’t leave home.” He arched a brow and she flushed. “It was in the reading. What little I could find.”

He smirked. “You were interested enough to search, huh?”

“Don’t be smug,” she chided. “Answer the question.”

He chuckled her under the chin. “Not often. Something happens to drive us away or the young looking for more. Though we’re warned away from that. Too many want to study our hair and keep us as a novelty.”

She’d learned that in her classes at the Academy. The course hadn’t been mandated but with her experience growing up among a mix of races she’d taken the cultural awareness class to increase her knowledge beyond Enotia. Still, there wasn’t a lot to cover on Volvians.

There was a mating heat in the females who had claws, fangs and an insatiable appetite for sex sharing. Beyond that, the little she did discover from her research only mentioned basic facts. “You left. What drove you away? Or were you one of the young adventure seekers?”

Kjar pressed his forehead to hers. From her position, chest to chest, she had a perfect view of his expression—a mix of sadness and muted affection. “My mother died.”

Stunned, she wrapped her arms around him and squeezed. “I’m so sorry, Kjar. I didn’t know”

“It...was hard on my father and me. Not long after, he died in a shuttle crash. Pilot error. It’s why I wanted to be in the air assault squad at the Jutak Academy.”

Shocked they had that in common, she reared back. “You fly?”

He met her gaze and pure arrogance stared back. “As my one, you really are the perfect match for me, Jaycie.”

Steering clear of the topic neither of them could agree on, she ran her hand over the smoothness of his jaw and asked another question on her mind. “Do you have to shave?”

He tipped his head to the side and contemplated her with a narrowed gaze. It was clear he wanted to pursue the *knowing* thing but he allowed her redirect. “Yes. Not often though. The hair on my face doesn’t grow as fast as the rest of my hair does.”

“Hmmm.” She continued to stroke along the angles of his face, fascinated by his heritage she’d never dared probe before, too afraid of growing close to him. None of that mattered in this moment. “Does it grow in white too?”

“Yes,” he answered with a smile. He kissed the crease between her brows, then attempted to smooth it out with his finger. She batted him away and he shifted his hand between her legs, cupping the heat of her. “Does this grow in red?”

She chuckled and shoved at him again but he resisted and pressed down. His thumb found her sensitive bud and stroked. As pleasure spiked, her head wobbled but she fought to remain focused. “No. For your information, I had it lasered years ago so it won’t be red because it will never grow.”

Tendrils of hair caressed her face before teasing along her collarbone. She’d gotten used to the random touches from his hair. Others may have viewed it as odd but she’d quickly become accustomed to it. Now that she allowed herself the luxury of stroking the strands, she didn’t understand why she’d held back.

The hand between her legs continued caressing, the other holding her tight at the hip. His broad fingers were firm and held her steady. The look in his eyes promised her anything she wanted. He’d grant her every wish physically and emotionally.

Desire bloomed. It was always like this when they were together. Sex sharing came easy but...they both had responsibilities. Meeting his gaze, she sighed and pushed up from his lap. His hand lingered at her hips. He pulled the other from between her thighs slowly.

Breath husky, she murmured, "I should leave so you can get ready."

After one last squeeze to her waist, he stood as well. She withheld a gasp at his imposing figure and her heart tumbled in her chest. Kjar was handsome. Not conventionally so but there was something about the image he projected. Strong, capable.

White hair streamed about his shoulders but he grasped the writhing mass and twisted it into a quick knot that came from years of practice. His fingers worked rapidly to braid the escaping strands around the front of his face and jammed pins in place to contain it.

Her gaze dropped and her breath caught at the sight of him in his nano armor. The black synth material hugged his body like a lover. The muscles in his thighs flexed as he leaned over to kiss her on her forehead. "Be safe while I'm gone."

This was their first time apart since they'd reconnected and she couldn't get her pulse to slow its rapid thump about this mission. It wasn't that she doubted his abilities. Kjar and the entire Ghost Unit were adept soldiers.

None of that stopped her worry something would happen on this particular trip to accompany her Seppi Torkel. Something really bad. She just couldn't put her finger on why she was disturbed by this assignment more than any other he'd gone on in the past.

"Are you alright?" he asked with a questioning frown.

Rocking back on her heels, she forced a smile to her face. "Fine. No worries here."

The lie tripped off her tongue because the last thing she wanted to do was send him off with her negative thoughts on his mind.

“See you whenever we get back?”

There was an estimate return date if Varu took the bait. They'd be gone for at least a week, giving the Marenian ample time to attack the ship they'd be traveling on or one of the locations Torkel planned to visit.

“Yes. If I'm not out. Otherwise, we'll coordinate our schedules.”

He nodded. When his comm buzzed, she knew their time was up. He'd set the alarm to give her enough time to leave without being seen. Viktor was on standby to take her back to the Jutak housing unit where Raptor Squad stayed.

Kjar brushed his thumb over her chin and her smile quivered. “Take care, Kjar.”

She commed her brother and Viktor appeared beside her in an instant. He spared a moment to nod at Kjar, looped his arm around her shoulders and the world swirled around her.

When her stomach settled, she was in her room back on base. Viktor tugged her hair, winked and vanished. In the quiet, she stared around her room and tried to tell herself everything would be fine.

Unfortunately, she didn't believe it and neither did her gut.





## TWENTY

Test runs were considered fun. Jaycie had done a few of them in simulation during her time at the Academy but this was her first real one as a Jutak warrior. Several pilots had recently reported an issue with their strikers and she'd gotten lucky as the designated one to work on the issue.

*"Flight lanes are clear, Raptor One. We are a go to initiate testing,"* her controller on the ground level said.

Flying in one of the flagged strikers, Jaycie double checked everything on her instrumental panel before responding. *"Copy that, Olk."*

Olk was one of the senior ground controllers she'd worked with on and off. He was steady and diligent about his work, one of the best in the department. She was glad he'd been assigned and not one of the newer controllers since this was going to be a long day.

*"Let's run through the complaints one by one,"* Olk suggested.

*"Affirmative."*

There was a slight pause and then, *"Start with response time, Raptor One."*

*"Copy that."* She shifted the controller and angled her flight pattern to the right. The striker's reaction was delayed.

Olk's voice came over the comms. *"Tell me what you're feeling, Raptor One."*

*"It's a bit sluggish."*

*"Copy. Move to manual controls."*

She hit the switch to take over and there was barely a waver. A thrill raced over her. Olk ran through a few sequences for her to try and the striker adjusted each time.

*"No lag, no drag,"* she reported.

*“Must be computer based and not mechanical,”* he muttered under his breath.

That was her summation as well. If it proved a simple fix, the tech team could go in and upload an easy patch.

*“Alright, Raptor One, moving on to the next issue. Kick up the speed and see what happens.”*

*“Affirmative.”* Keeping her eyes on the gauges, she depressed the acceleration bar. When she reached 15 dcgs, the striker shot across the sky.

Her head slammed back in her seat and adrenaline surged through her veins. The jet tore across the sky. Flying was an indescribable joy. No one could have told her how much she would adapt to being in the fleet instead of the ground troops like her papan.

*“Report, Raptor One.”*

She rattled off the readings and went through everything with him. Several hours later, they were on the last check item and she was heading back to base when a little rattle interrupted the recital of her report.

Frowning, she shifted the guide to the side and the striker turned easily. Another rattle beneath her seat, this one stronger than the last. She scanned the skies and didn't see anything.

Ruling out weather and other options, she finally contacted Olk. *“Raptor One to ground control, I think I have a problem.”*

*“Give me your readings, Raptor One.”*

She did and he had her try a few things to correct. The striker was now visibly shaking. Sweat broke out on her brows.

*“Bring her back in, Raptor One. We won't resolve whatever this is while you're in the air.”*

The transport station was only ten minutes out.  
*“Affirmative.”*

The striker dipped suddenly, losing altitude and her stomach dropped. *This is fine. This is fine.* She mentally recited the assurance even as she had to blink sweat out of her eyes. More lights turned red on the dashboard and a steady warning beep started.

“Fuck,” she muttered as she fought the controls, her only intent to get back to base and land.

*‘Crash imminent,’* the computer suddenly intoned.

“No kidding,” she muttered one of her maman’s favorite phrases.

Training for this scenario was a lot different than experiencing it. Following every step of protocol, she did what she could to keep the striker in the air.

*“Raptor One, we’re getting alarming readings from your striker. Please confirm,”* came a firm feminine voice.

Jaycie immediately recognized the head of ground control. She’d crossed paths with Bhamini a few times. The Enotian woman was sharp, intelligent and not opposed to voicing her opinion.

*“Multiple failures noted, ground control.”*

*“Will you be able to bring her in safely, Raptor One?”* Bhamini asked, her voice calm in the face of Jaycie’s rising terror.

*“I’m still six minutes out,”* Jaycie reported.

The base was directly ahead through the view screen. The retractable ceiling was open and she could see the assigned pad for her. Snorting, she measured the distance, her speed and the likelihood of threading the striker through without major injuries to those inside and other strikers.

*“Four minutes,”* she updated as the striker began to wobble and vibrate harder.

*“We have you onscreen, Raptor One. The outside runway has been cleared for your emergency landing.”*

Relief almost choked the breath from her. They were doing what they could to mitigate disaster as well. She adjusted her course for the wide expanse behind the Jutak building.

*“Affirmative grou—”*

The screen on her panel went dark and the striker dropped. Heart in her throat, Jaycie hit the back up system reboot button. Nothing. She tapped the dash controls but the striker continued its rapid descent.

*“I’ve lost power, ground control. I repeat, I’ve lost all power.”*

Holding the steering guide in one hand, she flipped the switches to glide. At the same time, she kept ground control on a continuous feed of what she was doing and what was happening in the cockpit.

She’d never been in a crash before but if she had to bail, she would. The green light on her force field chute reminded her that at least it still worked.

*“You’re coming in fast and hot, Raptor One. We are prepared for you,”* Bhamini assured.

Stars, how did the woman remain so calm?

Panting breaths fogged Jaycie’s face shield. She shoved it up to drag in a deep breath. Her mind flashed through every lesson she’d had at the Academy. She knew what to do. She could do this.

Below, a foam barrier had been sprayed down. If she could get the jet there, the foam would minimize damage to the expensive military equipment and prevent Jaycie from sustaining life threatening injuries.

In theory. It had worked with others but there was also the rare case where the aircraft exploded on impact with the ground or a fire ignited and the foam doused the flames *after* the pilot burned inside.

The striker jolted and power returned in a flash. Breathing rapidly, she held tight to the control guide and aimed the jet toward the largest concentration of fluffy white stuff.

*Lower. Lower.* The base was within mere kilometers. She was going to make it. Managing the jet in a controlled descent, she released a soft exhale.

A boom sounded on her right. She checked the indicator panels. Yellow warning lights. She jerked her head to the side. A thin crack appeared on the frame.

*“Raptor One, you are coming in too fast. Can you slow down?”*

There was no time to answer. The crack widened before her eyes until a jagged section tore away from the front curvature of the wing. In an instant, the striker spun out of control. Alarms blared. Lights flashed all over the screen.

The world around her rolled in a rapid fire blur. She jerked in her seat, her head hitting the side. Everything was upside down then right side up. Momentum sent her forward and she braced a hand on the dash to keep from smashing her face.

*“Going down, going down,”* she said as she hit the canopy release. *“Pilot ejecting.”*

Heart pounding, she unlatched the safety harness and activated the force field chute she wore. The moment she cleared the jet, her chute inflated, surrounding her in a clear bubble.

Below her the striker spiraled toward the ground, hit the foam overlay and skidded along the paved ground. It bounced twice before tilting and slamming on its side where the damaged wing ripped completely free.

Emergency crews in hover cars roared onto the grounds. Jaycie drifted slowly down and landed softly near the edge of the confusion. A group of uniformed Jutak warriors raced toward her. Grier, Justice, Toren and Darik. Behind them a full medic crew rushed forward.

Grimacing, she brushed off the scrapes to her hands and deflated the chute. Her nano suit was undamaged and she didn't seem to be injured.

*“Jaycie, are you alright?”* Toren asked when he reached her, his gaze running over her figure.

Justice joined them and gripped the back of her neck, tugging her in for a brisk squeeze. At her grunt, he eased back and stared into her eyes. “Fuck, Jaycie! We thought you’d crash.”

“Thankfully, you bailed in time,” Darik added, staring at her in concern.

Her hands shook and adrenaline continued to pour into her system. Medics surrounded her, one running a scanner over her and the other rattling off a stream of questions she could barely make sense of.

“I’m fine,” she assured the growing crowd around her. Her smile of reassurance quivered and fell.

A hover stretcher was brought out and despite her protests, Toren forced her to lay down. “Get checked out, Bastien. No argument.”

Grier came over and smirked. He reached down and patted her shoulder. “Way to show everybody up, Team Leader. You almost brought her in if the wing hadn’t gave way.”

Jaycie snorted. The snort turned into a laugh and she heard the deep bass rumble of her team joining in. The medics stared. They didn’t understand. It wasn’t laughter from humor but the release of tension and relief. Overwhelming relief because they knew in their line of work sometimes things didn’t always end well

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“Kjar and I will stay on the Jutak Commander. Dorian and Hahn will safeguard in the room next door.”

Rook’s instructions received all around nods from them. The air craft they were traveling on would stop at two locations. Torkel would tour the small colonies on each one, giving Varu ample opportunity to make a move.

If the Marenian planned to launch an attack, these planned visits would lead him into believing he had a chance. There were multiple broadcasts announcing Torkel’s travel itinerary.

“Is the Commander wearing a tracker?” Kjar asked.

Grunting, Rook said, “Yes. We have a tracker in his belt but Kyele also convinced him to get tracker ink like Ghost Unit. It’s barely noticeable on his left shoulder. Seraphina’s confirmed its registering.”

Seraphina stayed behind on Enotia with Kyele to monitor the situation. She’d been unable to confirm Varu’s location despite the earlier intel.

“Then we’re a go,” Hahn announced with a clap of his hands.

Rook’s mouth pinched tight and his gaze narrowed as he stood. “We should be landing shortly. Let’s go over everything with Alonson one more time. There is no room for error on this.”

“Agreed.” Kjar uncrossed his arms and moved toward the door.

On his heels, Rook followed. They left the suite of rooms they’d been assigned and knocked on the door to the right. Alonson opened it immediately and waved them in. “Right on time.”

Inside, Damiiian leaned against the wall, arms folded over his massive chest. A holo screen on a circular table revealed the leader of the Marenian world. Nikol’s stern expression tipped Kjar off something was wrong.

Alonson closed the door and strode to the lounge chair. He dropped down on a sigh and gestured at the other seating. “Sit.”

Kjar exchanged a look with Rook and they sat. Rook leaned forward and asked, “What happened?”

“Nikol received a notice today threatening his First Placement,” Torkel revealed.

First Placement was the Marenian equivalent to a Chosen. From the file, Kyele shared with the team, Darcy Wulven was also an Earth woman who’d participated in the planet’s now defunct Singles Program.

“Hasn’t he been making threats all along?” Kjar asked in confusion.

The Majad snarled, “He threatened *me*. He threatened *my rule*. He’s never threatened Darcy directly and now I want him to die painfully.

Varu had to be the biggest fool. Not many were willing to challenge a man as powerful and dangerous as Nikol.

“We stay on track. This is Varu trying to get you to behave in a rash manner.”

Rook’s words went over Nikol’s head. He glared from the holo and snapped, “I can be on a ship and meet at the first stop you have planned.”

“No!” Torkel interrupted. He shot a look at Nikol. “We agreed this was to draw you away from Marenia, making it easier to attack you. Right now Varu can’t touch you. He’ll come for me and Ghost Unit will be waiting.”

“I’ve spent my entire life protecting you and now you want me to stand by while you risk yourself?” Nikol asked in a menacing tone.

Torkel huffed, not showing the slightest sign of fear. “That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

Nikol’s gaze narrowed and silence filled the room as the two stared at one another. Kjar shifted awkwardly about in his seat. Rook glanced at him and arched a brow. Kjar shrugged. He wasn’t the least interested in jumping in between the two arguing.

“Fine,” Nikol snapped at last. “I want to be notified every step of the way on what’s going on.”

“Done,” Torkel agreed and shut down the holo communication. Frowning, he leaned back and met their gazes. “This can’t fail. My brother will burn down the stars if something happens to Darcy.”

“Is she being protected?” Kjar asked. Maybe they needed to send a Jutak unit there to assist.



Damiian who'd remained silent up to now, pushed off from the wall. "A group of enforcers watch over the Majad at all times. Four have been assigned to his First Placement and children. I trained each of them personally and have complete trust in their abilities."

Rook nodded. "Good. That's good. We don't need a war erupting from this."

"There will be a war if we don't contain Varu," Torkel chimed in.

There had been a thought teasing at the back of Kjar's mind from the moment they'd discovered Varu. "What if this is an elaborate hoax? Do we even have official confirmation that he's related to Lothar?"

Torkel's expression pinched tight. "I'm not sure either way. My brother believes it's not true because his father claimed to never have sex shared with the Earth slaves he abducted.

*"But* it's clear Varu has Marenian heritage. The story Damiian discovered supports the potential is there for him to be related due to Lothar's presence at certain auction sites and the woman listed as his mother. We'd need a blood sample and tests to be certain and rule out any doubt."

"Regardless," Rook added, "Varu believes it to be true or he wouldn't claim to be an heir deserving of ruling Marenia."

Kjar exhaled roughly. They were either dealing with a mad man or Lothar's vengeful son. Both didn't bode well unless they could stop him before he caused any more destruction with his actions.

"Then we continue with the plan," Rook stated firmly.

Their gazes met and everyone nodded. Kjar swallowed down his feelings of foreboding.



## TWENTY-ONE

The last of Jaycie's friends and teammates said goodbye and took their leave from her room. She blew out a breath and slumped back against the uncomfortable bed. According to the medics, she needed to stay here for another day to confirm there were no issues from her emergency ejection.

Goosebumps peppered her arms remembering the test flight. She'd never been so scared in her life. Not when she was little and fell out of a tree trying to keep up with Shiloh and not when she'd torn one of the sheaths to her maman's knives her papan had bought her.

But in the air, when the power had gone out on the striker, she'd been terrified. Even now fear twisted like a painful knot in her belly.

The door opened with a squeak, drawing her attention. She glanced to her right and her heart leaped. "Maman! Papan!"

Her maman shot past her papan and flew across the room to Jaycie's side. She leaned over the bed and hugged Jaycie tight. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, maman."

Slower to approach but no less intense, her papan stopped on the other side of her bed and kissed her forehead. He kept his head pressed to hers and murmured, "I'm glad you're alright."

The door opened again and Viktor strode in, a worried frown creasing his brows. Her maman stepped aside to make room for him but kept one hand on Jaycie's shoulders.

Viktor stared down at her and her papan straightened to step back. "What happened, little shadow?"

Her chest tightened from the concern visible on her brother's face. All of them watched her closely, waiting for an answer. Her family was worried. It was clear to see, though they worked to mask it.

And honestly she was worried too. No, worry wasn't a strong enough word for the strange feeling bubbling inside of her.

Part of her wanted to breakdown crying and tell them how scared she'd been, how she'd thought she would die. That wasn't an option though. They'd never leave her alone if she whispered a moment of doubt.

Clearing her throat, she pushed up in the bed. Flashes of the crash tore at the calm she tried to present but she batted it down.

Another deep breath then she said, "I was doing test runs on issues with the striker. We logged a few diagnostics, resolved some of the simple problems. On the return back, the striker experienced power failure."

Her maman gasped and pressed her hand to her mouth. Viktor's eyes narrowed but it was her papan's expression she studied. His face remained neutral but his green gaze darkened.

It was rare to see her papan's fierce exterior crack. He was her idol and everything she strived to be as a Jutak warrior. For years she'd watched him prepare for missions, leave with the teams and come back victorious.

The few times she'd seem him break, it had always been in the presence of her maman. She'd open her arms and he'd rest his head on her shoulder and Jaycie could practically see whatever he was dealing with drain away.

If her papan could handle it, she could do no less. This wouldn't be the last time she faced danger in her role. Forcing a smile to her face, she reiterated, "I'm fine. There's no need for you all to crowd me. I'll be back on duty the moment the medics clear me."

Doubt flickered across her maman's face but she only said, "If you insist but comm at even the hint something changes."

Her maman kissed her again and stepped back. Next, her papan wrapped his arms around her and squeezed. "I love you, always."

The phrasing locked the breath in Jaycie's throat. She grasped his shirt front and held on. The scent of him brought back the essence of her childhood and the safety she'd always felt with him around.

Disappointing them felt like the ultimate failure. All the years she'd spent assuring them she was ready to be a Jutak warrior and she'd crashed a striker on a typical test run that was conducted routinely.

Tears burned her eyelids but she blinked them away before her papan pulled away and kept her smile in place.

Viktor was another matter altogether. Nothing got past him. Her brother sat on the side of her bed and reached for her hand. She barely stopped from flinching. He eyed her knowingly.

"We'll see you later, Jaycie," her maman called out as she and her papan headed to the door arm in arm and left.

The door closed with a quiet click and Viktor's voice was ice cold as he asked, "What happened?"

She shrugged and shifted back from his penetrating stare. "It's just like I explained."

Snorting, he plucked her on the forehead with his middle finger and thumb. "Ow!"

"I meant what happened up there." This time he tapped her head with the tip of his pointer finger.

She jerked away and smacked at his hand. "Stop! There's nothing wrong with my head, I didn't hit it on anything."

He sighed and shoved her over to stretch out next to her on the bed. She grudgingly made room and they lay shoulder to shoulder as they'd done when children. "If I thought I was going to crash and had to eject from a jet, my nerves would be shot. Talk to me honestly."

Her stomach twisted with that scary feeling again only it felt bigger. Clamping her teeth down on the sensation, she leaned back and said, "Nothing. I followed through on my

training and now I'm safe. Everything worked the way it was supposed to in an event like this.”

“Mmm.”

She swallowed and neither of them spoke or called out her words for the lies they were.

And that unnamed feeling in her midsection continued to grow.

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Kjar and Rook kept their gazes on Torkel from a distance as he arrived at the first location. Hahn tracked his presence from the ship and Dorian was perched on a roof with his laser, searching for any sign of Varu.

They maintained their vigilance throughout the meeting taking place. It wouldn't pay for Varu to note their presence and back off from any attempt to attack. A few hours later, they followed Torkel back to the ship.

Inside, Alonson slammed his fist on the wall as he strode rapidly down the hall to a meeting room. Ghost Unit filed in a single line behind him. Their comms were synced and Kyele rattled off, “This is only one stop. Don't get discouraged, Torkel. We'll get him. There's no way he'll be able to resist.”

They reached the room and Torkel shoved the door open before the automated sensors could activate. Following him inside, Kjar exchanged a grimace with Rook. They'd never seen the Jutak Commander lose control.

“You're right.” Torkel sighed and leaned a hip against the corner of the table, taking up space at the center of the room.

Dorian and Hahn came in and sat. Rook crossed his arms over his chest, watching Torkel. Too restless to settle, Kjar leaned against the wall by the door.

“How's Jaycie?” Torkel asked.

Kjar's head snapped up. What had happened to Jaycie?

Kyele's rough exhalation came over the ear comms. “She says she's fine. Joni and I went to see her at the medic center.

They're keeping her overnight but don't foresee any problems. She was lucky."

The rest of the meeting past in a blur. As soon as Rook dismissed the team, Kjar lurched through the door and headed straight for the room he'd been assigned. Before he reached it, a thumping noise drew his attention.

Torn between investigating the sound and finding out what happened to Jaycie, he hesitated. A muted cry decided for him and he stepped into the narrow hall and opened the door to a storage unit. Shocked, he stood there and stared. The dark-haired woman rose from her crouch and offered him a wave. "Hey."

He tried to place why she looked so familiar. Dark hair, brown eyes and medium height. Her curvy figure was clad in flimsy wide legged yellow pants and a thin white shirt which ruled out a member of the ship's staff.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

She offered a crooked smile. "Well, this didn't go the way I planned."

His hand lowered to the weapon he wore. "Who. Are. You?"

Her gaze followed his actions and a frown twisted her lips. "You're serious? I'm sorry. I'm Shiloh. Shiloh Alonson."

It fit. Her face, the eyes. None of that explained why she was hiding in a storage room on the ship her father was on, daring a ruthless enemy to attack. "What are you doing here?"

Pursing her lips, she asked, "I don't suppose you could pretend you never saw me."

He merely stared. She sighed. "Right. I'm here because if I told my papan I wanted to go to Tuun, he would have told me no and I have a meeting with a client that couldn't be delayed."

Unbelievable. Kjar held his silence for exactly three seconds before snapping, "You snuck on a military vessel in the middle of a critical mission for a meeting?"

He didn't care how incredulous his voice sounded, what she'd done had placed her in danger unnecessarily.

Her gaze narrowed. "It's not just *any* meeting. I'm going to speak with the head of a research center about one of my inventions that will purify water in one of the struggling cities on the outskirts of their community.

"Many Tuun natives don't want to live in close quarters with urban buildings and busy roadways. They like their lives in the country side but the quality of water has deteriorated due to the runoff of toxins into their main water source."

He didn't know anything about inventions or problems on Tuun but he did know something had happened to Jaycie and he didn't have time for this. "The others need to be made aware of your presence and there is no chance you can go to the surface unattended."

Turning to leave, he was surprised when she caught his elbow. Her eyes widened, and a pink flush spread over her cheeks. "You don't understand. I can't have guards. No one can know about this meeting."

Kjar snorted. "That isn't my problem."

Her imploring gaze shifted into a dark glare. "You don't understand."

If he was a lesser man, he *might* have been intimidated. But he wasn't. "I don't have time for this."

"Please." Her grip on him tightened. "I only have to go to meet the lead scientist, drop off my device and I'll return right away. I can get test results via messaging."

Her voice reeked of desperation, her tone pleading. Fuck! He blew out a breath. "Give me the device and tell me who it needs to go to and I'll see it gets there."

She drew back and dropped his arm. "I can't. The scientist is already leery that an off worlder wants to help. Zaron won't deal with anyone else."

"That isn't my concern. Your safety and that of your family is."



She made a growling sound deep in her throat and spun around. Her back heaved with the effort of regaining control. Kjar waited patiently. When she turned back around, she held up her hands in supplication. “If what I’ve designed works, I’m donating several of the pumps free of charge to preserve their water. This prototype purifier *can’t* fall into the wrong hands. Someone could easily use it for nefarious purposes and the inhabitants would have no recourse if they want clean water.”

Sincerity blazed from her brown orbs and he felt himself weakening. Going against every instinct, he offered a compromise. “We reach Tuun tomorrow. You have until then to reveal your presence onboard and ask for an escort to this meeting.”

Her lips pursed and her eyes narrowed. He could see the stubborn refusal ready to spill forth. Then her shoulders slumped and she sighed. “That’s fair. I can see why Jaycie raced back to you.”

He stilled and studied her closer. As Torkel Alonson’s daughter, she would have grown up with Jaycie. Had she mentioned him to her friend? “What does that mean exactly?”

She shrugged and swiped her hand over the falling strands of brown hair to tuck behind her ears. “Nothing. Forget I said anything.”

He started to ask if she knew what had happened to Jaycie but realized if she’d snuck here, she’d probably been avoiding contact with family and friends. He sent her one last warning glance and made for the door. “Tomorrow. That’s the only chance you have to make your case to your father.”

Leaving as quickly as he’d arrived, Kjar rushed to his room and snatched up his comm to enter Jaycie’s contact code. She answered after several nerve inducing moments. “Kjar, is everything alright?”

Hearing her voice eased his rising panic. Exhaling in relief, he slumped back against the wall behind him. Though the question reflected her concern for him, there was an edge to the tone, a slight tremor in her voice.

Something *had* happened. His heart thumped a thunderous beat within his chest as he straightened. “I’m fine. Now tell me what happened to *you*?”



## TWENTY-TWO

The last thing Jaycie expected was a comm from Kjar while she was in the medic center. Until he spoke, she didn't realize how much she needed to hear his voice.

Flashes of the test flight went through her head in rapid succession. The vibrations, loss of power and the awful sensation of falling from the sky. Her breath quickened and her pulse leaped.

Drawing in a deep breath and letting it out, she worded her response carefully. "There was an accident but everything's fine. I'm fine."

She'd never risk upsetting him while he was on a mission, a habit she'd picked up from watching her maman deal with her papan. She'd expect the same in return.

"Tell me the truth, Jaycie. Don't make me wonder." His tone dropped and the rough growl softened that growing ache in her chest

She gathered her courage to walk through what had happened in the striker. When she finished, she scrubbed frantically at the silent tear that rolled down her cheek. There was no reason to still be upset about the incident. Nothing major had happened. She didn't even suffer any injuries.

"I'm glad you're not hurt," Kjar finally said.

"Yeah." She cleared her throat and pushed the incident behind her. If she focused too long on the details of the crash, her heart raced and her skin grew itchy. "Is everything going well for you?"

He grunted. "Going."

A smile teased at the corner of her mouth. "Is my papan being overly harsh?"

There had been times she'd heard stories of her papan as a gruff Team Leader. She could only imagine how he acted as a Unit Leader.

Laughing suddenly, Kjar said, “No. This is...the nature of this mission is risky and I found a stowaway.”

A stowaway? No one should have been able to sneak onboard a military vessel. “Who? Or can you not tell me?”

“Shiloh Alonson.”

“Shiloh?!” Her voice came out overloud and she lowered her tone. “Why is Shiloh there?”

“Something about a water device.”

He sounded puzzled. No one aside from a few of their friend group knew Shiloh designed and developed ground breaking technology. Most of it sold to various military forces, some went directly to the Alliance and occasionally she did private stuff for personal reasons.

Jaycie vaguely recalled her friend mentioning a trip or wanting to leave Enotia for something. It would be just like Shiloh to become obsessed with her latest project and ignore her safety to do what she considered necessary. Unfortunately, everything was necessary to Shiloh. She could be blind to a fault if it involved a life saving design of hers.

“Does my seppi know she’s there?” Torkel didn’t often lose his patience with Shiloh or Nikole but with the attacks from the mysterious Varu a major concern, the whole family was on alert.

“I’ve given her until tomorrow to inform him of her presence.”

She chuckled. “I’m sure she’ll plead her case with him.”

A medic entered her room and the twisting feeling in her stomach returned. “I have to go, Kjar but take care of yourself.”

“I’ll see you as soon as I return.”

They ended the comm and she faced the blonde woman who couldn’t be much older than her.

“Jaycie Bastien?”

“Yes.”

“I’m Medic Ruella and I’ve been assigned your case.”

Another bubble of anxiety rolled about her midsection. Jaycie swallowed. “What happened to Medic Adire?”

Ruella smiled and took a seat in the chair next to Jaycie’s bed. “She’s completed her physical assessment. I’ve been sent on behalf of the Jutaks to talk with you about the mental and emotional toll from the crash.”

Jaycie’s palms grew damp and she slid them over the sheet across her legs. It was hard to present a tough façade when you wore a medic gown and lay in a bed. “I didn’t crash.”

Ruella’s brows arched in surprise and she glanced down at the data pad she held. “Maybe there’s been a mistake. My records show you were in a striker doing test runs and went down.”

Her stomach wrenched sharply and sweat broke out under her armpits. “Well, yes. But not exactly. The striker crashed but I ejected. I’m fine.”

*Fine. Fine. Fine.*

The medic met her gaze evenly but all she said was, “I see.”

Feeling at a disadvantage, Jaycie tossed back the blankets and sheets to swing her legs to the side of the bed. The upright position allowed her to look down on Ruella. “I didn’t sustain any injuries and should be able to return to my team.”

“Mmm. You have a good record for a young soldier. Your Unit Leader speaks highly of you.”

Jaycie relaxed a little but stayed attuned to any indication Ruella could sense the fear coiling tighter and tighter around her throat. “That’s good to know.”

Ruella crossed her leg over the opposite knee and leaned back in her chair. She eyed Jaycie with a knowing glint in her eyes. “Tell me about what happened the other day.”

Jaycie licked her lips nervously. “What do you mean? I already answered questions and turned in my report.”

Tipping her head in acknowledgment, Ruella said, “Yes, but I only have the written account. I’d love to hear it from you directly to better do my job.”

*Thump. Thump. Thump.* The twisting, knot in Jaycie’s stomach returned with a vengeance. Her pulse began to race, her heart stuttering in her chest. “Sure.”

Despite the terror ripping into her, she walked the medic through the incident. By the time she finished, she was panting and sweat dripped down the back of her medic gown.

She stared, waiting, anticipating. Ruella met her gaze, blue eyes lit with sympathy. “I see. How did you feel? Were you scared?”

Terrified. Jaycie didn’t say it though. What if they decided she wasn’t fit to be Team Leader? Or worst, a Jutak warrior?

“Jaycie?” Ruella leaned forward in her seat.

“Um...I feel fine. Not scared at all.” Telling the lie seemed like a small thing to do to get beyond this. She was sick of talking about the striker crash and wanted it behind her. Getting back with her team was all that mattered.

Ruella sighed, typed something on her data pad and rose. “Thank you for your time. I’ll get this processed.”

Jaycie stood as well. Being anxious wasn’t new to her but she hated this feeling of apprehension. “What does that mean? I need to get back with Raptor Squad.”

“I’m not at liberty to reveal my conclusion. My notes will be submitted and your Unit Leader will contact you.” Ruella reached over and squeezed her upper arm. “I’m glad you’re alright, Jaycie.”

As soon as the medic left, Jaycie’s comm chimed. She checked the messages and saw it was from Toren. It chimed again and this one from Justice. Both were checking on her. She clenched her hands into fists then forcibly relaxed them. Borrowing trouble wouldn’t do her any good.

The next few hours dragged. She got dressed and paced. The door opened behind her and Medic Adire entered with a

bright smile. “Looks like you’re clear to leave us.”

A familiar face entered behind the medic. “Maman!”

Her maman grinned. “I thought I’d come by again to visit and ran into Medic Adire. Sounds like my timing was excellent. You can come hang with your papan and I. We’re long overdue for a visit.”

For some reason, those words were exactly what she needed until her Unit Leader contacted her about when she could return. There was nothing more to do.





## TWENTY-THREE

“Nothing,” Rook spat as he dropped into his chair.

Kjar and the others joined him in the conference room and Torkel followed behind. The Jutak Commander had spent the day on the surface visiting and making a big show of his presence on Tuun. Ghost Unit had taken cover and waited but Varu hadn't shown up.

They were all discouraged not to have drawn him out. Torkel set his comm down on the table and drummed his fingers against the top. “Do you think he figured out it was a trap?”

Rook shook his head. “While there's the possibility, I don't think that was the case. Only a small select group knew of this.”

“It could be timing. Perhaps he didn't have enough time to launch an attack,” Damiiian stated. “I don't believe for one moment he's given up.”

Kjar glanced at the tall Marenian who'd been quiet for the most part on this trip. Aside from being sent as an enforcer on behalf of the Majad, he wasn't sure why Damiiian seemed so compelled about this mission. It had to be more than the threats against Nikol and his First Placement.

“I should check on my Chosen,” Torkel said on a sigh. “We can't take the chance that Varu uses this opportunity to target my family with me away.”

Kjar's gaze jerked around to face the table. It was well past morning. With the rush to get planet side, he'd forgotten the most important thing. He studied the Jutak Commander for any hint Shiloh had revealed her presence onboard.

Wouldn't Alonson have shared with the team if he was aware? Not wanting to sound the alarm on the off chance he was wrong, Kjar asked, “Have you talked to any of them?”

Rook glanced at him sharply but Kjar's focus remained on Torkel. The Jutak Commander must have sensed something

because his brows drew together as he eyed Kjar. “No. Why do you a—”

A comm vibrated, cutting off his question. Everyone in the room glanced down to check their own. Torkel reached for his and answered. “Faye?”

There was a moment of quiet as he listened to whatever was being said. Torkel roared and jumped to his feet, knocking his chair over behind him. Damiiian dropped his folded arms and pushed away from the wall, his gaze never leaving Torkel.

Kjar tensed, looking to Rook who shook his head in confusion. Torkel’s hand clenched on the comm. “How long?”

They all froze and Kjar had an odd feeling in the pit of his stomach. Rook signaled frantically but the Jutak Commander began pacing the room as he dug his hand in his hair. Finally, Rook snapped, “Commander Alonson, what’s going on?”

“Calm down. I’ll take care of it. I’ll find her. Yes. Yes. I promise.” Torkel ended the comm and slammed the device on the table. Breath heaving from his chest, he raised his head and spoke to Damiiian directly. “My daughter is missing.”

The chilling expression on the Marenian’s face sent a shiver down Kjar’s spine. Damiiian nodded abruptly. “I’ll let the Majad know right away.”

Kjar stood and spoke at the same time, drawing everyone’s attention. “Last evening I heard a noise in the storage space next to my room. Inside, I found Shiloh Alonson hiding.”

“What?!” Hahn exclaimed.

Dorian watched him with a questioning stare but didn’t speak.

“She’s here?” There was hope in Torkel’s voice as he turned for the door. “Which storage room?”

Rook shot Kjar a look he didn’t need to interpret. He’d messed up.

“This way.” He took the lead and everyone followed. “I told her she needed to report her presence. She mentioned meeting someone on Tuun regarding a device.”

“Water purifier,” Damiian put in as they reached the room.

Kjar twisted the latch and opened the door. Torkel rushed inside. As Kjar expected, it was empty. Damiian was on his comm, muttering in angry snarls. He caught the words, “Guards. How?”

Torkel spun in a circle as if searching the room but it was clear his daughter wasn’t here. Rook moved to stand next to Kjar. “Why didn’t you report this?”

He should have and now the cost was the danger to the Jutak Commander’s daughter. “She pleaded with me to give her a chance to speak with her father. She wanted him to understand about an important meeting she had planned with someone named Zaron.”

Saying it didn’t make it any better and Rook’s dark look let him know. “Are you serious, Kjar?!”

Dorian and Hahn joined their small huddle. Hahn shook his head. “You are really full of surprises lately.”

Flushing, Kjar gripped the back of his neck. “I fucked up by not reporting it.”

Hahn snorted. “You think?”

Torkel’s comm went off. He glanced down and his brows rose. Relief crashed over his features. “It’s Shiloh.”

Kjar and the others moved in closer. Rook was the one who asked, “Is she alright?”

“Where are you? Shiloh? It disconnected.” Torkel sounded puzzled. The comm buzzed again in his hand. “Wait. She sent a video.”

“Play it,” Damiian ordered.

No one questioned the command. They leaned in close to watch the clip. It took a moment for Kjar to understand what he saw and when he did, everything in him froze in horror. Damiian snarled and stepped back to stab at his comm. He paced away but not before Kjar caught his furious look.

Torkel's face paled and he staggered, falling back against the stack of containers behind him. Dorian cursed under his breath and Kjar couldn't blame him. On the screen, Shiloh sat tied to a chair in a dimly lit room. Her head sagged to the side and her eyes were closed but it was definitely the Jutak Commander's daughter.

It was hard to discern if she was alive or merely unconscious. If she was dead there would be repercussions throughout the Alliance.

"Hahn, see if you can verify if this is real and identify anything to help us find Shiloh Alonson," Rook snapped, holding up his own comm. "Commander, send me the video and I'll have a member of our team try and trace it from her end."

Seraphina might be able to give them a starting point or location. Her past avoiding the law would definitely help.

"On it," Hahn replied with a bite as he left. He'd need to retrieve a comp to work.

Dorian's dark brows clashed over his stormy glare. He held his comm clenched in a white knuckled grip. "I'm going to update Kyele."

Inwardly, Kjar winced. The close relationship between the Jutak Commander and their Unit Leader meant Kyele's reaction would be explosive.

A sense of urgency filled the room. Deciding to do what he could to mitigate the rising emotions of anger and panic, Kjar moved to Torkel's side. The Jutak Commander's chest shuddered at his approach but the brown eyes that met his were calm.

"You said you saw her? Spoke to Shiloh?" Torkel asked.

Kjar nodded. "Yes. As I mentioned, she planned to meet with a scientist to deliver a device to test for water purity."

Confusion flickered in the eyes watching him closely. "Water purity device? I don't even know what Shi would be doing with that. She studies wildlife flora in one of the remote cities of Enotia. Her head is always buried in research."

Perhaps the Jutak Commander didn't know his daughter as well as he thought. Kjar had no reason to believe Shiloh Alonson had lied to him when he discovered her. The reaction of surprise and her insistence on being the one to meet the scientist had appeared sincere.

When Torkel's comm buzzed again, everyone stopped what they were doing and their attention swung in his direction. A muscle ticked in his lower jaw.

"Don't answer yet, Alonson," Damiiian ordered. "The Majad received a similar vid of your daughter."

"A taunt," Kjar guessed. "He wants both of you aware he has her. The moment you move, he'll respond."

"What do you suggest then, Rulayin?" Torkel growled, the muscles in his chest and arms swelling in the manner of a Marenian amped up. "Do you want me to ignore that some cast off of Lothar's has my daughter?! A man who claims to want vengeance on his father's behalf?"

Torkel's comm stopped then started again with an insistent buzz. Kjar kept his tone neutral. "I want you to remain calm and not behave irrationally. Anything else won't help the situation. The Jutak Commander can not walk into a trap and jeopardize our military's position."

Huffing out a breath, Torkel sneered. "I don't give a fuck about walking into a trap if it means Shi comes out of this alive."

With that said, he answered his comm. It was a live visual. The light haired Marenian they'd been after grinned from the screen. Torkel activated the holo, giving them a better view. Varu wouldn't be able to see them.

"Torkel Alonson. By now, I'm sure you realized I have something that belongs to you." Varu spoke from the glowing image hovering over the comm Torkel held.

Strain visible on his face, Torkel held his silence.

"Nothing to say," Varu continued. His image moved to the right and Kjar saw Shiloh Alonson. Her head was upright and though her hair was disheveled, her eyes held a fierce light.

Thank fuck she wasn't dead. Varu gripped the back of the dark strands and yanked her hair. A wince crossed her face but she pressed her lips tight, refusing to cry out. Varu leered into the screen. "She wasn't pleased to meet a new relative. How unwelcoming."

"What do you want?" Torkel asked.

Seeming to listen to Kjar's advice, there was no trace of emotion in the firm question.

"I want what I deserve, what should have been my heritage. A heritage you threw away to live among your false race." Varu's voice rose with each heavily worded phrase until he was almost yelling. A flush worked its way over the light bronze of his skin.

"Ignore him, papan," Shiloh suddenly called out, struggling in her bonds. Courage and anger blazed from her face. "You and Seppi Nikol don't need to risk yourselves for this ebo!"

Brave words and they cost her. Varu's backhand sent her head snapping sharply to the side. When she faced the holo again, a bruise bloomed on her cheek and a red smear stood out like a garish stain along her split bottom lip.

Varu straightened and shifted his position to stand slightly in front of her. Raising his hand, he revealed a knife the length of his forearm and teased it across Shiloh's forehead, stopping at the top of her ear. "That wasn't very wise, was it?"

"Now I have to show your father why he shouldn't let what you said sway him. Too bad you don't have any horns for me to send him. What a disgrace you are to our family's bloodline."

Varu's arm swung in a downward arc. Then the comm connection ended.

"Nooo!" Torkel roared as they lost the live feed.





## TWENTY-FOUR

Jaycie couldn't believe the news she was hearing. "Are you saying this Varu has Shiloh?"

Her papan grimaced and paced the main room of their home. "It would appear so. Ghost Unit is on their way back. Based on my conversation with Rook and Torkel, it sounds like Shiloh snuck onboard, secretly went to the surface of the secondary location and was abducted by Varu."

Her maman sat on the arm of a chair, her foot swinging back and forth in agitation. Faye was coming over shortly and a few others. Joni frowned and her eyes narrowed. "What I don't understand is why she was there."

Blowing out a breath, her papan paused his pacing next to where her maman sat and pressed a hand to her shoulder. "We don't have complete details. Kjar says he found her hiding and she referenced a device to help one of the cities suffering from contaminated water in their area."

"Shiloh studies wildlife!" her maman exploded. "None of this makes sense."

Shiloh did far more than study flora and fauna. It was the excuse she used to explain her long absences and extended stays to work in her lab or meet others to negotiate deals on her tech.

Jaycie wasn't sure how much of that she should mention though. The truth was bound to come out eventually. She didn't even understand why her friend kept it a secret to begin with. Her designs were incredible and so far advanced she was constantly in demand.

A brisk knock distracted her parents. Stiffening, her papan lifted his head. His gaze went to the secure vids as it always did. Though they no longer lived in the main compound she'd grown up in, he'd kept up the security protocols for their family residence and remained vigilant about their safety.

"It's Lissi," he said.

Her maman was on her feet in an instant and opened the door. The blonde woman, who entered, wrapped her arms around her maman and squeezed. “Joni!”

They held each other for a moment and Jaycie caught the sound of a broken sob. When they parted Lissi wiped away a stray tear and came in. She nodded at Kyele before taking a seat on the long lounge in their main room. Her maman sat beside her. “Are you okay, Lissi?”

Lissi was Torkel’s baby sister and spoiled Shiloh as much as she did her own children. “I’m trying to be.”

“Greetings,” two voices called out.

Jaycie smiled in recognition of the newcomers. Boid and Aya, Lissi’s children, came inside followed by a tall, slender man with gray eyes that scanned the room before he moved forward. Rydak, Lissi’s Chosen, and the first one she’d gone to when she’d submitted her application for the Jutak Academy.

He’d offered her sound advice and congratulated her on pursuing her dreams.

More came in to offer support for the last woman to arrive. Faye Alonson. As soon as she entered, the women converged on her, hugging and offering reassurances. The men hovered on the edge, a coiled sense of danger and urgency filling the air.

Jaycie glanced around at the crowd overflowing her home. So many familiar faces.

Standing in a tight circle with Nikole, Justice, Toren and Raze, she whispered, “Did any of you know what Shi was doing?”

Nikole shook her head immediately. “My sister didn’t tell me anything.”

Toren looped an arm around her shoulder and tugged her in close, his horns lightly brushing the side of her face. “Because you can’t keep a secret, Nik.”

Nikole flushed. “I know.”

Though the mood was somber, they managed a smile at her admission. Raze folded his arms over his chest and eyed their parents off to the side in an intense conversation. “I don’t understand why she would leave knowing there was someone targeting her papan.”

Raze said what they were thinking. Alaina and Taya, Jaron’s daughters, joined them. Part Argoran, they’d clearly heard him during their approach. Alaina rolled her eyes. “You know, Shi. She’s often in her own head when she’s working. How many times did one of us have to drag her from that lab to hang out?”

“She’s not intentionally flighty,” Justice defended, speaking up on Shiloh’s behalf.

“No,” Jaycie agreed, “but we talked and I reminded her now wasn’t a good time to go off.”

Nikole sighed. “It’s because she cares deeply. My sister can’t resist those in need. Her mind is always working to solve or fix a problem. Sometimes to the detriment of her well being.”

True. Shiloh had always been act first, think later but her heart was in the right place and she cared about others more than she thought about herself. Working on wildlife allowed her to cover her deeper passion for technology.

If Torkel and Faye Alonson knew some of the things their daughter designed or who she met with to get her inventions in the right hands, they’d be shocked. Proud but shocked.

In hindsight, Jaycie felt guilty for not mentioning it when it could have prevented Shiloh’s abduction.

Shaking his head, Raze faced Jaycie with a narrowed gaze. “I heard from my sister that you were in an accident recently.”

Jaycie groaned. Of course, Liv would tell him. “Not necessarily. My striker went down and I ejected in time. No injuries and discharged with a clean bill of health.”

“Not back in the air yet,” Justice grumbled.

Her breath caught but she forced a smile. “Have to get my simulator time in. Brush back up.”

There was no way she could reveal the truth. The thought of going back up terrified her. Logging in flight time with a simulator gave her an excuse to delay returning to active status. Medic Ruella had no idea of the favor she’d done Jaycie by recommending the refresher training as a precaution.

“Has anyone talked to Cerise?” Taya asked.

Toren nodded. “She couldn’t return right now. The selection process is beginning but she asked to be contacted the moment we hear anything about Shiloh.”

“I can’t believe Cerise is in contention to be the next Supreme Matire,” Alaina said, shaking her head in amazement.

The Supreme Matire, Peshla Dahreel, once had an adversarial relationship with her son, V’hor. It was hard to imagine. As long as Jaycie could remember, Cerise had adored visiting the woman.

Nikole’s lips turned downward. “I miss her. Seppi V’hor and Tante Eva too. Moving to Serpine is so...permanent.”

“The downside to growing up and going our own way,” Justice teased with a grin as he tugged Nikole’s hair.

Raze shifted his attention back to their parents. The dark look in his eyes returned. “I’m really worried. Shiloh’s not a fighter. Throughout childhood, she was the mischievous one. Always encouraging me with my pranks.”

It was a good summation. Shiloh loved to laugh and have fun. She was the first one to make the rest of them laugh and it was hard to be mad at her when she hyper focused on her work to the exclusion of everything. She more than made up for it when she gifted a person with one of her tech prototypes. A fighter she was not.

“What do we know about this Varu anyway?” Alaina asked.

There was only so much Jaycie could disclose due to her role as a Jutak warrior but this wasn't strictly a mission. This was about their family. "He's supposed to be Lothar's son by an Earth woman."

"He's vowed vengeance against Torkel and Nikol. Claims he's meant to rule Marenia," Toren added.

"Fuck," Raze muttered.

"Seppi Nikol is in a rage and promises to destroy the imposter as he calls him." Nikole's mouth twisted and rare anger creased her face. "If my sister is harmed in the slightest, nothing the Alliance says will keep my seppi away."

"His love for Shiloh...it's different. It's like he views her as his second chance to make up for not being there for my papan. Shiloh's the one who reached out to him as soon as Marenia joined the Alliance. She pushed to get to know him while I stayed behind."

Jaycie's brows creased. "We've seen how overprotective he is of the two of you."

For weeks, Marenian enforcers had been on Enotia with the strict purpose of following Shiloh and Nikole. They'd been recalled after an embarrassing incident involving a sedative gas after Shiloh discovered one of the guards trailing her on her way to her lab.

Jaycie didn't know the whole story but Shiloh smirked whenever the conversation came up and said she couldn't have her secret work discovered.

"You don't get it." Nikole shook her head. "He treats her like another daughter. My cousins love her, his First Placement finds Shiloh hilarious. She is beyond precious to his family. There is nothing that will stand in Nikol Wulven's way to get my sister back."

Unfortunately, Jaycie had a feeling that was exactly what Varu was hoping.

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Kjar waved to his teammates as they each broke off to go to their separate rooms once they arrived back to the base. The strain of coordinating a strategy regarding Shiloh Alonson's rescue and knowing he should have revealed her presence on the ship sooner wore on his temper.

Snarling, he tossed his bags on the floor. He ripped at the buttons of his shirt, ignoring how they snagged the material in the process. He left a trail of clothing behind as he strode into the cleansing room and took a much needed shower.

The entire time his thoughts circled back to Jaycie. She'd assured him she was fine but he couldn't shake the tone he caught in her voice when they spoke. He knew every inflection in her speech and something was off.

Water ran down his face, his loose hair soaked and a heavy weight down his back. Bracing his hands on the walls of the shower, he tried to place the reason for his concern.

Flustered.

That was it. He straightened and brushed his hand over his face to clear his vision as he stared at the tiled interior. Jaycie had sounded flustered and that didn't happen often.

He turned the shower off, dried quickly and pulled on a pair of pants. He needed to see her, make sure there wasn't more to the incident than what she'd told him. It would be just like her to put on a brave front and not disclose if something was wrong.

His comm was in the pockets of the pants he'd discarded on the floor. Just as he bent to retrieve it, a familiar voice from behind said, "I'm glad you're back."

Next, soft hands caressed the blades of his shoulders. He glanced to the side and caught sight of Jaycie. She leaned into his back and kissed the side of his jaw.

He shifted slightly and caught her weight, pulling her into his arms as he stood, the comm forgotten. "Do you ever worry your brother will get caught bringing you here?"

Amusement gleamed from her eyes as she arched her brows. "You don't know my brother. Viktor would only get

caught if he wanted to.” She shrugged and added with a wiggle of her hips, “Plus, my papan isn’t really worried about us coming and going. He knows we would never do anything to betray him.”

Kjar didn’t know that level of trust outside the members of Ghost Unit. Rook, Dorian and Hahn had proven themselves to him time and again. He’d done the same for them.

The hips pressed against his were distracting and he easily forgot any concerns about how she got here. “That’s good to know.”

Jaycie reached up and slowly pulled the pins from his hair, one after the other. He stiffened and tried to jerk away but it was too late. Freed from the braids, the white mass swarmed over her, wrapping around one wrist, her throat and eagerly stroking her back.

Running her fingers through a section of his hair, she leaned back and tipped her head to the side. “What’s wrong with you?”

Drawing in a deep breath, he studied her expression. She didn’t seem to notice the shorter length in spots. He feigned a smile. “You caught me off guard.”

A frown dipped between her brows and a flash of something he couldn’t read passed through her gaze. “Is that all?”

He nodded. “Things are tense right now. We had to leave knowing Varu Hasteen is holding Shiloh Alonson somewhere and the Jutak Commander wasn’t...in agreement with this.”

She bit her lip and rested her head on his chest. Kjar closed his eyes and inhaled. The scent of the shampoo she used eased the heavy weight in his heart.

“I know. Everyone’s worried about Shiloh. Seppi Torkel returned and looked completely destroyed. This is a nightmare for him and Tante Faye.”

He’d forgotten her closeness to the Alonson family and had to be careful of what he disclosed. “I understand.”

They grew silent, both deep in their own thoughts. He caressed her hips, smoothing his hands to her round butt cheeks to ease his need to touch his one. The plump curves filled his palms, her softness and the groan she uttered leached the last of the tension right from him.

After a while she asked, “There was a vid. Did she...did Shiloh look alright?”

“Jaycie,” he chastised softly, “you know missions are confidential. Don’t ask me things I can’t discuss.”

Her head moved up and down along his chest. “I know. Papan saw the footage and wouldn’t share either. It’s hard. She’s one of my best friends, Kjar. Nothing can happen to her.”

He curled his arms around her back and brought her in tight. It was all he could do to comfort her. Changing the subject, he asked, “Are you back on active status?”

She stilled, drawing his attention. Her fingers curled into his hair, the nails scraping along his scalp and he felt the touch as if she’d run her hands over his cock. “Not yet.”

The answer surprised him. If she wasn’t injured, why hadn’t she returned to her unit? His earlier speculation came back. Was she being truthful with him? He pulled away to search her face. “Why not? Is there something you’re not telling me?”

Her laughter was light, eyes aglow. “Of course not. I’m doing sims per the medic notes in my file.”

Flight simulations. He relaxed. It was reasonable if the Jutaks wanted to make sure pilot error didn’t play a part in the crash. Knowing there was nothing more to the delay and his concern, he let the matter go. A wave of exhaustion rolled over him from lack of sleep in the last two days on the mission. He tugged her toward his bed. “I need to hold you.”

She grinned and followed. “I thought you’d never ask.”

They lay together in his bed, Jaycie burrowed into his chest, her nose like a cold dot at the base of his throat. Soon her breathing evened out and he knew she was sleep. His hair



worked to glide over her but several strands fell listless to the bed.

He waited but they didn't move again. There was nothing he could do about it. This was merely the next stage. Closing his eyes, he pondered how much time he had left.



## TWENTY-FIVE

Parting ways with Jaycie the next morning caused Kjar actual physical pain. Holding her close, he pressed kisses across her cheek, down the side of her throat where he rested his face and inhaled sharply. Her scent flooded his nasal passages but nothing could ease the ache.

His hair whipped about wildly, entwining around her arms and wrists. Each time he untangled a section, another looped around her. Jaycie laughed, her eyes amber bright. “This never happened before.”

Because his hair sensed she wasn't bonded to him yet. Because he literally craved her but knew his days were numbered. Every strand wanted to cling to her in whatever way it could until the end.

Instead of saying any of that or pushing his pain onto her, he managed a smile. His finger grazed down her cheek as he stared into her eyes. Her skin was warm to the touch. “Do you want to get together after your sim runs today?”

While they spent most of their nights together, there was still no true acknowledgement of their relationship status. That included being seen in each other's company during the day. He was done with being mad at Jaycie about that.

Sure, he would have loved for her to say they didn't have to hide any longer but he'd known when he agreed they could reestablish their *friendship* it would be this way. Now, he only hoped to spend his remaining time with her.

“I'd like that.” She kissed him, a quick press of her mouth to his before stepping back, before he could wrap her in his arms again and savor the feel of her body pressed against him.

They finalized their plans for the midday and Kjar watched as she combed her brother and the other man appeared a moment later. He gave Kjar a nod of respect, clasped Jaycie's hand and they were gone.

As he prepped for the morning meeting with Ghost Unit, Kjar fought the cramping sensation in his midsection and the beginning throb at his temples. More signs of his physical failing without his one. Ignoring the tremors in his hands, he meticulously tied his hair back and adjusted his clothing.

Unlike his father's death, the pain of being separated from Jaycie wasn't tearing into him with savage blunt force. This was a slow, grating death in which he'd either collapse where he stood one day or go to sleep and not wake up.

Shaking off his regret for what could have been, he made his way for the morning meeting. In the lower level, his path crossed Seraphina and Rook. Seraphina waved at Kjar's approach. She was truly coming into her own. The hesitation she'd exhibited in those earlier days was far behind as she grew more and more comfortable in her role with the team and them.

Seraphina had been a loner for years and was slowly lowering her guard. All because of her mate. Rook was right behind her with a hand at her waist. Hahn hurried down the hall from the opposite direction, a sheepish grin on his face when he spotted them going into the conference room. None of them wanted to be late. Kyele could be a hard ass about that.

Dorian had Zsamei pinned to the wall next to the door they needed to go through, the two engrossed in a passionate kiss. Hahn cleared his throat loudly. "Make way. Clear out with the affection. Some of us are still alone. Right, Kjar?"

Kjar shoved Hahn out of his way without answering, moved past the couple and went inside. As soon as they were seated, Kyele reviewed everything from the failed attempt to lure Varu into going after Jutak Commander, down to the subsequent abduction of Shiloh Alonson.

"Do we think he'll truly harm her?" Hahn asked when Kyele finished speaking.

"Yes. Varu's previous attacks in Alliance territory have shown him to be ruthless and cunning," Kyele said.

Rook cut it. “It would make more sense for him to use her as leverage to get what he wants.”

“If hurting Shiloh Alonson can get the result he wants, he will absolutely do it,” Kyele stated firmly.

They took a moment to absorb that. It wasn't only about drawing Nikol and Torkel out. Varu seemed to want the two men to suffer by taunting them with his capture of Shiloh Alonson.

“What about the Majad? Once he knows about this how can we keep him from jumping in without a care for his own safety?” Dorian asked.

Kyele sighed. There were lines at the corner of his mouth and the grooves in his hair attested to the strain he'd been under since the vid of the Jutak Commander's daughter.

“Damiian is already on his way back to Marenia. He's going to try and convince Nikol not to leave their home world and then return here to strategize on how to rescue Shiloh.”

“I don't feel good about any of this,” Seraphina said, tapping her fingers nervously on the table top. “He doesn't seem the type who'll wait long to prove he has the upper hand.”

And every minute they spent to counter and plan was time Shiloh Alonson might not have.

Rook reached over and squeezed the top of Seraphina's hand. They exchanged a quick affectionate look that sent a shaft of envy through Kjar's heart. He wanted that. Desperately.

Kyele blew out a rough breath. “Agreed. We have to move on this as fast as possible. An update was sent to the Alliance the moment we knew he had Shiloh but there is the very real possibility Varu has already...hurt her.”

Kjar focused on his Unit Leader's face and narrowed his gaze. That pause. He'd been about to say something else. *Killed her?* It wasn't out of the realm of possibilities. Varu could be far enough gone that he had killed the other woman

in an effort to lash out at the two he deemed responsible for Lothar's demise.

Which meant none of this could be easy on Kyele. He and Torkel were more than former teammates. There was a close friendship bordering on familial connection that existed between the two.

"Everyone stay on alert. The minute we get the call to assist, I want us ready to respond and work with the Jutaks on this," Kyele said.

The meeting wrapped up and everyone rose. When Kjar stood, he grew lightheaded. Taking a moment for it to pass, he drew a deep breath and straightened. The others were already gone. He turned toward the door.

"Kjar, stay behind," Kyele called out.

Kjar dropped back in his chair. As soon as the door closed, his Unit Leader met his gaze and the green stare froze Kjar to the spot.

"Help her," Kyele said.

Kjar stared and said slowly, "Help who?"

Kyele's lips firmed. He withdrew one of his ever present knives and began rolling it through his fingers. "She's afraid of flying because of the incident. I can sense it. If she doesn't get over it, she'll never go up in a striker again. You have a notable record from your time at the Jutak Academy. You were a top pilot. *Help* her."

Jaycie. Stunned, Kjar didn't know how to handle the verbal spillage. To make the situation even more difficult, Kyele spoke as if he was aware of the connection between Kjar and Jaycie. The roots of his hair pulled at his scalp in reflex. If she hadn't disclosed their relationship to her papan and this was a random guess, he could ruin everything.

"Are you talking about your daughter?"

Kyele stabbed his knife onto the table top, causing the handle to quiver in the air when he released it. "Don't fuck with me, Kjar. I need you to help Jaycie. You obviously have

feelings for her and you might be the only one who can help her. Her maman is worried...*I'm* worried.”

The admission hit like a blow to the chest. Kjar had to be careful as he navigated this minefield of a conversation. Drawing a deep breath and releasing it, he asked, “Why do you think she’d listen to me? I’m just one of your soldiers.”

Kyele glared and stood abruptly. He planted his hands on the conference table and leaned forward, aggression pouring from him in waves. “There is *nothing* of importance about my children that I don’t know.”

The implication was damning and a flood of heat poured over Kjar’s face as he met the dark look aimed his way. “I spoke to Jaycie this morning. She seemed fine, upbeat even.”

There had been no sign or mention of the fear her father seemed concerned about. She’d even made plans to meet him today.

Kyele snorted and ran a hand through his hair, leaving the dark waves in further disarray. He’d been frustrated, annoyed and often firm with the members of Ghost Unit at one time or another which was to be expected as they’d learned to function as a team together. Sometimes it was clear Kyele had reached his limits with Rook and Kjar’s constant bickering early on but Kjar had never seen him at a loss.

“I thought you knew her. How long have you been together, Kjar? Was I wrong in my estimation that the two of you have been together for months?”

The heat flooding his face spread into a full flush down his throat and his ears burned. “How did you find out? Her brother?”

Kyele jerked back, true shock reflected in his gaze. “Viktor? Jaycie’s brother would never reveal her secrets to her maman or me unless he thought she was in danger. To which, he would handle the issue before bringing it to our attention afterward.

“As to how I know, my daughter can’t hide her feelings as easily as she thinks. I could see she’d grown to care for

someone by the change in her demeanor, a lightness to her heart. I couldn't figure out who until her maman mentioned your name at dinner after the explosion on the mission. Jaycie avoided my gaze which is unlike her unless she thinks she's in trouble. From there, it was a simple matter of observing both of you."

Hearing how Kyele deciphered their relationship made it seem sordid. The fact it was Jaycie's idea to keep them a secret wasn't something he'd voice to the other man.

Offending his Unit Leader was the last thing Kjar wanted. He respected Kyele and hoped he hadn't ruined their professional relationship. Running a hand over his face and sighing softly, he asked, "Should I apologize?"

Kyele cocked his head to the side and slid his hands into his pocket. At least he wasn't reaching for the knife still stuck in the table or the other one holstered on his right thigh.

"For loving my daughter? Why would you do that?"

Breath shuddered from his lungs and Kjar stumbled. His hands caught on the table to regain his balance. The reaction and calmly asked question wasn't in anyway what he'd expected. "What?"

The corners of Kyele's lips pressed tight. Green eyes studied him carefully and he couldn't read anything in the bland expression. "You love her."

Succinct and to the point. Swallowing, Kjar had to work to get the words out, "Yes. I love her. Jaycie is my one."

Relief flowed through him at being able to acknowledge the truth aloud to another.

"Then help her. Get my daughter back in the air doing what she loves."

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It had been hard leaving Kjar's for several reasons but the most important was that she enjoyed being with him. Waking up to the secure feel of his arms around her brought a sense of peace she couldn't explain.



And it scared her, scared her to think she might become too dependent on that feeling and give up on her dreams. She'd placed so many expectations on herself and with the recent test run accident, she worried more and more that she wasn't capable.

Her papan, maman and brother were so strong. They never let anything get in their way and could push through obstacles with single-minded focus yet the first sign of trouble had her wanting to run away.

Maybe the pressure she created about it was all in her head. If they knew how afraid she was to fly, they would jump in with reassurance and support. Except she didn't want to lean on them this time. She should be able to get over this irrational fear on her own.

Instead, she was thinking about moving to a standard ground unit and leaving the strike team all together. Even contemplating such a huge change tightened her throat and sucked all the air from her chest. She loved flying. It was a passion. In the words of her Tante Lindsey, it was a shitty situation to be in.

"Bastien." Her Unit Leader, Caadin, signaled her with a wave of his hand the moment she entered the building.

She headed in his direction and tried to still the violent thump of her heartbeat. "Yes?"

"I got the update in my morning notes. Your last simulator training is today and then you'll be cleared to return to duty," he informed her with a pleased smile.

This should be good news but instead it reignited the twisting knot in her belly. "Great. Thanks."

He eyed her for a moment and she held his stare. Could he tell she was petrified about returning to the air?

Finally, he said, "I'll catch up with you later. Can't wait to have you back with the team."

"Sure. Later." She walked down the hall in the opposite direction thinking he was the only one. Nothing about the thought of flying in a striker again excited her.



## TWENTY-SIX

Jaycie stalled for as long as she could. When she couldn't avoid it any longer, she headed for the simulator room. It needed to be completed before the day was out or there would be questions

She stopped in front of the overlarge double doors. The sight of the man standing there gave her pause. Had she missed something? After a quick glance around, she walked to him and whispered, "What are you doing here? It's too early."

Was there word on Shiloh? *No*, she would know. Her maman or her Unit Leader would have said something.

Kjar shrugged and straightened from his pose leaning against the wall. "Thought I'd watch you in the sims."

"Shiloh?" she couldn't help asking. She really wanted her friend back. Safe and whole.

Kjar shook his head and her spirits sunk. "Your papan has us on standby. The moment we hear something, Ghost Unit might get called out or another Jutak team will respond."

Glancing at the door and controlling a shiver, she repeated her earlier question, "What are you doing here then?"

The smile he sent her way devastated. With his silver eyes sparking and his white hair pulled back in a single tail, she wanted to grab him by the arm and drag him to her room to sex share. In his arms, she could drown the waves of anxiety rolling over her.

Kjar moved aside to wave at the entrance for the simulation room. "Thought I'd see you in your environment."

Breath lodged in her chest and for a moment she couldn't respond. Fear teased at the edges of her mind and it took every bit of courage she could muster to move forward and go in. Kjar followed close behind and kicked the door shut.

Simulation training didn't require monitors or staff. There were three mock cockpit pods of an X-striker in the room.

Each connected to a comp system with pre-set flight plans and could mimic actual flight.

“You ready?” Kjar asked.

Sweat dampened her palms and she couldn't move. “In a minute.”

To her surprise, he didn't probe or press. Drawing in a deep breath, she moved for the pod on the left. Sensors activated and the canopy rose on a smooth glide. Her heart thumped, resumed its beat and sped up. Gripping the rungs of the ladder at the side, she made her way up and sat in the familiar synth leather seats.

Above her, the canopy lowered slowly, closing her inside. Moisture slicked her upper lip as she gazed at the controls in front of her. She'd done this before. Sims weren't too hard but Caadin said if she completed this one, it pretty much meant her status would be reactivated.

Could she fly again? Nerves sent a prickle of bumps down her arms. She reached for the control guide and held it firmly. The shaft was hard and cold in her grip. Outside the tinted view screen in front of her, Kjar stood on the other side of the room. He'd resumed his relaxed pose against the furthest wall, ankles crossed, shoulders back as he stared at her.

Did he know? What if he could tell how frightened she was?

Shame washed over her and she jerked her gaze roughly from his to look at the panel in front of her. In previous sessions, she'd selected beginner cycles. Easy, short flights that left her a jittery mess afterward but qualified as completions. So far no one had questioned why she'd chosen such basic sims.

She hit start and an automatic comp voice spoke. “Final sim for Team Leader Bastien has been pre-selected by Medic Ruella.”

Pre-selected. She choked on a breath, frantic as the pseudo engines started and the striker rumbled beneath her. The image

of Kjar faded as the simulation reproduced the Enotian sky as it appeared when a launch sequence was about to take place.

The moment she rocked back in the seat and the jet tilted as if to take off, she slammed her palm down on the emergency stop sequence.

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Kjar waited for the simulation program to begin. He'd done them numerous times in his day as a trainee at the Jutak Academy. Now he flew for fun in his spare time between missions with Ghost Unit. It was something he'd never lost his joy for.

The familiar hum of the pod signaled the striker powering up. He couldn't see Jaycie clearly through the window of the tinted canopy, only the shadowy outline of her figure.

When he'd first come upon her, he'd read the emotions on her face. Surprise, happiness, worry, then fear. The last was what Kyele had seen, the fear he'd mentioned to Kjar.

There was something to the stiff way she held herself before they entered the room. His hair had fought to reach for her but the strands were too weak to do more than twitch against his shoulders.

The sudden succession of sound jerked his head up. The front of the striker lowered and settled back on the mount. The canopy flew up and Jaycie stood. Her chest rose and fell rapidly, her features stark white.

Concern propelled him forward. He stopped at the bottom of the ladder clamped to the side of the pod, his hands tight on the rails, one foot raised to climb. "Jaycie?"

Her head swung in his direction. The pupils of her eyes were wide, mouth slightly parted. He flew up the stairs and braced one hand on the side of the pod, the other cupped her face. There was no missing the terror blanching her skin a dull shade. "What is it?"

Her breath came in pants and she gazed frantically around the room before looking back at him. Shuddering, she clenched his shirt and patted his chest. "Nothing. I'm fine."

She was *not* fine. His worry for her increased. This was way beyond simple fear. Had she been like this since the accident? When they'd talked about her return to duty, she'd claimed to be doing her sims. Not once had she mentioned having a reaction like this.

He moved his hand from her face to the ball of her shoulder and ran his hand up and down her trembling arm. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

She shook her head, lip quivering. "I...I have to do the sim."

*Fuck the sim.* He bit back the curse. There was so much terror emanating from her, it struck at the heart of him and he had to resist the urge to snatch her up in his arms. "Choose something quick and get it over with. You can't function like this."

"You don't understand. Final sim. It's pre-selected by the medic."

"Reschedule," he snapped, firming his hold on her.

Another shake of her head. "Can't. Need to pass for clearance."

He glanced over her shoulder into the pod. Standard set up. Manual controls, comp holo imagine. Using both hands, he grasped her upper arms and stared into Jaycie's face. "You can do this. I know you can."

Her expression crumbled and she fell forward into his arms. "I'm scared, Kjar. I'm a failure. I don't think I can ever fly again."

His heart cracked wide open at the plea he heard in her voice. He palmed the back of her head, burying his hands in the softness and pressed his jaw to the top of her hair. He murmured words of reassurance.

As she settled, he spoke again. "It's the pod. Being in a striker doesn't feel the same."

"Felt trapped," she mumbled into his shirt.

Nodding, he said, “That happens but when you’re in the wide open sky, there’s no other feeling like it.”

She shuddered again and it ripped at his soul. “I can’t do the sim.”

There was a level of defeat in the painfully uttered words he’d never heard from Jaycie before. She exuded confidence when it came to pursuing her goal to be a Jutak and now that she’d succeeded, her dream was at risk of slipping through her fingers.

Kjar could never let that happen. In a split second, he made his decision. “Go up with me. No sims. Just the two of us in an X-striker. Let me remind you of how beautiful flying is.”

She lifted her head and met his gaze. No tears hovered in her eyes, but the hope shining back at him pierced his heart. “What?”

“You have to fly again, Jaycie. It’s who you are.” He waited, breath suspended for her to decide. He needed her to agree. This wasn’t something that could be forced. Jaycie had to decide within herself if she wanted to be in the air again.

She inhaled sharply, released the knotted grip she had on his shirt and nodded. “Yes. I’ll try.”





## TWENTY-SEVEN

They left the Jutak base and went to a nearby transport station. Jaycie didn't want any of her teammates to know. Fortunately, Kjar had privileges to fly strikers here. No one questioned their arrival and he logged out an older model jet within minutes.

"I'll take the pilot seat and you'll be in the rear," he said, stopping next to the ladder by the striker he'd been assigned.

Despite the rapid beat of her heart, Jaycie trusted Kjar. "Alright."

He ran a hand through her hair and she leaned into the touch. "Last chance to change your mind."

She had to do this if she wanted to salvage her career with the Jutak warriors. Still, the truth spilled from her. "I don't know if I can."

He leaned forward and pressed his forehead to hers. "You are amazing, Jaycie. So much more than you give yourself credit for. The final decision is up to you if we do this."

If only she could believe him. The only thing to do was to force herself to get through this. She shook off her nerves and grinned weakly. "I got this."

His look was doubtful but at least he didn't question her further. He moved away and climbed the ladder with quick steps. Though her skin was drawn tight, she followed him.

As soon as she settled in the seat behind him, her hands started to tremble again.

"Sync your comm," Kjar instructed.

She glanced down and saw the small black loop hanging from a hook. Slipping it over her ear, she said, "*Comm on.*"

"*Affirmative.*" His voice caressed her ear through the comm.

The gentle vibration beneath her butt caused her heart to lurch. She panted and gripped the guide controller in front of

her though she wasn't the one flyin. Stay steady, she mentally commanded herself.

*"Rulayin request for take off."*

*"Confirmed, Rulayin, you are cleared for take off."*

In front of them, wide hanger doors separated and provided a view of the transport runway outside. Adrenaline poured through Jaycie's system as she worked to calm her jerky breathing.

The striker moved through the doorway, shot forward and was in the air between one second and the next. There was no sensation of lifting, no delayed dip in her belly or the feeling that usually accompanied a standard take off. Kjar must have noted her confusion because his chuckle danced over the comm.

*"You're impressed, right?"*

Too nervous to full on laugh, she did crack a smile. Kjar was obviously a stellar pilot. She didn't know anyone who could have managed that take off without the slightest discernible shift. Looking down at the instrument panel, she thought about her accident.

Everything had changed from one instant to the next. She'd been on her way back. Close to landing and the world had spun away from her. She'd had no control.

Control. She sat back in her seat. That had been the issue. She'd felt out of control and powerless.

*"Jaycie, how are you doing?"* Kjar asked.

She held up a hand in front of her face and stared at the way her fingers shook. Clenching them into a fist, she said, *"Fine. I'm fine."*

Concerned about them dropping from the sky any minute, worried the jet would malfunction in some fashion but she was fine. The lie left her nauseous and she closed her eyes briefly to get over it.

*"Do you prefer the X-striker from previous years or the current model?"* he asked.

Confused, she faced forward. The answer popped out.  
*“Previous years.”*

Laughter. His laughter rang freely and the tense line of her shoulders subtly eased.

*“It’s the speed isn’t it?”*

She was already nodding though he wasn’t facing her.  
*“Yes. The designer diverted some of the energy for a stronger weapon bank but I still believe faster is better. The less likely chance of an enemy catching you and engaging in an air fight.”*

His reply was earnest and soon they were involved in a sincere debate about the merits of various crafts within the military and out, as well as an array of weapons they preferred. Many of his choices matched hers but when they differed, she found herself enjoying his view on why he felt the way he did.

They were in the middle of a disagreement regarding the pros and cons of a minor policy with Jutak warriors when he fell silent.

“Kjar?” She was immediately worried, her gaze going to the instrumental panel and not seeing anything amiss.

Around her the Enotian sky was lit in brilliant colors. Things were calm up here, her mind at ease with Kjar at the controls.

“Did you think of another point to debate? I still think I’m right,” she teased and waited for his warm laugh.

Nothing. A frown pierced her brows. “Kjar?”

The first stirrings of disquiet hit. She tried to peer around the seat but couldn’t maneuver in her safety harness. Was this his attempt at humor?

“Not funny, Kjar. Kjar!” She banged on the back of his seat and his head tipped to the side.

True fear struck. He wouldn’t pretend or trick her like this. Something was wrong.

The front of the striker tipped forward. Alarm bells went off. Her gaze flew around the cockpit. Lights, warnings and being in a jet feeling out of control. It was her worst nightmare all over again.

“Kjar, please. I need you.”

No response. The striker continued to fall from the sky, her stomach dipping with the motion. This was nothing like the smooth flight pattern he’d had them on. She’d been distracted and almost relaxed.

Another alarm went off. No time to think. Instinct took over and she switched controls to the co-pilot, giving herself access. The striker leveled out immediately. Her feet and hands moved in accordance with memory.

She followed the directional settings and was able to determine the flight path to the transport station. All the while, her heart pumped madly as she worried about the slumped form of Kjar in front of her.

The station was in sight. She signaled ground control. “Mayday, mayday. Coming in fast. Medical emergency onboard.”

She guided the striker in with a level of calm she couldn’t explain. Her landing wasn’t clean, far from it but she got them down and almost ripped the harness off in her haste to reach Kjar.

“Kjar! Kjar!” She called his name frantically and climbed over the seat the moment the canopy rose.

His hair lay limp and listless over his chest. Despite her running a hand over his chest and down his arms, he remained unmoving. She gazed at his still features and everything in her stilled. She couldn’t lose him.

“Please, please.” She pressed a finger to his pulse at his neck and didn’t feel anything.

Someone ran toward them across the tarmac yelling. She hadn’t followed a load of safety procedures, her only goal getting them back on the ground. Thankfully, there were no other jets out today.

“Help me!” she yelled down to the uniformed man.

He pushed a ladder alongside the striker and between the two of them, they dragged Kjar to the ground. She snagged the medi-pack from the front closure pocket of her pants. If she hadn't had her uniform on, if she hadn't been at base when he got her, she wouldn't have had it. So many ifs.

The blond man who'd come to help kneeled across from her on the other side of Kjar. “He's not breathing.”

“I know.” Calm settled over her as she worked. All soldiers received basic medical training and she'd grown up around Bane's mate, Mischka, who worked as a medic assistant in their home with Medic Maku.

She didn't know anything about a Volvians physiology but withdrew an injector with a stimulant. Indecision caused her to hesitate for a split second before pressing it to the side of Kjar's throat. His body jerked and she started her mental count to track.

*Ten, nine, eight.*

Breathing was difficult, her emotions bouncing around inside like an out of control ball. She couldn't take her gaze off of his face as she begged. “Please, Kjar. Please. I'm your one. I'm your one.”

*Five, four, three.*

“Medics were contacted and will be here soon,” the dark-haired man said

She didn't glance in his direction, her complete focus on Kjar. Inside, she continued to count.

*Two, one.*

“If the ten count doesn't get a reaction from the stimulant, you can try a second. But no more,” Mischka had stressed. “Depending on the race, it can cause a heart to explode.”

Kjar hadn't reacted. Jaycie prepared a second injector. Steps pounded behind her but she couldn't afford to take her attention away from Kjar. His survival depended on her right now and she didn't know what was wrong with him.

As soon as she used the second injector his back arched from the ground and settled with a thump. The gasping breath he dragged in was the most beautiful sound she'd ever heard. She fell forward, her arms barely going around his shoulders as she cried. The ends of his hair flickered weakly, several strands coiling about her wrist.

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Jaycie sat beside Kjar's bed in the medic center. Each time someone came in to check on him, she eyed them for additional clues to his condition. According to the last report, he was doing fine. Except he hadn't awakened and that wasn't *fine* to her.

"Jaycie?"

She looked up and jumped to her feet at the sight of her papan entering Kjar's room. "What are you doing here?"

"As Kjar's Unit Leader, I was notified of his presence here," he said as he came in.

Seeing her papan brought a wave of relief. She ran into his open arms and closed her eyes as he squeezed her tight. "I'm so scared, papan."

He patted her back and let her lean on him until he cleared his throat and asked, "How is he?"

She leaned back and tried to unobtrusively swipe at the tears building in her eyes. "They say he's fine but he hasn't opened his eyes."

Her papan stared at her and she fought the urge to fidget. "What about his hair?"

She turned to see Kjar lying so still in the medic bed. The round lights running along the rim of the frame were a reassuring green but she knew they could turn red in an instant. His hair rested in thick waves along the pillow his head rested on and down his chest covered in a medic gown.

They'd stripped him upon arrival, rattled off medical jargon and hooked monitors to him. There were questions about his history she couldn't answer but she'd informed them

of his partial Volvian heritage. Gazes had darkened and sympathy glinted as if it were a foregone conclusion he wouldn't survive.

“Jaycie?” Her papan touched the back of her arm.

When she was little that tone and light touch would have her telling all her woes but she wasn't that little girl any more.

“You fear to share with *me*?” Hurt laced his tone.

She stared into his deep green eyes and nothing but understanding glinted back. When he learned the truth, would he be disappointed in her?

Inhaling a breath, long and deep, she let it out slowly before answering. “His hair hasn't moved at all.”

“Not good.” His lips firmed. “Tell me what happened out there. I thought you were doing sims today.”

She folded her arms over her chest and cocked her hip to the side. He didn't seem the least surprised to find her here and she hadn't shared with either of her parents about the requirements to get her clearance. “How did you find out?”

Her papan boldly met her gaze and arched a dark brow. She sighed. Of course he knew. Someone had told him. Rules didn't always get followed when the request came from members of the great Torkel Alonson's former unit. “I had one last sim required. Kjar came and offered to take me up in a striker instead.”

She waited for him to question how she knew one of his soldiers well enough to be on visiting terms but he asked, “Did you know he was sickening?”

*Sickening?! She looked to Kjar than back to her papan.*  
“Why is he sick? What do you know, papan?”

The frown that creased his brow lowered and his expression grew grim. “He shouldn't be sick. Not if you're his one. His condition has been worsening but I thought the two of you would have resolved it by now.”

She stumbled back a step and a flush heated her cheeks.  
“You...know?”

“That you are Kjar’s one? Yes.”

He stated it simply. She hastened to correct him. “I’m...I haven’t officially accepted.”

He glowered at her and she flinched. “You are his one, Jaycie. Volvians can’t survive without acceptance of the bond.”

The bottom fell from her stomach. Kjar hadn’t said anything about survival. “I don’t understand. What are you saying, papan?”

There was a slight pause before he said, “A Volvian’s hair has sentient qualities. Weakness in the strands and shedding are the first signs of distress in his race. He’s slowly dying, Jaycie.”

A sharp cry escaped her mouth. She moved to Kjar’s side and grabbed his wrist, the thump of his pulse a reassurance she needed after her papan’s words. “He can’t die.”

“I’m sorry. I’ve seen the medic reports as his emergency contact on record. My question is why have you been sneaking around with him if you refused to commit?”

There was so much disappointment in the question, she could hardly hold his gaze. “All this time you knew?”

His hand landed on her shoulder and squeezed. “You’re my daughter. As much as you and your brother like to keep secrets, there isn’t much about you both I don’t know.”

Another flush filled her cheeks. She’d have to talk to Viktor. Clearly, they needed to share with their parents more.

“Being with him isn’t possible. I’ve always wanted to be a Jutak warrior. It’s been my dream for as long as I can remember.”

A dark snarl entered his voice. “Did he give you an ultimatum between being a soldier and being his one?”

“No!” Kjar wouldn’t do that but there was no way the two of them could manage a relationship.

“Then why have you held back from him?”



The tears from earlier filled her eyes once more. “I watched you and maman. I watched Seppi Torkel and Faye. The others. Everyone makes it look easy but I know it’s not. To love someone means to give them your all and it doesn’t leave room for personal goals or dreams.”

Her papan let out a rough growl and spun her around to face him. “Is that what you believe?”

“It’s true,” she retorted in defiance.

“It’s not. Being a Chosen comes with sacrifice on both parts but it also comes with compromise, love, compassion. I wouldn’t have been the Jutak warrior I was without your maman at my side.”

It was as she thought. “Maman had to give up her dreams to support yours.”

“Jaycie,” he drawled her name out in dismay. The scar on his face twitched and his green eyes watched her with remorse. “Your maman has never sacrificed her dreams for me.

“She wanted commitment, love, a family, and she has that. For me, your maman *is* my dream. Being a soldier meant nothing if I didn’t have her love.”

“But...but I want it all. My career...Kjar’s heart. I can’t do both.”

His head tipped to the side. “Why not?”

“Because I’m not as strong as you or maman. I’m not great at everything like Viktor. I’m a disappointment to the family.” She blurted out the worry she’d lived with her whole life.

And was abruptly pulled into her papan’s arms as he hugged her. “If your maman and I have ever made you feel that way, we’re sorry. *I’m* sorry. We love you, Jaycie. As you are. You have *never* been nor could be a disappointment.”

She buried her face in his chest and sobbed. Through it all, her papan held her. When she finally drew back, he tipped her chin up. “Is this why you haven’t accepted Kjar?”

She nodded. “I’ve been afraid of failing. I’m scared I can’t have what I want and that’s Kjar and the Jutaks.”

“Do you love him?” her papan asked.

Another nod. “He makes me feel safe and strong at the same time.”

“Because I love you,” a weak voice whispered.

“Kjar!” She broke away from her papan’s hold and raced to the side of the bed. Silver eyes watched her. His hand lifted and she caught it between both of hers. “You’re awake.”

“There will never be another for me, Jaycie,” he said in a stronger voice.

“I’ll leave you two alone.”

Her papan left but Jaycie barely noticed. Her entire focus remained on Kjar and the loud thumping of her pulse. “You can’t be sure. What if I’m not enough?”

Shifting in the bed, Kjar leaned close to her lowered face and whispered harshly, “You’re enough, sweetheart. You don’t need to be the best or compete with your father’s reputation. Do you hear me? Whether you fail or succeed, it wouldn’t change what I feel for you.”

She grabbed the front of his medic gown, unsure what she planned to do. Her heart clenched tight at his words but he continued in a ruthless tone that sent shivers down her spine.

“I’m yours, Jaycie Bastien. *Yours*. And I want you to be my one. Only you. No one else will do.”

Tears streamed down her face but she couldn’t wipe them away unless she released the hold she had on him and no way she wanted to let him go. Not now after what he’d said. He’d always stated she was his one but she hadn’t allowed herself to believe, or accept it. “I’m really your one? You want me?”

He rested his forehead on hers and murmured, “Yes. Forever.”

The pressure and weight on her shoulders slid off as she breathed out, “Alright. Alright, I can do this.”



## TWENTY-EIGHT

Kjar's recovery once Jaycie accepted being his one astounded the medics and he was released later that day.

"This is the second time I've had to visit you in a medical center. I hope it's the last," Jaycie joked as she and Kjar made their way outside.

He tossed a grin in her direction and climbed into the driver's seat of the hover car her papan had sent over for them to use. He'd left his hair loose and it streamed behind him like a white length of rope, every strand vibrant and bouncing once more.

How had she missed it? Had it been willful denial to not see the way the ends moved slower?

"With you by my side, I'm stronger than ever," Kjar said. "I could probably take a laser blast to the chest without nano armor and be fine."

"Don't even joke about that." She slid into the front passenger seat and waited until he closed the door and settled in his seat. Strands of his hair reached toward her and she stroked the ends before shoving them away from her face. "I'm serious."

The grin on his face was unrepentant. "I like this side of you. Showing your care for me."

Forcing him to hide their relationship was a terrible thing it would take her a while to forgive no matter what he said. "I've always cared about you, Kjar. I love you. My fear held me back from saying it before but my heart is full with my love for you."

He twisted in the seat and reached up to touch her face. "Jaycie, don't blame yourself for any of this. Not me ending up in the medic center and not the fact you weren't ready to commit to me. It is *not* your fault and you're entitled to take your time before giving your heart."

With every word he spoke, a little more of the wall she'd built in her head chipped away. She smiled and said, "I'm so happy you didn't give up on me."

Laughing, he dropped his hand and gripped the steering guide. "As if I could. Back to the Jutak base?"

"Yes. I need to explain to my Unit Leader why I didn't finish my sim."

He glanced over at her. "You still have time. Plus, I'm sure landing the striker at the transport station should count as a successful flight. With a pilot in distress, no less."

Jaycie rolled her eyes and relaxed back in the seat. He could find humor in the situation. She could not. They arrived at the base and before getting out, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and kissed him. Kjar groaned and leaned into the embrace.

Streams of his hair caressed her shoulders and slid across her neck. When she eased back, his eyes glowed with happiness. The difference was startling. If she'd paid closer attention she would have noticed the wariness and how the barriers she placed between them impacted him.

Kjar chuckled her on the chin. "Let the past stay in the past."

"I'll try."

"Comm me later," he said with a flick of his brow upward.

She nodded. "If I'm reinstated and get sent out, it might be late."

His thumb stroked the curve of her cheek. "Doesn't matter how late. I want to hear from you."

"Alright." She hopped out because if she stayed any longer, she'd begged to go back with him to the Ghost Unit compound and spend the day in his arms, thanking the universe he was alive.

Kjar drove off and her comm buzzed in her pockets before she entered the doors to the Jutak base. Grinning, she

answered without checking the contact code, “You miss me already?”

“You thought you disappointed us?” Her maman’s startling cry gave her pause.

“Maman?” She hurried inside, waving at those who called out her name in greeting.

“Kyele just told me that you think you’re a disappointment to us. We never wanted you to feel this way. I love you so much, Jaycie.”

It was unbearable listening to her maman speak in between quiet sniffles. “I know you and papan love me. I’ve never doubted that.”

“But you thought less of yourself,” her maman stated sadly.

Moving toward her Unit Leader’s office, Jaycie did her best to soothe her maman’s distress. “Papan has this huge legacy and you’re so amazing I can’t put it into words. Everyone knows Viktor’s abilities are on par with our saleyo. It made me feel...inadequate. I thought the best way to prove myself was to become a Jutak warrior.”

“Oh, Jaycie. I wish I’d known you felt that way.”

“It’s not your fault, maman,” Jaycie stressed. The last thing she wanted was for her parents to feel bad. They’d done nothing wrong. She’d let fear govern her thoughts.

“Do you know why your papan says I love you always?”

Jaycie stopped outside Caadin’s office. She’d never questioned why her papan phrased his feelings that way to them. “No.”

“When Kyele was on a mission once, he rescued a man who’d lost his entire family in a colony siege. The man spoke to your papan and said his biggest regret would be wondering if they knew how much he loved them because he never said it to them. He told Kyele he’d never have peaceful rest in his remaining years knowing they may have died doubting his love.”

Jaycie's breath caught. "Papan always tells us he loves us."

"Exactly. After that mission, he swore he'd say it upon every greeting or parting from his presence so that we, the ones he loves most, never doubt or wonder where his heart is."

And now she felt worse. She shouldn't have doubted, shouldn't have spent years thinking her family would consider her less. "I'm sorry, maman. I've messed up so bad. With Kjar, papan...you."

Her maman's laugh tickled her ears. "Life isn't about being perfect, it's about learning from your mistakes. Expect a comm from your brother too. He went to Serpine and has been out of contact for some reason."

She didn't know Viktor had gone to see Cerise again. Hopefully, he wouldn't cause an uproar there. The door to Caadin's office opened and her Unit Leader's eyes widened, seeing her standing there. "I have to go, maman. Thank you for the comm."

"I love you, Jaycie."

"I love you too." She ended the comm and Caadin waved her in.

She took one of the chairs placed to the side of his desk and didn't flinch when he took the chair opposite her.

"You missed your sim," he started. "It was a required metric for your return to the team."

She fortified her nerves. This conversation would determine whether she got to continue as a Jutak warrior or not. "Yes, but let me explain."

Caadin listened and when she finished, the corner of his mouth curled up. "Thank you for the additional details but I was going to say your flight and immediate response to save the pilot was noted as exemplary action. The transport station reported in earlier. We consider your actions better than completing a sim on how you'd react in an emergency. With that said, you've been officially cleared for duty. Welcome back, Team Leader Bastien."

Relief filled her and none of the dread Jaycie had expected. She really could do this.

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“Varu has had Shiloh Alonson for approximately seventy-two hours. The Jutak Commander received another message. This one only contained an image file of his daughter being held in a dark cell with a blood stained floor. A message accompanied it saying one would expect more from the daughter of an elite soldier,” Kyele announced.

Though he tried to maintain a neutral expression, Kjar read the rage glowing from Kyele’s eyes. This wasn’t simply another mission, this was personal.

“What’s the plan?” Rook asked, seated on Kjar’s left.

“A Jutak team has been selected for a joint rescue mission with Ghost Unit,” Kyele announced.

“Which one?” Kjar asked. He’d have to let Jaycie know he was leaving soon and wouldn’t be able to meet with her later.

“Raptor Squad.”

Kjar stilled. Jaycie’s unit. His hair tugged at the braids he’d pinned in place. Though much calmer now that she’d accepted the bond between them, he’d need to spend a lot more time around her before the strands recovered from the trauma.

“Is that wise?” Hahn asked. He slid a glance toward Kjar then continued. “Jaycie is friends with the Jutak Commander’s daughter and might not be rational about the situation if we run into problems.”

“Jaycie will do what she needs to do.” Wariness caused the droop to Kyele’s shoulders and for the first time he allowed the team to see the impact this entire situation was having on him.

Not the anger and rage for Varu but the concern and worry for a friend’s daughter. A daughter he’d watch grow up and considered family.

“When do we leave?” Dorian asked.



“Shortly.” Locking his emotions down, Kyele straightened. “We’ll get the go ahead soon and you all will meet with Raptor Squad at the nearby Jutak base.”

After a round of follow up and head nods, the meeting ending. Kjar’s heart raced in eagerness. This would be the first time Ghost Unit worked officially with a Jutak team. It also meant he’d get to be with Jaycie.

“Why are you smiling?” Hahn asked.

Kjar shifted his gaze to glare and sneer. “This better?”

Hahn groaned and walked out. Rook and Seraphina waved on their way to the door. Dorian and Kjar left together. Dorian murmured, “You and Kyele’s daughter. I didn’t think I could be shocked by anything you did but I am.”

Kjar snorted and shoved his teammate on his way out of the door. He could handle the jokes. Nothing they said mattered.



## TWENTY-NINE

Jaycie had never experienced anything this dark in her experience. She knew there would be missions where she'd witness attacks, brutality and loss of fellow Jutak warriors. She just never expected her first time to involve a friend and loved one.

"He'll pay for this," Torkel said harshly as he held a crying Faye in his arms.

The door to the secured room they were in opened. Kjar and his teammates dressed in nano armor and loaded with weapons entered. Her papan accompanied them and his green gaze swept the room, noting the tension.

Leaning against the edge of the table with his hip propped on top, Damiian glared. He'd returned from Marenian and arrived here to participate in the mission to recover Shiloh.

Jaycie bit the inside of her cheek to hold back the tears as she watched her Tante Faye cry in Seppi Torkel's arms. Torkel for his part stared sightlessly at the wall in front of him, features pale and his lips pressed tight together.

Unable to stand here and watch their pain, she moved toward Kjar. She couldn't ask him to hold her like she wanted but being near him eased the wails wanting to escape.

His gaze settled on her face and she knew when he noted her red rimmed eyes. She sniffed and straightened her shoulders with determination. It was easiest to get right to the point. "A package was sent here addressed to the Jutak Commander. Security protocol necessitates everything be scanned and investigated before being forwarded."

It was standard practice and no one had thought anything of the mysterious box that had arrived. She'd been present as one of the leads for the mission and Torkel had been notified as well. Faye wouldn't let him leave and that's how she'd come to be here.

Initially, they'd thought Varu had sent another video. Though why he wouldn't have used Shiloh's comm as he'd done prior didn't make sense.

"What was in the package?" Kjar asked.

Before she could answer, a group in light blue shirts entered. Med techs. The three blonde Enotian women went directly to the opened brown box set on the table, drawing everyone's attention.

Jaycie's gaze followed and a muscle ticked in her jaw. Kjar sucked in his breath as the taller woman reached in with gloved hands and withdrew something. Beside him, Rook let out a series of muttered curses. Color drained from Hahn's face and Dorian walked away without a word.

Her papan growled low in his throat and rushed over to Torkel to grip his shoulder. Faye's head jerked up and she sobbed harder at the sight of him. "Why? Why would he do that, Kyele?"

Kjar's eyes narrowed as he studied what the med tech held. She knew the moment it registered. A severed hand. Varu had sent one of Shiloh's hand to her father.

Gutted. Jaycie was absolutely gutted. The coldness of such an act was inconceivable to her. If Shiloh was still alive, she'd be in excruciating pain. Jaycie refused to let herself think of the alternative.

"We'll need to get this to a lab for verification right away," her papan said over Faye's weeping.

The pain in his eyes stabbed at Jaycie. This was incredibly hard on him as well. She glanced across the room and her gaze locked on Damiian. The Marenian remained silent, his eyes never leaving the bloody appendage.

"That could be anyone's hand," Kjar whispered in an aside to Jaycie. "Varu might be trying to push for a mistake."

"Look at the fingers," Jaycie said. On the finger next to the smallest digit was a thick gold ring. "Nikol gave that ring to Shaya, Torkel's maman, who passed it to Shiloh years ago."

The masculine ring had been refitted for her smaller finger and her friend never took it off.

“It’s not hers.” Damiiian spoke quietly into the emotional room.

Gazes swung toward him. He signaled the med tech, who was preparing to place the delicate hand into a sealed bio container. With a frown, the tech approached him and put it on the table.

Rising from his slouch on the edge of the table, Damiiian removed a stylus from his pants pocket and poked at the stiff hand until he turned it palm side up. “This is not Shiloh’s.”

Torkel drew near, an arm around Faye’s shoulders as she swiped at the tear tracks on her face. Clearing her throat, she asked, “What makes you say that?”

There was desperate hope in the question.

“There are no calluses,” he said simply.

At the firm revelation, everyone frowned. Their gazes bounced from the hand and back to Damiiian. Jaycie admitted to being confused as well. She didn’t understand how he could flatly deny this being Shiloh’s body part without official testing.

“What do you mean?” she asked, coming closer with the need to act, to do something for her friend.

“Shi has calluses on her thumb and forefinger, here and here.” He pointed the specific tip of the digits. “It comes from holding the welderna tightly when she’s building models for her designs.”

“Models?” Faye looked to Torkel who shrugged as well but his focus remained attuned.

Hope rising, Jaycie bent over the hand. She swallowed back bile at studying a body part that belonged to someone if not Shiloh.

Pushing aside her wish for him to be right, she looked directly at the fingertips and gasped. The bottom of the rounded edges were smooth and bare. “Whoa. He’s right. She

complains all the time and I tell her to stop working into the night or to wear gloves but she says she likes to feel the project forming under her hands.”

Conversation exploded around the room and orders snapped back and forth as a plan was quickly put together. Jaycie’s gaze flew back to Damiiian. She caught something the others hadn’t. Shi. Only close friends called Seppi Torkel’s daughter that.

It stood to reason after all her time spent on Marenia the two could be friends but there had been a pause, a slight softening when he said the name that warranted a second look.

She replayed everyone’s reaction in the discovery of the severed hand, including her own. Emotions had instantly gone from fear to horror. Only Damiiian had remained coldly enraged.

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Damiiian’s announcement had thrown the room into a flurry of motion. Kyele and Torkel exchanged rapid fire orders. Jaycie’s Unit Leader, Caadin, joined in with brisk responses to their questions.

Around the room there was an air of hesitant relief mingled with excitement. Kjar fervently hoped the Marenian wasn’t mistaken. Recognizing something as minute as calluses was a stretch but if he proved correct, it meant Varu had sent this to taunt them and cause them to rush into a foolish decision.

“Kjar.”

He looked up when Jaycie called his name. His heart thumped as she came back to his side, her expression drawn. The need to soothe her worry tickled at his senses and the end of his long braid stretched between them to tap her shoulder.

Her eyes sparked and she ran her hand up the bottom half of the length. The strands coiled around her wrist and squeezed then released and fell flat against his shoulder once more.

She drew a deep breath and leaned in to say in a low voice, “A trace came in on the package. We know where it came from and it coincides with the location we believe to be where Varu is hiding.”

“The mission is still a go?” he asked. He wanted to get to Shiloh Alonson as long as soon as possible. If the severed hand proved to not belong to her, the window would be closing on how long before Varu decided to actually injure the young woman.

“Yes. We’re taking a cruiser to go to the location. Ghost Unit will accompany us.”

He nodded. A cruiser meant the strikers would be loaded in the bay. The Alliance keeping the option open for a possible air assault. Gazing down at her, he asked, “How are you holding up?”

A deep sigh. “I’m scared. Not for me but for Shiloh.”

“Ghost Unit and Raptor Squad, prepare to depart,” Torkel announced.

Everyone moved at once. Faye Alonson’s eyes followed the techs and the bio container with the hand. Kjar really hoped they’d have good news and bring back her daughter on this mission.

Anything else didn’t bear thinking about.





# THIRTY

Jaycie crept next to Justice and stopped near the building they had under surveillance. According to their intel, this was where they believed Shiloh to be held. So far there had been no signs of Varu but guards patrolled the area in twos.

Kjar and his team were in position at the back of the building. The plan was to launch a joint assault from the front and rear to shift the attention of Varu's men and hopefully grab Shiloh. A fast and hard in and out if everything worked according to plan.

"Two minute countdown, Jaycie," Justice whispered.

Without taking her gaze from the door, she nodded. "Toren, you're up first. Blast the door and clear the way for us."

"Affirmative."

"Darik and Grier, provide distraction on my signal," she ordered.

"Affirmative," the two men replied.

"Justice, you're with me."

As soon as she finished speaking, the night rang with the sound of laser blasts and explosive booms. Kjar and his team. She tensed, prepared to storm forward. Toren charged for the door and his boot splintered the wooden structure.

Guards came racing from the back. The pffft pffft of Darik's and Grier's weapons filled the air. She leaped to her feet with Justice. The two guards dropped to the ground, clearing the way. Toren waited for her and his brother. Farther inside, she could hear pounding steps and more lasers.

Ghost Unit was providing a loud enough distraction in the back. She held up her wrist and flicked on the interior map on her comm. There was a level below this one and based on the design, she felt sure that's where Shiloh was being held.

"Let's go," she snapped, heading for the elevator at a run.

Justice and Toren burst into the elevator behind her. She jammed the button for the lower level. Her stomach dropped with the motion as the elevator descended. Her heart thudded against her chest and she kept a mental count on their time. How long could Ghost Unit hold Varu's men off?

"She's fine. We're going to find her and she's going to be fine," Toren suddenly said.

Jaycie glanced up. The strain on his face was telling and Justice wore a matching expression. None of them wanted anything to happen to Shiloh. They were too close to this mission but if anyone had tried to pull them, it would have been a fight. She was sure Seppi Torkel knew this and made sure those who loved Shiloh were the ones sent to rescue her.

It went against protocol but he trusted them. This wasn't a standard mission, it was his *daughter*.

The elevator dinged and the doors opened. Toren crouched and went first, Justice followed and Jaycie took the rear.

"Clear," Toren said, sweeping his laser across the empty hall.

"Move, move," Jaycie said.

Justice took off. Every minute they were here was an opportunity for Varu. They made their way in V formation down the hall, Jaycie at point and their weapons held at the ready.

The elevator dinged and they spun around. Hahn and Kjar came through. She relaxed and waited until the two caught up with them.

Kjar wore a fierce expression, gaze narrowed with intensity. This was the first time she'd ever seen him truly in action. Arousal teased at her senses and she flushed at the inappropriate thoughts she had watching his muscular form prowl toward her in his black nano armor.

"Guards are all out. No other presence on the upper level. Your two men are with Dorian and Rook, keeping watch," he reported.

That was good news. Ghost Unit had worked faster than she expected. They moved in single file down the hall and stopped at the first cell. There were no bars or door, just an empty space that reeked of stale linen and body waste. She waved two fingers and Justice and Toren dropped back to cover their rear.

Kjar and Hahn stayed on her heels as she moved to the next cell. A body huddled under a blanket on the ground. Energy bars enclosed the small space.

“Hahn,” Kjar snarled.

“I’m on it.” The big man was already in motion and had a small kit in hand to work on the control panel at the side of the glowing prison bars.

Within seconds the bars vanished and Hahn stepped back. Jaycie rushed inside and Kjar caught her arm. He shook his head and admonished, “Careful. Stay on guard.”

Her mouth tightened but she offered a clipped nod. Being rash wouldn’t help Shiloh. Clutching her blaster in hand, she neared the curled figure. “Shi?”

The body shifted around and groaned. Jaycie went to her knees, staying a respectable distance back. She caught a glimpse of dark hair as a shaft of light illuminated the area and her breath caught. Had they found her?

“Shi?”

This time a broken groan in response. Giving in to the urge, she moved closer and peeled back the blanket from the individual’s head. The sight of the battered face had her falling back on her heels. Eyes swollen closed, a nose clearly broken and lips split and puffy. The woman peeled her lids back and stared at Jaycie without recognition.

“It’s not her,” she called over her shoulder to Kjar and Hahn. “But she needs medical attention.”

“I can help.” Hahn dropped down next to Jaycie and whipped out a medi-pak.

Disappointment tugged at her but she forced the emotion down and stood. Kjar accompanied her to the next cell and the next. Each empty. She grew discouraged and her steps slowed as she approached the last cell. If Shiloh wasn't here they'd have to return empty handed. She wasn't sure how she'd face Seppi Torkel and Tante Faye with the news.

"Jaycie." Kjar tapped her shoulder.

When she faced him, he tipped his head to the side. She followed the gesture toward the last cell. Kjar took care of the energy bars, clearing the way. Sitting upright with her head leaning over the side was a familiar face. "Shi!"

Shiloh jerked and her eyes opened. Her cracked lips parted and she staggered to her feet then fell back against the wall behind her. "Jaycie!"

Jaycie slammed into her and hugged Shiloh tightly. Her friend's body shook with fine tremors. "It's alright, it's alright."

"You came. I can't believe you came," Shiloh mumbled in a scratchy voice.

"Can't let anything happen to my one of my best friends," Jaycie joked.

"You need to get out of here. Varu...Varu wants my papan." Shiloh's eyes flared in panic and her gaze jerked around, landing on Kjar. "My papan didn't come, did he?"

Jaycie ran her hand over her friend's arm and clasped her fingers. "No, he's not here. We're getting you out."

The look of relief on Shiloh's face cut deep. Jaycie tamped down the feelings flailing wildly inside of her. They could deal with the aftereffects as long as they had Shiloh back.

"Can you walk?" Kjar's deep voice rumbled from behind her.

Shiloh tensed and Jaycie eased her hold for Shiloh to see him better. Shiloh's brown eyes darkened. "Yes. I'm not hurt."

Jaycie ran an assessing gaze up and down the curvy figure. She didn't note any obvious injuries. A few stains on the

blouse she wore, a tear in the material gaping to reveal a dark bruise on the flesh below. Her pants were creased and twisted but nothing to indicate an injury in her lower limbs.

Limbs! Jaycie grabbed Shiloh's right wrist and twisted it around, searching. Five fingers in a dirty hand flexed in her grip.

"What? Jaycie, what are you doing?" Shiloh's brows creased in confusion.

Shiloh dropped the hand she held, her heart pounding and grabbed Shiloh's left wrist. Same. Dirty hand. All five fingers. The vise in her chest loosened and she choked out, "Varu sent your papan a severed hand and said it was yours."

Shiloh cried out and grasped Jaycie's shoulders to shake her. "My maman! Did my maman see it?"

Faye had been abducted years before Shiloh's birth. While none of them knew the specific details, it had been horrific. Each of the Jutak warriors who worked with Torkel during that time became somber if the topic was ever brought up.

Unable to lie, Jaycie nodded. "Both your parents saw and believed it to be your hand."

Shiloh's shoulders stiffened and she gritted out, "He needs to pay. I want to punch Varu in his throat."

Kjar snorted behind them then the boom of an explosive shook the building.

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Finding Alonson's daughter sent a spurt of satisfaction through Kjar. Although dirty and a bit disoriented, it didn't seem as if Varu had done any damage. She might have emotional scars from the experience but that could be addressed by medics.

An explosion from above suddenly rocked the building. Rook's voice spoke sharply in his ear comm. "*Hunter Two, status?*"

*"Package found, Hunter One. We are coming out now."*

Satisfaction glimmered in Rook's response. *"Good. We can give you another three then we need to evac before the lack of response from the guards here is noticed.."*

Rook's words spurred Kjar into action. Jaycie smoothed a hand down Shiloh's bedraggled hair. The two women would have to have their reunion later. "Time to move."

Neither hesitated to which he was grateful. He was shocked when Jaycie shoved a spare laser blaster into Shiloh's hand. From what he'd seen and heard, the other woman was into tech development or wildlife. Neither lent itself to fighting. If it came to that.

Jaycie caught his questioning look. "She can shoot."

He grimaced but the confident way Shiloh held the weapon kept him from protesting. Hahn burst into the doorway with a blanket covered bundle cradled to his chest. A slender arm lay on top of the blanket with a thick cloth wrapped over the lower half of the limb. Hahn met his gaze and spoke one word. "Varu."

If this was someone Varu had abducted too they couldn't leave her here. "Rook gave us three to evac."

"Got it," Hahn snapped.

They ran out, going back the way they'd come with Jaycie in the lead, Shiloh and Hahn carrying the woman and Kjar covered their back. Justice and Toren held position at the doorway where they'd waited. Their eyes brightened at the sight of Shiloh with them, Toren reaching over and ruffling her hair.

A quick grin flashed over Shiloh's face and they were off again. Their boots hit the stairs at a run, thundering upward. Adrenaline coursed through Kjar's system while his gaze constant scanned for an enemy target. This was too easy. Varu could be watching them right now from a long range vid and planning to destroy the building at any moment.

Ahead, Jaycie raised a fist. Kjar stopped. In front of him, Hahn froze and the woman in his arms let out a pain-filled

gasp. Shiloh paled but braced her weight and held her laser up in a two-handed grip.

Rook's face appeared in the doorway followed by Dorian's. Tension flowed from Kjar. Rook's gaze brightened when it landed on Shiloh then paused on the woman Hahn held. Instead of asking questions, his Team Leader asked, "Any sign of Varu?"

"Not here," Kjar replied. "There were cells that showed signs of being previously occupied but nothing else."

A grimace flashed across Rook's face. He turned to Jaycie. "Darik and Grier are at the front door. We've eliminated the guards who were here but there's no telling if there are more."

"Evac plan?" Jaycie asked.

"Shuttle is on its way to get us back to the cruiser. Have your team prepped and ready to run."

"Perfect." Jaycie broke away to confer with Darik and Grier, Justice and Toren following behind her.

Rook eyed the woman in Hahn's arms. Hahn's grip tightened and he pulled her closer to his chest. She moaned softly, pulling Hahn's gaze down briefly. For once his jovial teammate wasn't smiling. "She was in a cell when we found the Jutak Commander's daughter. Varu cut off *her hand*."

He bit out the last two words on a snarl. Rook leaned forward, his expression revealing nothing. "What's your name?"

Long lashes fluttered to reveal startling blue eyes amidst the bruises and swollen face. "Zara. Don't leave me here. Please."

"We'll get you out of here," Rook confirmed.

Her eyes closed on a shaky exhale but not before they saw the relief flickering in the blue depths.

Varu had a lot to answer for.





# THIRTY-ONE

Jaycie gasped when the door to her room on the cruiser suddenly opened. Kjar eased inside and closed it behind him. She stood and lowered the nano armor she'd just shed.

Kjar crossed the room toward her and pulled her into his arms. His hair was in a sleek pony tail, the length teasingly flicking at her cheek. She nestled her face at the crook of his neck and shoulder to breathe in his scent. He'd found time to shower like she had based on the soapy aroma filling her nose.

"How's Shiloh?" he asked.

"Okay. I think. She's with the medics and held my hand for the initial check. They think she'll be fine outside the trauma of being abducted."

His sigh stirred the hair at the top of her head. "Kyele notified the Alonsons. They're ecstatic to know we managed to retrieve their daughter back safely."

She'd spoken to both of them as they expressed their thanks for her part in the rescue. "Any news on the woman we brought back?"

Zara hadn't said anything else after passing out on the shuttle to cruiser journey. She'd been rushed to the medics.

"She woke up screaming. Hahn had been waiting outside the door, burst in and as soon as she saw him, she settled."

Strange. Jaycie eased back. "What about her hand?"

"Regeneration serum administered but it may be too late. According to their preliminary examination, the amputation occurred over a week ago."

And Varu had held onto her hand for whatever reason. Managing to take Shiloh hostage must have pleased him to no end.

"Wh—"

Kjar lifted her in his arms, stopping what she'd been about to ask and carried her to the narrow bunk in her room. He

lowered her to the bed and climbed in next to her. “I’ve already sat in a debrief with your father. I want to hold you now.”

Fighting a smile, she wrapped her arms around his waist and laid her head on his chest. Caadin had dismissed their team after congratulating them on a job well done. There was a lot to do when they got back to Enotia. Especially since Varu was still at large.

For now, she’d enjoy this moment with Kjar. Determined to do that, she reached for the length of his pony tail and stroked the white strands. The soft ends curled around her fingers and she found herself smiling.

“I’d like to say the ritual binding words to complete the knowing,” he said. “Are you ready?”

Not sure what was involved, she nodded. Whatever it was, she wasn’t running from him or their relationship any more.

He smoothed back the hair from her face and said, “My heart is her heart. My love is her love. She is what I need and I am what she needs. Together, our bond will unite us until death, for she is all I long for.”

Her skin tingled on the last word. A heavy feeling settled in her throat, the pressure reminiscent of how she’d felt when he’d been in the explosion. “That was beautiful, Kjar.”

“Tell me again,” he whispered.

Distracted by the teasing twists of his hair, she continued to play with it, watching the coils loop about her fingers and asked absently, “Tell you what?”

His rich chuckle spilled forth and he rocked her in his arms. Pulling his hair from her touch, he said, “That you love me. I need to hear it. Often.”

The admission tugged at her. Because of her, he’d been ill. She’d made a promise to never withhold her affections from him again. It would take practice though. She’d resisted her feelings for so long she needed to remind herself that it was okay to share them. “I love you, Kjar. I love you with all my heart.”

He groaned and rolled her beneath him. “I love *you*, Jaycie Bastien.”

She leaned up and nipped his bottom lip. Kjar lowered himself and his weight settled atop her body. She spread her legs and welcomed the feel of his cock as it rocked against her center. “I need to hear it often too.”

And she did. Each time he spoke the words, it healed a little of the doubt that taunted it wouldn’t last or something would snatch this happiness from her.

“Love you, love you, love you.” He punctuated each declaration with a kiss to her temple, nose and lastly her lips.

Her mouth clung to his and she wrapped her arms about his neck to keep him close. Their bodies rocked together and soon they were tossing clothes to the side, rushing to be skin to skin.

Her nipples perked and she pinched them for relief as a fully bared Kjar slid down the bed, parted her thighs and licked up the seam of her with his wet tongue.

“Again. Do that again,” she begged, dropping her hands to clutch the sides of his head.

A hearty chuckle preceded another lick. Moaning, Jaycie fell back and stared at the ceiling while Kjar devoured her and created a wave of passion through her core. Clouds of white hair slid over her body, adding to the stimulation.

“I’m going to come, Kjar. I want you inside me,” she begged.

In answer, he gripped her thighs and kept her immobile for the tongue lashing. Her legs quivered and she tugged on his hair futilely. The low growl he let out and the nip on the inner curve of groin let her know he had no intention of moving.

Crying out, she gave herself up to the pleasure spiraling from her midsection down to her clenching channel. She arched up as the orgasm burst through her, her fingers locked in the mass of white hair spilling around them. Tremors racked her frame in a steady stream until she collapsed on the bed with a whimper.

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Watching Jaycie in the midst of her climax was an incomparable sight. Kjar wiped his mouth on her quivering leg and placed a gentle kiss there. Her body continued to shake and jolt in the aftermath of the orgasm he'd wrought.

A glowing pink flush spread across her skin, the surface of her belly shiny with a hint of sweat. He pushed up to hover above her and glanced down at her face. Her eyes were closed, the red gold tipped lashes resting like a flutter bug's wings on the curvature of her cheeks.

As he stared, her lids slowly lifted. The corners of her mouth tipped up and she smiled. The gesture struck him at the center of his chest like a blow. He *loved* her. Joy and satisfaction resonated at his core. Having her acceptance of the knowing settled the disquiet within him.

Already his hair responded to the change, moving over her body with a vitality that had been lacking recently. He caressed her shoulder and admired the lines of her beneath him. Her hard nipples tempted and he lowered his head to suck one then the other.

Jaycie moaned and cupped the back of his head. He alternated between both, nuzzling the crease between the soft mounds. When Jaycie reached down and stroked his hard cock, he bit back a snarl. She released a hum of excitement and held him in a firm grip as she slid her hand up and down. Ripples of ecstasy coursed down his spine and he thrust into her soft hold.

“Don't make me wait, Kjar.”

It was all the impetus he needed. “Put me in.”

Her breath caught and their eyes met. As he held her gaze, she flicked her thumb over the crown of his arousal. The teasing glint brought a grin to his face. His shifted his hips and the crest dipped at her interest. Jaycie moved her hand to his flexing hips as he thrust forward.

Warmth welcomed him. He rocked back and surged forward again. Her internal muscles clenched and released.

Jaycie dug her nails deep and his nerve endings fired up. Bowed over her, he increased his speed. Desire and the need to come caused his heart to race.

With every pump of his hips, her thighs tightened around him. Her moans fueled him on and soon he was grunting non-stop. “My one. You’re my one, sweetheart.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” she chanted, wrapping him in an embrace he couldn’t escape.

Staring into her eyes, he thrust deep and hard, feeling his orgasm close in. Legs shaking, he pounded into her, fighting the give of the bedding as she rocked up to meet each thrust. Pleasure slammed into him, sending a flare of bright white across his vision. His jaw clenched and he locked his muscles as he buried himself deep and shot his seed in a never ending stream.

The moment it was over, he curled his body around hers and held her close. This was what he’d wanted, what he’d worked for over the last few months. Jaycie in his arms, loving him the way he loved her.

“Kjar?”

“Hmm.” Eyes closed, he squeezed her waist to let her know he was listening but he had no plans to move any time soon.

“If I asked, would you agree to be in a presentation ceremony with me?”

He stilled. This wasn’t a random question. Presentation was a commitment between a couple on Enotia when they wanted to solidify their relationship with another.

“You want to choose me?” he countered, not daring to hope.

“Yes. If you want,” she added as if hesitant he would agree.

His eyes opened and he reached out to tip her head up to face him. A hint of vulnerability marred her expression. Despite their vows of love, it would take a while for Jaycie to

believe she was enough and could manage love and her dedication to the Jutak warriors equally.

Time didn't matter to him. He had his whole life to prove she was it for him. "I want."



## THIRTY-TWO

The next few days were a flurry of activity. Shiloh didn't have much information concerning her capture. Apparently, when she was returning from delivering the water device, a man walked directly up to her and slammed a laser against her temple before she could react.

When she awoke she was in a cell, Varu had her comm, demanding to know how to contact Nikol Wulven and Torkel Alonson. He knew who she was and threatened to torture her before killing her.

Remnants of terror as she told the story of her brief captivity made Jaycie angrier than she'd already been. Caadin questioned Shiloh repeatedly until she finally broke down in sobs. That was the end of that. Torkel Alonson acted with a swiftness and cut all formal questioning of her any further.

On the other hand, the woman Hahn had saved was full of information. A meeting was called, including the members of Ghost Team and Raptor Squad. The room overflowed with those involved with the mission pertaining to Varu Hasteen but Jaycie managed to snag a seat next to Kjar.

Damiian's presence was allowed as a representative of Marenia on behalf of Nikol. Torkel was here due to his role as Jutak Commander along with her Unit Leader, Caadin and her papan as Unit Leader for Ghost Unit.

"Thanks everyone for being here," Torkel started. "Zara Imako has agreed to answer our questions regarding her experience and capture by our target, Varu Hasteen. Please be respectful of any inquiries."

Everyone nodded agreement. None of them wanted to add to the trauma she'd already experienced.

The dark-haired woman sat rigid in her chair, spine straight and gaze direct. The bruises on her face had been healed. She wore her long hair in a sleek tail that fell to the middle of her back. Sharp cheek bones cut through an oval face dominated



by startling eyes a shade of blue so deep they seemed to pierce anyone they focused on.

A synth leather sleeve covered her right arm from forearm to wrist where it ended. Due to the timeframe between Varu's brutal act and the rescue, it was too late for the drugs they'd tried to reinvigorate growth for her hand. She was in the process of being fitted for an artificial hand.

"Zara, please share with us how you came to know Varu," Torkel said in a gentle tone.

"Of course. In order to understand, allow me to explain a few things first." She drew in a deep breath. "I am an Edinu of the Usefi tribe. Among my people we highly value two things for a match to be considered successful—beauty and fighting ability."

Pausing to await a response to her statement, she glanced around the room. No one said anything but the tension increased. It was as if everyone knew something terrible was coming.

Beneath the table, Kjar placed his hand on Jaycie's thigh. The reassuring weight enabled her to keep her breathing even.

Zara placed her sleeve covered right arm on the table and pointed at it with her left hand. "This is the result of my vanity and desperation. I was prideful and let a stranger's words woo me. None of the males in the Usefi wanted me. I am one of the top female warriors, a fighter unrivaled. But I am plain of face and many deemed me not acceptable for marriage—too rough, too unattractive."

She sighed and shook her head in dismay. "This Varu you seek was a master in deceit. I went to a space station not far from my home world to ponder what my future would look like and be content. He approached while I was at an entertainment lounge and expressed an interest in me, spoke kind words and stated he wanted me for his own.

"Like a fool, I invited him to our Edinu colony. He promised to come and declare his affections for me. Returning

home, I maintained the secret of his planned arrival. I was giddy, like an untried girl.”

She snorted on the last, dismay darkening her features as she lowered her gaze. The silence in the room was loud. Jaycie bit her bottom lip and clenched her hands into fists. Varu had preyed on her with no remorse. While Zara wasn't young, she was a woman with feelings and the Marenian had manipulated them. Targeted her admitted weakness.

“When he came—” The first crack in her brave façade appeared as she choked on her words. Breath blew from her mouth in a tortured rasp. She raised her eyes from the table and continued. “He came and slaughtered my people. Killed those of my tribe who were maintaining the homes for our warriors away on a hunt. While *I* was away on a hunt.”

She thumped her fist to her chest and tears glimmered in her eyes. “We arrived back to a massacre. And do you know what he did? He *grinned!* He grinned and moved directly for me, wrapping his arm around my shoulder as he shouted, ‘my love told me how cruel you’ve been to her. I hope this teaches you a lesson.’ Friends, family, those who knew me from birth suddenly looked at me in disgust.

“Then this bastard turned to me and said, ‘are you ready to go?’”

Her brows creased on that part and rage suffused her face in a vivid shade of red. “He asked if I was ready! As if I’d willingly go with the one who’d murdered women and children, the weak and old. I fought him but he dragged me away, kicking and screaming. Because my people believed his lie, none sought to help me. I tried to escape the first night and he did this.”

She fell silent, her lip quivering and held up her arm in the synth sleeve. It was hard to witness and hear her pain. To know she’d trusted the wrong person and suffered in multiple ways for that mistake.

Kjar rubbed Jaycie’s thigh and the soothing touch helped her feeling of helplessness in light of Zara’s pain.

Torkel drew the attention from her and said, “The Edinu reported the attack on the Usefi tribe to the Alliance. Their planet is not within the boundaries and we have no jurisdiction to retaliate but since Varu is already on our radar, the Alliance intends to include the murder of members in an unprotected group in the charges when he’s apprehended.”

“Apprehended?” Seraphina asked in shock. “He should pay for what he did to her people. Pay with his life!”

Rook turned to her but Seraphina leaped to her feet and stormed from the room. Rook rose, paused to look to Kyele and received a nod of approval. Rook raced after his mate.

Seated further down, Hahn’s expression was rock hard, his gaze never leaving Zara’s distraught face.

“Zara, we sympathize with what Varu did to you. We are dedicated in our pursuit to bringing him to justice. Is there anything else you can share to help us find him?” Torkel’s voice softened as he probed for more.

Something flashed across her face, some thought or idea before she shook her head. “Nothing else. He ranted about making someone pay. How he would get his retribution and take what belonged to him. When your soldiers came into where we were kept, I thought it was a trap. Varu hadn’t been there the day before but his guards were constantly coming through to taunt me and the one named Shiloh.”

Anger darkened Torkel’s face as he listened to Zara go on to talk about the beatings and treatment they received. Some of it they’d heard from Shiloh.

After a few more pointed questions, he ended the meeting. Zara would stay a few more days on Enotia in order for the medics to confirm her full recover.

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Kjar stood when everyone else did. Hahn went to help Zara from her seat and left with her. From what he’d seen so far, his teammate was going out of his way to help her and Zara seemed most comfortable with him.

Dorian came over. "I'm going to head back to base and update Zsamei."

"I'll be there shortly," Kjar said.

One by one, the others left until he and Jaycie were the last ones. He cupped her elbow and followed her into the main hall. Jutak warriors strode by, some nodding at Jaycie in recognition.

"Back to work, I guess," she said with a small uncertain smile.

He wanted to kiss her and wipe the look away but in the middle of the hall at the base where she was a Team Leader wasn't the place. He settled for giving her waist a firm squeeze. "Yes. Tomorrow, though. We're still on, right?"

More nerves and her eyes widened. For a brief second, he thought she'd back out. At last, she sighed and nodded. "Yes. Presentation tomorrow."

They hadn't expected to formalize their relationship so soon but when they'd looked at the dates of the upcoming ceremony, they'd realized they could participate now. Kjar wanted Jaycie tied to him by every means possible and had leaped at the chance. To his surprise, Jaycie agreed and she'd been jittery over the last two nights.

"Kjar, we need to get back. Hahn's staying here since Zara feels more comfortable with him around. Dorian left with Kyele," Rook said, walking up next to them with a much calmer Seraphina at his side.

Because he couldn't resist, Kjar kissed Jaycie quickly on the forehead as he started walking backward. "Remember—I love you. I'll see you tonight and then tomorrow, you belong to me."

A grin formed and the worrying expression faded. "You mean you'll belong to me."

He laughed. "We'll belong to each other."



# EPILOGUE

The man explaining the presentation process droned on about instructions and what to do when the women entered the sand filled arena in front of them. Jaycie didn't pay attention to any of it as she waited in the underground tunnel.

Occasionally, fear and nerves caused her to hop from one foot to the other. Dressed in a hooded blue robe that reached her ankles like the other women, she drew a deep breath and tried to mentally prepare herself for what she was about to do.

Presentation was something she hadn't considered for herself growing up. There had been such confusion attached to her feelings about having a Chosen and managing her goal to be a Jutak warrior.

Now with Kjar, some of that was gone. Not all. She still worried she'd mess up and not balance her relationship and her job but Kjar promised to help her every step of the way. And she trusted him. Trusted him to speak up if she stumbled, trusted him to catch her when she fell.

Her toes curled in anticipation and when the women around her burst forward through the arched opening, she surged forward. The crowd in the arena screamed and cheered for their family members participating. She automatically sought her parents.

Her papan and maman stood shoulder to shoulder, watching with approval. The guys from Ghost Unit were there wearing all black uniforms, expressions stoic.

Behind them were the friends she'd grown up with. Raze, his sister, Liv, Justice, Toren, Alaina and Taya. Standing by the barrier at the front was Shiloh. Her friend's smile was a fraction of what Jaycie was used to. It would take time for her to recover from the experience. Jaycie only hoped it didn't permanently impact her open and mischievous personality.

There was only one piece keeping this from being a perfect day. Her brother. Viktor promised to be here if he could but

something had happened on Serpine with Cerise and Jaycie hoped it wasn't as bad as she imagined.

“Go, Jaycie!” her maman shouted, pointing toward the sands.

Heart pounding, Jaycie refocused on why she was here. Turning away from family and friends, her eyes scanned the sea of waiting men standing bare-chested on a large sand covered area. Each wore the traditional loittes of past Enotian warriors. The leather knee length garment was designed to put a male's body on display and declare his strength and ability to care for a family.

Her gaze landed on the man with long, white hair flowing down his back. Around his hips he wore a black leather loitte with precious green stones used in the front. A familiar garment she instantly recognized. Tears burned her eyes and she swung around toward her papan. He caught her gaze and nodded slowly.

She wanted to sob. It hadn't crossed her mind that Kjar wasn't from Enotia and wouldn't have a loitte for today. Most men received the leather garment from family members, something passed down from a papan to his son for generations.

Kjar wore the loitte her maman had bought for her papan over twenty plus years ago. Tears flowed down her cheeks as she continued moving toward Kjar, more certain than ever of the pledge she was about to make.

Silver eyes snared her gaze. Kjar's mouth lifted when he spotted her and a huge smile followed. A warm spark lit in her belly as she took the first step toward him.

The closer she got, the faster she ran until she slammed to a halt directly in front of him. His head lowered immediately and she lifted the Chosen medallion in the air. As she slipped it over his neck, she whispered, “No going back now.”

Kjar straightened and pulled her into his arms. “No going back.”

When the members of the Commissioning body approached, pride filled Jaycie as Kjar announced, “Jaycie Bastien has Chosen. Kjar N’de Rulayin has accepted.”

More screams and stomping of feet occurred. The commissioners moved on to the next couple but Jaycie was too busy laughing as she grabbed Kjar’s hand and pulled him to where their family and friends waited.

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The celebration was in full swing at her parents’ home. Jaycie laughed, danced and practically floated on air from the happiness bubbling inside of her. Two arms curled around her waist from behind and without missing a beat, she leaned into the solid chest behind her.

Kjar tipped his head down, to nuzzle the side of her face as he asked, “Happy?”

“Yes.” More than she could describe.

“I love you.”

She spun in his arms and wrapped her arms around his neck. “I love you so much. Thank you for being patient with me.”

He kissed her forehead and whispered, “I’ll never give up on you. Trust me.”

“I do.”

Kjar would keep her on track by the sheer force of his love. Over his shoulder, she spotted Shiloh sitting off to the side by herself. Damiiian stood behind her chair, glowering at anyone who came close. Allegedly, he was guarding her per his Majad’s instructions.

Jaycie didn’t think Shiloh would be leaving Enotia any time soon after what happened to her which made the likelihood of needing a guard slim. There was more to the Marenian wanting to stay close to her.

“Do you think Damiiian has feelings for Shiloh?” She kept her voice low, not wanting anyone to hear her speculations.



Kjar ran a hand down the column of her back and pulled back to see her face. “He called her Shi. He recognized a severed hand wasn’t hers due to *calluses*. What do you think?”

Put like that, the answer was obvious.

“Enough of that. Save it for later,” Raze yelled, pulling Jaycie away from Kjar.

Her Chosen merely smiled and she twirled away, knowing Kjar would be waiting in that same spot for her to return.

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“You make her happy,” a familiar voice stated.

Kjar arched a brow at the man who came to stand next to him. Kyele kept his gaze on Jaycie playing with Raze as Toren and Justice joined in.

“It’s only fair since she makes *me* happy.”

“That’s all I want for my children. Happiness and peace of mind. Don’t ever break her heart, Kjar.”

The threat was uttered calmly, no increase in volume or dark glance. Then again, it wasn’t needed. He didn’t want to be on Kyele’s bad side.

“Volvians believe that if we accept the knowing and love our one, we will only have peace in our lives. Jaycie’s my one. I have no doubt she is all I’ll ever want or need.”

Kyele inclined his head at him and clapped him on the shoulder. “Good enough.”

He walked away to join a group of Enotia’s finest Jutak warriors to ever serve. Kjar recognized each of the former soldiers talking with Torkel. Arak, Bane, Jaron, Rydak and others he’d only seen in vids or holo images.

Rook and Dorian walked toward him, holding hands with their women. One person was missing from the group.

“Where’s Hahn?”

“Went back to check on Zara,” Rook said.

“Did she remember anything new regarding Varu?” Kjar asked.

Seraphina smirked. “I think Hahn has a crush on her. He spends more time at the medic center than at base.”

“I think it’s good that she has someone to lean on right now,” Zsamei added, her gaze dark.

She’d had her own run in with someone in an attack. Kumar had killed one of her friends and almost killed her during a failed mission to entrap the former Jutak warrior.

Jaycie’s laugh rang out, drawing Kjar’s eyes. His heart thumped watching her surrounded by the people she loved and worked with. Raptor Squad had stayed to celebrate the presentation and she had her head bent listening to her Unit Leader talk.

As if feeling his gaze, she lifted her eyes and met his stare. Her lips pursed and she blew him a kiss.

“Look how the mighty have fallen,” Rook said with a smug grin.

A flush heated Kjar’s neck. “Fuck you.”

Rook’s loud burst of laughter followed Kjar, his legs already carrying him across the distance to be near Jaycie. She stretched out an arm toward him and he hugged her to his side.

They leaned against one another and he could see them doing that for many years to come.



## Author's Note

Writing a romance for Kyele and Joni's daughter (*Kyele's Passion*) was amazing. I know these characters, their parents, their children. It's like my brain opened and gave me this secret peek inside at their lives. I'm pleasantly surprised and having so much fun peeling back the layers of the original Jutak warriors' children.

I hope readers enjoyed watching Jaycie struggle to find her place, accept love and still be the Jutak warrior she's always dreamed of being. To me, she's a perfect blend of her parents. I really, really like her.

Then of course we have the other children! I loved getting these glimpses of them.

We have one last Ghost Unit member to do (YAY for Hahn) and for those who have asked, yes I intend to do Viktor's story. LOL. It's no secret that his heroine is Cerise Dahreel, the daughter of V'hor and Eva from *V'hor's Nestmate*. And potentially the new Supreme Matire? \*gasp\*

I'm not sure which of the children will also get stories but I know Torkel and Faye's (*Torkel's Chosen*) oldest daughter, Shiloh, for sure. The rest will gradually come to me.

If you enjoyed this story, please share a review at wherever you bought the book. If you want exclusive early looks and VIP peeks, sign up for my newsletter at my site [www.michellehowardwrites.com](http://www.michellehowardwrites.com).

As always, thank you for loving my books, my characters and my series.

Michelle H.



## About the Author

USA Best Selling Author, Michelle Howard lives in a happy fantasy world where she writes sci-fi and paranormal based romances. Love stories have been a staple in her life since she discovered some of her favorite romance novels by classic authors like Judith McNaught, Julie Garwood and Johanna Lindsey.

I love to hear from fans so please reach out to me. If the mood hits you, leave a review.

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