

LAURIE ROMA



A 3013 NOVELLA

3013: OBSESSION

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3013: THE SERIES

Laurie Roma

THE 3013 SERIES

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3013: OBSESSION

As a former undercover agent for the Alliance, Zenix Li is used to living a life of danger. But as the new Chief of Security on Evo, he is ready for a little peace and quiet. However, his plans take a drastic turn the moment he meets his superstar mate, Ayla D’Nye.

D’Aire singer Ayla D’Nye has millions of fans throughout the known universe, but her celebrity status comes at a steep cost. While most of her followers are content to simply enjoy the music she creates, some of their devotion has taken a darker turn. When admiration turns into obsession, will Zenix and Ayla’s love survive the threat stalking them, or will the price of fame be their end?

3013: OBSESSION

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DEDICATION

To all the artists who have experienced the scary side of
fandom.

PROLOGUE

THE WORLD HAD changed in the year 3013.

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

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

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

CHAPTER ONE

ZENIX LI HATED crowds, but as the new Chief of Security on the planetoid Evo, he was constantly surrounded by them. He still had to ask himself daily if he'd lost his damn mind by agreeing to officially leave the Alliance for the private sector, but then he remembered all the perks that came with his new position.

The best of which was not being under the perpetual threat of torture and death.

Well, at least most of the time.

Ever since Zenix had graduated from the Academy, he had been living a life of constant danger. Part of that was because he'd been stupid enough to admit to developing a unique gift a few years after he'd gone through testing and had been given the enhancements.

All enhanced Elites were bigger and stronger than the average citizen, but only a select number of people ended up getting an extra gift or two. Those individuals went through advanced training to develop those abilities, and for Zenix, figuring his out had been akin to torture.

At first, he hadn't noticed anything was different. He'd assumed he had gotten the same enhancements as most of his peers, but after a few years at the Academy, he'd started having terrible nightmares. It wasn't every night, but they'd happened often enough that it began bothering his sleep. The dreams were a nuisance, but they hadn't really started concerning him until a few months later. That was when he'd

finally realized that the events in his nightmares were actually starting to happen in real life.

After he'd understood they were more than simple dreams, he'd reported it to his instructors. In order to test what kinds of premonitions he could have, those sadistic bastards had put him through a series of tests. Once it was determined that he could only predict incidents where his own life was in danger, he had been subjected to a barrage of sneak attacks, beatings, non-lethal poisons, and several other crazy situations.

Suffering through months of that torture had been utter hell, but the Alliance had finally classified him as a Class-B Precog. Since his premonitions were specific to events in his life only, he wasn't powerful enough to be a Class-A Precog, who were considered better because their premonitions or views of future events helped more people and dealt with a wider range of circumstances.

Zenix's premonitions were also pretty short-term, only spanning between a few hours to a few days into the future. That wasn't much of a warning, but he couldn't really complain since it was more than other people had. His precog abilities allowed him to effectively change his own fate by avoiding certain situations or formulating plans to counter whatever was going to happen.

As time went on, he'd also developed another ability he liked to call his sixth sense. If he was anywhere near a dangerous situation, his skin would prickle with electricity like tiny shocks. It was similar to how people described their hair standing on end or getting goosebumps when their intuition kicked in, but for him, it was more intense.

And the bigger the threat, the more discomfort he felt.

Although he'd been a strike force commander, he hadn't worked with a full team. Because of that, he had been considered more of a spy than a soldier. That had given him more autonomy in his work, but it had also left him at the mercy of commanding officers who had no issue with putting him at risk for their own gain.

Over the years, he'd had missions all across the known universe. He'd been in rebel camps, on cargo freighters, in several space stations, and on a few different planets. Some assignments only took a day or two to complete, while other undercover work lasted for months. He had cultivated his own network of informants and associates along the way and had compiled one of the most extensive mission files of any Alliance operative.

That was why he'd felt burnt the fuck out.

While he had enjoyed the work, it had been draining. He had taken pride in kicking ass and taking down the bad guys, but he'd barely had time to decompress from one mission before he'd been sent on the next. He knew he should have insisted on taking longer breaks in between, but he had believed in the work they had been doing.

Until he'd simply had enough.

Deciding to leave the Alliance had been a much easier decision than he'd thought it would be. Normally, a soldier in good standing with as many commendations as Zenix had shouldn't have had an issue leaving for the private sector, but the Alliance hadn't been as ready to let him go. While there were other precogs who had similar abilities, there weren't

many who had the same experience. On top of that, there weren't a lot of people who were willing to take the risks he had over the years.

When he'd gotten some pushback, he had asked his friend Roman Newgate to clear the path for him. Not only was Roman a former regent, he was also a current advisor to the council. He'd hated to bother his friend, but as an orphan with no family, Zenix had no one to officially back him up. He shouldn't have worried, though. Roman had been more than happy to help.

Intimidating the officers into doing the right thing had been easy for the former regent. He said it had alleviated his boredom, but Zenix knew that Roman was plenty busy now that he was mated to a powerful Dragon Warrior and a father to newborn twins. Zenix had babysat for the couple one evening, and he'd learned firsthand just how utterly terrifying and exhausting it was to be around magical babies. He'd nearly had a fucking heart attack when the twins had literally floated themselves across the room to greet him.

Thankfully, he no longer lived on Earth, so he could be taken off the babysitter roster. The twins' intelligence developed a lot faster than human babies, so they had been able to understand him well enough for all three of them to survive the night. He'd enjoyed spending time with them and thought they were cute as hell, but he freely admitted he'd still been more scared of them than he was a hostage negotiation.

Before he had retired, he had gotten a new job offer from the Artane brothers that had initially sparked his decision to leave his undercover work. When he had first heard that

Magnus, Nicolo, and Razar Artane had quietly purchased a planetoid they were planning to make into the site for their new interactive video game, he'd thought they were crazy. He had been friends with the Artanes long enough to know it was never safe to bet against the brothers, though.

Especially when it came to innovative technology.

Evolution, the new game the Artane brothers had created, was not only an advanced multi-layered survival game, it also combined several different types of games into one complex universe. Once a player entered the system, there was pretty much no limit to what they could do. Players could live out their wildest dreams. They could create a whole new fantasy life or construct an exciting extension of their own reality.

Gaming was already a huge industry, but playing Evolution by the normal means hadn't been innovative enough for the Artane brothers. Of course, the game could be played by the standard formats, such as on wrist units, screens, virtual reality, and holo-tech. However, Artane Electronics had taken things to the next level by creating Evo, the planetoid that had been magically terraformed to be the live-action version of the Evolution game.

Evo was located near a giant blue star and was made up of several large islands with different landscapes and miles of vibrant blue water. Each island was host to a different setting or stage within the game, and was supported by a complex electrical grid, advanced nanotech, and an extensive network of satellites that surrounded the planetoid.

While the entire planetoid was essentially one giant amusement park, it was also home to several hundred

employees. There were a large number of people who worked in the command center, security, and on the various maintenance crews. Then, there were the staff members who worked at the luxury resort, medical centers, shops, and other businesses.

The only thing not under the Artanes' strict control was Wonderland, the massive sanctuary that was located on the main island. Wonderland was run by Fenris, Raek, and Charm Barra, and was practically big enough to be considered its own sovereign city. The Barra siblings had recruited their own staff for the sanctuary as well as for the casino that was run on the property.

There were still more stores and restaurants to be opened in the new towns and villages at each of the various game locations, but the Artanes were still going through the process of deciding what to keep in-house and what spaces to lease to outside companies. Inviting some established businesses to Evo would be beneficial to all parties involved, but they wanted to make sure they chose the right partnerships. Just like they had carefully selected each of the supervising positions, including choosing Zenix as Evo's new Chief of Security.

He had agreed to work for them before the Evolution project had even been completed since the Artane brothers' offer had been too damn good to pass up. Not only was he making a shit-ton of credits, he'd also been given luxury living accommodations, gourmet meals, and all the additional perks that came with being a top-level employee for Artane Electronics.

His only demand had been that he be allowed to bring a few individuals he trusted to serve on the security staff with him. Zenix had never been much of a gamer, but Travis McClain, his friend and the first selected member of his team, was. Travis was the computer expert he had worked with during each of his missions. He had met Travis back in the academy, and the two of them had become fast friends.

While they had very different personalities, they both had rebellious souls and an underlying problem with authority in common. Travis had originally failed to become an elite after he had purposefully bombed testing. He'd had no interest in joining the military, but when he'd gotten caught hacking into an Alliance network, he had been given the choice to serve time at the Academy or in prison.

The choice had been easy to make.

Taking the easier route, he had gotten enhanced and had become an Elite. Once Zenix had started going out on missions, Travis had been paired up with him as support. While Travis claimed it was luck, Zenix knew it was because he was the only one who could control the snarky computer expert.

Travis freaking loved living and working in a mixed reality game and was now in nerd heaven as one of the specialists in the command center at headquarters. He was also one of the members of the security team that worked exclusively on problems inside the game, using virtual reality or holo to enter the system to resolve any issues.

Zenix's other two choices for his security team were a little less thrilled by the gaming aspect of the job, but they loved the

physical aspects of exploring the different landscapes on each island.

Anissa Lazuli, a lethal Helios warrior with a hardcore grudge against anyone who preyed on the weak, had been chosen as his second-in-command. Zenix had met Anissa during one of his early missions. He had developed a healthy dose of respect for her exceptional fighting skills and her unwavering sense of honor.

While her abilities made her perfect for security work, her personality took some getting used to. She was often seen as being kind of robotic and lacking emotions, but he knew her brain was just wired a little differently. That was why she had been kicked out of her tribe and had been living as a bounty hunter for most of her life. He had thought it would be a long shot to ask her to join his team, but she had been considering settling down in a place she could call home, so the timing had been perfect.

The last addition to his team was Xian Renn, a Krytos-D'Aire hybrid who had been instrumental in helping him gather intel for several of his missions. Xian had the big, muscular frame of a Krytos, but his seeker ability came from his D'Aire half. As a seeker, he could hear the thoughts of whoever he touched, so he normally wore special gloves to protect himself.

Not that many people were willing to get close to him.

Besides being physically intimidating, Xian had one iridescent blue eye and one black eye, which most people found a little disturbing. He also had a fierce expression on his face most of the time, so very few individuals could hold his

gaze for long. Some might have chosen to wear dark glasses to hide his unusual eye colors, but Xian didn't give a shit about pretenses.

Zenix was pleased his friends had agreed to join him on Evo and thought they had adapted to their new home better than he had. To be honest, he thought it was pretty fucking strange to be living and working in a video game simulation. Initially, he'd been worried that being the Chief of Security on Evo would be the equivalent of working in an insane asylum where everyone had voluntarily signed up to be there, but thankfully, it wasn't that bad.

Sure, there were a bunch of freaks running around playing make-believe, but that was sort of how he felt everywhere he went. He did admit that some of the people he'd met on Evo were a little strange, but so far, he'd had no issues with anyone besides a few drunk and rowdy revelers. He definitely wasn't used to the slower pace yet, but not having to worry about people constantly trying to kill him was kind of nice.

Evo was a place where people could come and have fun, relax, and experience the extraordinary, but that was only the surface. At its core, Evo was an advanced, groundbreaking ecosphere formed by integrating nature, technology, and magic into an innovative world.

Some might argue against a new society structure being created by a corporation, but Zenix gave the Artane brothers props since they were basically in charge of governing a whole planet on top of supervising the entire game world. Because of that, the security team was also a police force and fire and rescue team rolled into one.

For now, he was in charge of approximately a hundred people on the security team. Thankfully, his friends and several other capable commanders were helping him run things, but he knew that their division would only continue to grow as time went on.

Besides being a physical presence, they were also in charge of monitoring the safety of the players inside the game system. But that wasn't as difficult as it seemed since they had some unique help with that.

Evo wasn't just the nickname for the planetoid. It was also the name of the artificial intelligence system that managed all of the tech on-site and in the game. But it had turned out to be so much more than a mere computer system. Since the Artanes had programmed it with the latest nanotech and adaptive learning capabilities, Evo now had a human-like personality that was almost as annoying as the real thing.

“Chief Li, your vital signs are concerning. You should take a break and eat something before the next wave of shuttles arrive. Adequate nutrition is essential for humans to function at optimal levels.”

Speaking of the damned AI system, he thought wryly as Evo's voice came through the earpiece he was wearing in order to connect with his team. The nanotech tattoos he had on his body gave him easy access into the system, but Evo had taken that as permission to constantly monitor him like it did the Artane brothers and their mate, Brielle.

“Evo, I told you I don't need meal reminders,” he grumbled. “And stop monitoring my damn vitals.”

He had spoken softly, not wanting to draw attention to himself as he observed the crowd of excited visitors that had just arrived on the planetoid. Thankfully, the various greeters, porters, and guides were there to sort out the mess of people and make sure that everyone got to their final destinations safely. Most of them would be staying at the main resort, but a few of the more adventurous souls would be staying on some of the different island locations.

Those individuals needed to be directed to the teleporting pads located on the other side of the transport center. The teleporting pads allowed people to get from one island to another in a blink of an eye. While the technology was new and arguably experimental, the Dragon Warriors who had helped terraformed the planetoid had magically enhanced the teleporting pads to ensure they were the safest and fastest mode of transportation.

“Unable to comply, Chief Li. As an important member of our family, ensuring your safety and welfare is one of my top priorities. You have been on duty for twenty-two hours and only had approximately three and a half hours of sleep before that. All you have consumed today is coffee, an energy bar, and half of the sub sandwich you stole from Travis when you stopped at the command center this afternoon.”

“Coffee. I just need more coffee,” Zenix muttered.

It was odd to have an AI system consider him family, but he just rolled with it. The Artanes and their mate were the alphas of the entire planetoid, and all of the people who worked there were essentially their pack members.

And Evo watched over all of them.

While it was a meddling, intrusive entity, Evo was also pretty helpful and made Zenix's job a whole lot easier. It had taken him some time to get used to having it popping in to randomly speak to him whenever it wanted, but when he'd started thinking of Evo as just another member of the team, it didn't seem so bizarre.

He was aware that he was running on empty, but he only had a few more hours left before the last of the large shuttles arrived. Now that the Evo project had entered the beta testing phase before the official launch of the Evolution game, the place was flooding with people who had been invited for the soft opening.

That group included friends and family members of the staff, major business connections of Artane Electronics, some hardcore gamers, and popular social media influencers. People had only started arriving a few days ago, but word was already spreading throughout the known universe about the mixed reality version of the game on the planetoid.

That had started the moment the coveted invitations had been sent out.

Zenix felt it was important to be present for the arrivals just in case anything happened. He was also scanning the crowd for anyone who wasn't supposed to be there, since it was better to catch them before they even had a chance to leave the transport center. The special sunglasses he was wearing allowed the system to scan everyone he saw, making it easy to pick out anomalies in the crowd.

Like the two crashers he'd caught yesterday. The two males had been flagged as disruptive social media

personalities who had tried to sneak onto Evo in order to cause problems. They were well-known for crashing events to play mean-spirited pranks on unsuspecting individuals while filming the chaos for their fans to enjoy.

Zenix and a few other security personnel had quickly caught the two intruders and had detained them in a holding cell on the lower level before the rest of the guests had even realized there was a problem. Once they had been thoroughly interrogated and had the shit adequately scared out of them, they had been escorted to a waiting shuttle that had transported them off the planetoid.

New Vega, the floating space station, was in orbit close by, so they weren't going to be stranded out in space or anything like that. Although the Krytos in charge of New Vega were used to dealing with troublemakers, Zenix had still sent them a heads-up.

If the security team treated trespassers like enemy combatants, that was their right. Whether or not anyone liked it, the planetoid was privately owned, which meant the Artane brothers' word was law there. Besides setting a few ground rules, they had pretty much left security matters completely in Zenix's hands, and he was determined to set a standard of keeping everyone as safe as possible.

“Evo, tag the female with the big floppy hat and sunglasses. Is she hiding her face, or is that just a questionable fashion choice?”

Less than a heartbeat later, Evo responded. “*That is Maureen Colder, a famous vid star who is also a very active gamer with a large following. She is most likely trying to keep*

her identity a secret until she is ready to be seen by her fans. It is confirmed that she is on our invite list, along with her manager and assistant.”

Several video clips appeared on the lens of his sunglasses, allowing him to view the proof himself. Satisfied with that explanation, Zenix continued to study the crowd. A few minutes later, Xian walked over to join him. He was wearing the same uniform of black pants and a matching jacket that was actually made of lightweight armor. He was also wearing a similar set of special sunglasses. Unlike Zenix’s darker lens, Xian had his set to transparent mode so his dual-colored eyes were visible.

Holding out an insulated tumbler in his gloved hand, he said, “Damn, you really do look like you need this.”

Accepting the tumbler, Zenix flicked the top open to take a deep, satisfying inhale of the dark brew inside before taking several long sips. “Thanks.”

“You should know that Evo made me add a vitamin booster to that.”

Zenix just grunted in response.

“Isn’t it weird that a computer system is telling you what to drink? I mean, she can basically monitor everything we do, say, and eat on this planetoid. That’s strange enough, but those nanotech tattoos you’re wearing also gives her access to your insides, too. That’s kind of creepy, don’t you think?”

Zenix shot him a side-eyed glance. “No one is making you get the tattoos.”

Xian gave a mock shudder and held up one gloved hand. “That would be a hell no for me. The last thing I need is someone else in my head. It’s bad enough hearing everyone through this damn earpiece.”

Since the seeker had made that clear from the very beginning, Zenix had never pushed it. While Zenix, Anissa, and Travis had been willing to get the nanotech tattoos because it gave them access to the entire system, Xian had been a hard never-going-to-fucking-happen.

“Any problems over at the resort?”

“Nope. Everyone is just settling in or walking around taking a tour of the place. I spoke to Fenris Barra earlier, and he said they are pretty busy over at Wonderland Casino already,” Xian said, mentioning the sanctuary that was close by the resort on the other end of the mainland. “They invited so many damn people here for this beta testing that I don’t really see it being any different than the official opening.”

“Hard to believe, but this is only a fraction of the people that will be coming to this place. The holo-center is already packed, and so are the VR stations. It will be worse once this place is open to the public, though. Anissa just reported that her team had to rescue a bunch of assholes from the Ice Palace location who didn’t have proper winter clothing on. They really thought it was going to be like a holo-room, and not real ice and snow.”

Xian snorted out a laugh and shook his head. “Even with the proper gear on, we almost froze our asses off when we tried it out a few weeks ago. I hate the cold almost as much as I hate crowds.”

“I hear that,” Zenix muttered. “Shit is about to get crazy from here on out. I’d say the next few days should be a little easier since everyone will be busy trying out the game, but this weekend will be next level since everyone will be here on the mainland for the big opening ceremony and concert.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“Thankfully, I’m off in a few hours, so I’ll be able to head home and catch some sleep before I come back here in the morning and go over the—”

“Negative, Chief Li. I have already reported your lack of sleep to the alphas, and they declared that you are not to step foot back on the mainland tomorrow,” Evo cut in.

“Hear that? Your AI overlord has spoken,” Xian teased with a chuckle. “Actually, you really do look like shit. You need a day off...and to be honest, we need a day off from you.”

Zenix snorted out a laugh before downing some more coffee.

“You’ve checked over everything multiple times and made sure we have a workable plan for every potential scenario we could think of. And we’ve got every sector covered with more than enough people. You need to trust your damn team more.” Xian’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Unless there’s something worrying you that you haven’t told us about. Did you have one of your freaky dreams?”

Zenix shook his head. “It’s not that. It’s just...I have a feeling. But it’s not the same as it usually is.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“I’m not sure how to describe it. I feel energy tingling along my skin, but it doesn’t sting or hurt. It’s just there. I’m not sure if this is a warning or if I’m simply anxious about the opening. We have to make sure everything goes off without a hitch. I need to earn my ridiculous salary, after all.”

“We all do,” Xian shot back. “So, why don’t you head home and leave this to the rest of us? Unlike you, I got a solid eight hours of sleep last night because I’m not a fucking psycho workaholic like you.”

“That sounds like an excellent plan,” Evo cut in. *“And remember to eat something before you go to sleep. Shall I place an order for you at one of the restaurants here on the mainland? Or will you be using the food console at home?”*

Since Evo gave him access to every eatery on the planetoid, he could order anything he wanted from the comfort of his home.

“I’ll just wait until I’m home.” Zenix continued to study the crowd as he said, “Remember, we’ve got the last of the VIPs coming in tonight. Two of the bands that are performing at the concert arrived earlier today, but we are still waiting for —”

“I know, I know.” Xian rolled his eyes. “Word is that Constantine Comet has been partying on New Vega over the past few days, so he might be late. The band Contagious has been traveling with Ayla D’Nye, so they should all be here on schedule. I know Ayla, so I will personally escort them to the resort after they land.”

“We also have—”

“Stop being a pain in the ass and go home,” Xian growled, out of patience. “Or I’m going to knock you out and put you to sleep.”

“Thanks, but I think I’ll decline that lovely offer.” Zenix chuckled as he slapped Xian on the shoulder. “Notify me if anything comes up.”

“If anything comes up, I’ll handle it myself, you fucking nag.”

“That’s the team spirit I like to hear,” Zenix said cheerfully as he walked away.

CHAPTER TWO

ZENIX WOKE WITH his heart pounding and his pulse racing, but it wasn't from a nightmare. What he'd just dreamed hadn't been disturbing in the normal sense. Instead, it had been the most vivid erotic dream he'd ever experienced, and that was far more troubling than someone trying to kill him.

Stars, what the fuck did that say about him?

It wasn't a secret that Zenix had avoided bonding like the fucking plague. Living most of his life working undercover hadn't exactly been ideal for having a relationship. At least, not the lasting kind. Since he had taken the job on Evo, more than a few females and several males had made it clear they were interested, but he wasn't. Not only was he too damn busy, he also felt a slight sense of panic every time he even thought about dating someone, even casually.

He wrote that off as courtesy of his abundance of trust issues.

While he wasn't opposed to settling down with someone someday, he was in no rush to make that happen. Besides, he was looking for the right person, not just someone to fill a gap right now. He didn't want to waste time dating just to be with someone. That would just end up pissing him off. Some people minded being alone, but he didn't. In fact, he treasured the quiet moments of peace and quiet since they were so rare.

That was the main reason he had chosen to live on a small, secluded island a few miles off the coast of the mainland. Since he was constantly surrounded by people all day, Zenix appreciated the silence he found at home. Although he shared

the island with Travis, Anissa, and Xian, there was enough distance between their homes to give each of them plenty of space.

Zenix and Travis had both built their homes close to the beach. While Zenix preferred to be close to the water, Travis was fine wherever he had access to his computers. And since all of their homes had gotten magical upgrades, they never had to worry about losing power.

Anissa had chosen to put her dwelling in the middle of the jungle. She enjoyed prowling through the trees in her shifted form, and often spent her days off sunning herself on one of the flat rocks near the waterfalls close to her house. She also patrolled the island in her cat form every night, needing to make sure their island was free of intruders before she attempted to sleep.

Xian had built his own hideaway high up on the side of the mountain located on the island. Since he had wings, it was easy for him to get there, and since he was borderline fanatical about people touching his personal things, extreme isolation was ideal for him. Very few people knew that his seeker abilities allowed him to occasionally pick up residual thoughts if he touched something right after another person did. Because of that, his home was his sanctuary and the one place he was safe without wearing gloves.

There were a few guest villas on the other side of the island, but so far, none of them had been used yet. While there were a few roads, access was extremely limited. Luckily, Zenix, Anissa, Travis, and Xian each had their own teleporting pads. They also had access to a central garage that was stocked

with several vehicles, including a private shuttle, hover-cycles, off-roaders, jet skis, and a couple of boats.

Glancing at the clock, Zenix sighed as he rubbed a hand over his short black hair. He'd only been out for a few hours, so he knew he should just go back to sleep. Instead, he got out of bed and tossed a pair of gray sweatpants on over his boxer briefs. Not bothering to turn on the lights, he made a detour to the kitchen to grab a beer, then headed out to the back deck. The deck had a great view of the beach and the gazebo at the end of a small dock where his personal teleporting pad was located.

He sat down on the wide porch swing he'd built himself and used one foot to push it in a slow, rocking motion. Leaning back, he relaxed and simply enjoyed the view. One of the moons was full, while the other one was a perfect crescent in the night sky. Moonlight glittered on the surface of the water, but the rolling bioluminescent waves created its own display of lights that was fascinating to watch.

Back on Earth, he used to go swimming almost daily, but since he had moved to Evo, he hadn't gotten up the courage to go out into the ocean yet. They didn't know enough about what type of creatures lived in the water there, and he wasn't willing to risk something taking a bite out of him just for the sake of a little exercise. Thankfully, there was a lap pool around the side of the house and a magical hot tub filled with purple gel that could heal any aches and pains he might have.

Initially, Zenix had been slated to move into living quarters on the mainland, but his desire for solitude had made the island the perfect alternative. Since the Vyper brothers had

already been there terraforming the planetoid, it had been easy enough to ask the Dragon Warriors to build something for him.

He had gotten to know the Vyper brothers when they had been in Zion visiting their sister. Zenix had just finished up his last mission for the Alliance when he'd met them. The Vyper brothers were intimidating as hell, but they were a lot less scary than their older sister, Jade. Not that he would ever admit that out loud. While he'd been surprised when they had invited him to travel around Earth with them, playing tour guide had given him a well-deserved break.

When he had asked them to create a house for him, he'd never expected a freaking mansion. His home was two wide levels built out of glass, black stone, and a shiny black metal that gleamed in the moonlight. Since the place was protected by magic, he didn't have to worry about storms breaking the windows or pretty much anything else.

Zenix drank his beer as he watched the lights dancing along the waves. Once he'd gotten home, he had kept his promise and had eaten something, opting for a large bowl of noodles in a spicy broth with slices of marinated steak and a selection of vegetables. After he'd finished, he had taken a long hot shower, then he'd fallen into bed.

But the dream had woken him.

As hard as he tried, he couldn't recall the details. Who she was, what she looked like...it was all a blank. But he remembered the sweet heat of her kisses, and how smooth her skin had felt beneath his seeking hands. She'd felt perfect in his arms...like she had belonged there.

And that thought scared the shit out of him.

Movement down on the beach had him tensing, but he relaxed again when he realized it was just Anissa and Nicolo Artane. Since they hadn't arrived using the teleporting pad, Anissa had probably been out patrolling the island. Seeing the large Krytos male there so late was a surprise, though.

"I wondered if you would still be up," Nico said as he walked up the steps to the deck.

"I went down for a few hours."

"It wasn't enough," Nico stressed. "You still look like shit."

"So, everyone keeps telling me," Zenix muttered.

Without asking, Nico headed straight for the minifridge that was located in the small outdoor kitchen on the other side of the deck. He grabbed a beer for himself and a bottle of water for Anissa, who had taken a seat on the top step with her back braced against the railing.

Zenix recognized the oversized shirt and shorts as clothing she kept in one of the various packs she had hidden around the island. Since she patrolled in her shifted form, carrying clothes with her wasn't practical. So, she kept caches all over the island in case she had to shift back. She wasn't much of a talker, so Zenix greeted her with a nod that she returned in kind.

Nico handed the bottle of water to her, then he took a seat on the swing next to Zenix instead of sitting on one of the lounge chairs off to the side. Since he had made the swing large enough to take a proper nap on, it was wide enough for both big males to sit comfortably. Still, he might have to make

another one since visitors always seemed to prefer sitting on the porch swing over a regular chair.

“I keep meaning to ask you to make one of these for us.”

“To fit all four of you?” Zenix scoffed. “I don’t think that’s possible. Not unless we get the Vyper brothers to use their magic to make sure it doesn’t break.”

“One this size will do,” Nico told him. “My brothers and I can fight over who gets the privilege to cuddle up with our mate.”

Zenix snorted out a laugh. “Okay, then. What brings you here this time of night?”

“We had a change of plans for one of our VIP guests. The singer, Ayla D’Nye, requested to stay somewhere a little more private, so I set her up in one of the villas on the other side of the island. Her assistant and some of her protection team are staying with her, while her brother and the rest of the team are in the villa next door.”

“Did something happen?”

“Ayla got swamped by fans when she checked in. Even though we blocked off the floor she and her band were staying on with the other VIP guests, she wasn’t really comfortable. Straight up, there were hundreds of people at the resort waiting to get a picture or vid of her when she arrived. I hate to admit it, but that included some of our employees, as well as other guests. It was fucking madness.”

“Damn,” Zenix breathed out.

They had obviously miscalculated just how popular she was. Hell, he’d known she was famous. Everyone in the whole

damn universe knew that. It was hard not to when her songs were always being streamed everywhere. She was one of the true superstars of their era, and her fanbase only seemed to grow with each new song she put out.

“We’ll have to increase her security detail when she is out and about.”

“Xian already did. She also has a personal protection team with her,” Anissa reminded him.

Nico cleared his throat. “But there’s this other thing...”

“What?”

“Stalkers,” Anissa spit out like the word itself was distasteful.

Nico nodded. “Ayla’s got a few of them. There are several individuals who attend every single one of her concerts, but that’s nothing new. However, she has started getting some messages that have crossed the line into alarming. Some of them have even mentioned private details that no one should know. Her brother, who is also her manager, handles all of her correspondence, but some messages and gifts have slipped past him and have gotten straight to Ayla. That has them worried.”

Zenix scowled. “I don’t blame them. That’s not just alarming, that’s a major breach in security. Someone has her under surveillance, and her private team hasn’t figured out how or who it is?”

Nico shook his head. “Not yet. That’s why this is a problem. Since it keeps happening, they think it’s one of her

fans that is part of a core group that follows her to each of her tour stops.”

“People actually do that?”

“Apparently, there are quite a few that do, although Ayla only performs around a dozen times each year, so it’s easy for her more dedicated fans to travel to each show. Most of the regulars have already been checked out, but something could have changed.”

“Perhaps one of them had a psychotic break,” Anissa supposed, sounding a little too hopeful. “Taking down a legit crazy person might be fun.”

Zenix and Nico both shot her some serious side eye before they shared a look of understanding between them. They were not going to touch that comment of hers.

“We want to make sure Ayla has a good time on Evo since we are definitely planning to ask her to come back again,” Nico said, steering the conversation back on track. “So, it’s essential we give her safety top priority. In the past, some of the messages and gifts have gotten through using a well-placed bribe to one of the ancillary staff or crew members at the different venues. At least we know that won’t happen here.”

“It better not,” Zenix warned darkly.

“Heidi’s team is picking Ayla and her people up and escorting them to the arena for her rehearsal tomorrow afternoon around three. I know you’re supposed to take the day off, but I was hoping you could meet them at the arena and escort her and her team back to the island once they are done. Take a look at the messages and see what you think.”

“Can do,” Zenix said with a nod. “I’ll need to meet with her security detail to make sure everything is covered. Send me the threat file.”

Nico smirked. “Already did.”

Finished with her water, Anissa got up and tossed the empty bottle in the recycler. “I’m going to finish patrolling now.”

“You’re on the night shift tomorrow, right?” Zenix asked.

“I am, but I can head over to the rehearsal with you for the briefing.”

“Good. Meet me back here at three.”

Anissa nodded before swiftly disappearing into the shadows.

As Zenix watched her leave, he drank his beer and started formulating a list of things he needed to do in order to deal with the stalker situation. He glanced over at Nico and raised a brow. “What are you still doing here? I figured you would be running back to your mate’s side as soon as we got this matter settled.”

Nico downed some of his own beer, then sighed. “Brielle is working in the command center tonight with Razar. We’re spreading out this week to make sure we have everything handled, so only one of us gets to hang with her at a time.”

“Poor you,” Zenix mocked, earning him a sharp elbow jab to the side. Chuckling, he said, “I just meant after what happened earlier today, I’m surprised you are letting her out of your sight.”

Nico sat up straight. “What happened earlier?”

“A guy tried to hit on Brielle, and I had to stop Magnus from tearing him to pieces.”

“What?” Enraged, Nico surged to his feet. “Why the fuck didn’t he tell me?”

“Probably because of this reaction,” Zenix pointed out blandly. “And you can’t really fault a stranger who doesn’t know she’s mated to you.”

Nico glared at him. “Everyone should know!”

Zenix sighed. Dealing with his friend’s relationship drama was utterly exhausting, but he didn’t bother saying that out loud. “Magnus said the same thing earlier. It doesn’t help that you, Magnus, and Razar are already covered with tattoos, so bonding marks wouldn’t even show if you got them.”

“Our marks are not the issue. It’s her. We need to mark her somehow to show everyone she belongs to us.”

Since Zenix had been friends with Brielle Lee for years before she had mated with Magnus, Razar, and Nico, he knew how much she had hated the star mark she’d once had to wear that had deemed her infertile. Once she had gotten that star removed, he’d thought she’d never get another mark on her body. He had been proven wrong when she’d gotten the nanotech tattoos, but those small symbols on her wrists, ankles, and the back of her neck were very different than whatever crazy shit Nico was currently planning.

“Doesn’t she have your mating mark on the back of her neck?”

“That’s not enough to warn people away from her,” Nico snapped as he began pacing around the deck. “There has to be another way.”

To stop his friend from going down the love-crazed path of doom, Zenix said, “Before you try to tag your mate with ‘Property of’ somewhere on her body, and she kicks your ass for even suggesting it, you should know that Magnus took a different approach. Have you seen him today?”

“No, I had the morning off, and I have been in fucking meetings for most of the afternoon and evening. Why?”

“Magnus visited Fenris at the sanctuary and got a new tattoo.”

“Where? He’s basically covered with them already.”

Zenix used his finger to swipe at the front of his own throat. That was basically the one patch of visible skin the Artane brothers hadn’t covered with ink. Well, besides their faces, of course. And though the sides of their necks were already tattooed, the front was bare.

“Magnus got Brielle’s name tattooed on his neck so no one can miss it.”

The move was as subtle as a slap to the face, but Magnus had been determined to proclaim that Brielle was his mate to the entire universe.

Nico stopped pacing and slowly smiled. “Why the fuck didn’t I think of that?”

As he bounded down the steps, Zenix called out, “Where are you going now?”

“To see Fenris.”

“He’s probably sleeping at this time of night.”

“Then, I’ll wake him up!”

Zenix shook his head and chuckled. The Krytos tattoo artist was surely going to love that. Since Zenix hadn’t been able to talk Magnus out of branding himself with his mate’s name, he didn’t even bother trying with Nico.

Freaks.

All mated males were freaks, Zenix thought as he got up and headed back inside. He’d take a look at the threat file before getting some more sleep. He wanted to be well-rested before dealing with the singer’s security issues the following day.

And if he got to do a little ass-kicking, that was definitely something to look forward to.

CHAPTER THREE

AYLA D'NYE FELT a surge of excitement the moment she stepped onto the stage in the arena on Evo. It raced through her bloodstream, firing up her system, until she was practically glowing like a supernova under the spotlights that focused on her.

When her band began to play, she nodded her head to the rhythm of the driving beat, waiting for her cue. Then, she opened her mouth and began to sing. Her hauntingly beautiful voice was a powerful instrument, resonating through the sound system to reach every corner of the large arena.

She always started out her playlist with an upbeat number, wanting to get the crowd hyped up. With that in mind, she'd chosen to open her set with one of her anthemic hits that everyone knew. She hadn't performed it live in quite a while, so people were bound to be excited to hear it. She loved when the crowd sang along with her, and the energy would set the tone for the rest of the show.

Ayla loved singing. She had been born for it. Music was simply in her blood, and the lyrics came straight from her soul. When melodies filled her head, it was impossible to think of anything else until she wrote them down. Performing was an adrenaline rush unlike any other, but she would have gladly continued to write songs even if no one listened to them.

Luckily, they not only listened...they loved her music.

She had done quite well for herself and had cultivated an impressive following over the years. She had fans all over the

known universe and had won a number of awards and accolades, but that wasn't what drove her.

The music was enough to do that.

Her career as a singer and songwriter had spanned over three decades, and she had written music in several different genres. In fact, she was known for mixing genres. She had the vocal abilities for opera or classical crossover, but she also loved pop, rock, and EDM. She enjoyed doing the unexpected, blending things that might not seem to belong together and turning it into something beautiful.

While most D'Aire were considered fairly reserved and private, Ayla thrived in the limelight. She had never intentionally sought to become famous, although doing what she loved had brought her both fame and fortune. Honestly, being a celebrity was more of a bother than a bonus, but she tried not to complain too much since she enjoyed the benefits of it. It allowed her to live the life she wanted, and she was able to provide well for her family, friends, and crew.

Living on a space cruiser most of the time wasn't ideal, but at least they were all comfortable and had plenty of space on the large vessel. She loved traveling to different planets and space stations to perform, but it was starting to take its toll. Because of that, she knew it was time for a break. So, after the concert on Evo, they would all be taking an extended vacation.

Ayla planned to relax and write new music, but she still hadn't decided where. She could return to her residence on Earth, or the one she kept on the D'Aire home world. While she would have more privacy amongst the D'Aire, she enjoyed the lively atmosphere in Zion when she needed to get her

creativity flowing. Hell, she could go anywhere she wanted. Revisit an old favorite or pick a new place and explore.

There were no limits to where she could go or what she could do.

But first, she had a concert to smash.

Being asked to headline the show to celebrate the launch of the new game, Evolution, was a big honor, but Ayla hadn't just been asked to sing at the concert. She'd also written and recorded the theme song for the game. While it was only in the beta testing phase, Evolution was all everyone was talking about. Although she wasn't much of a gamer, her brother, Artem, was. He was extremely excited about the game and couldn't wait to check everything out once the concert was over.

Ayla didn't need to test the game out to know that Evo was going to be successful. Just seeing the planetoid was enough to be sure of that. It was the ultimate adventure, the pinnacle of innovation and entertainment. Something new and exciting would be enough to attract people, but once people got to Evo, they would experience something beyond their wildest expectations.

Ayla had been impressed by what she'd seen so far, and that included the arena. No expense had been spared to create the huge coliseum with a retractable dome, allowing them to change the indoor space into an outdoor venue in a matter of a few minutes. Right now, the roof was closed, keeping any sound from reaching outside. That was a good thing since she didn't want people to hear a preview of what was to come.

Although this was just a rehearsal, she belted out the lyrics at full volume, treating it like a real performance, sans makeup and costumes. During the real show, she would dress to dazzle. But for now, she wore a pair of gray leggings, an oversized sweater the color of ripe plums, and a pair of knee-high boots that were lined with a soft material that made it feel like she was walking on clouds.

A rehearsal was about getting used to the stage setup to make any necessary adjustments before the actual performance, but most of the performers had already done that by holo. While they were fine with just a simple sound check before the concert, Ayla still insisted on doing a brief rehearsal in person. She liked getting the feel of a place before she walked on stage for the real show.

The stage itself was shaped like an hourglass, with her band on their own platform near the center. During the concert, the stage would rise up into the air to give everyone a better view of the performers. The arena had been created to host concerts, sporting events, and gaming competitions, so there were also several floating viewing screens that would provide everyone with a close-up view of what was happening on the stage below.

Although she loved the energy a large crowd provided, Ayla occasionally missed singing in smaller venues where the experience felt a little more intimate. She didn't like the lights blinding her so she could hardly see the audience, and thousands of screaming fans made it difficult to hear. That made her feel a little disconnected from everything that was going on around her.

As the song ended, she immediately flowed into the next. When that one was finished, she gave the band the signal to pause. Ayla's assistant, Lina Z'Mar, hurried over to shove a water bottle into her hand.

"Drink. You need to stay hydrated."

"So you always remind me." Ayla laughed before following orders. "How did it sound?"

"Excellent, as always."

"You always say that."

The younger D'Aire female shrugged. "Well, it's true."

"Let's see what the critic has to say." Ayla lifted a hand to shield her eyes from the lights. "What do you think?"

She was aware that there was a group of Evo security personnel in the building as well as her own personal protection team, but they weren't who she was waiting for a response from. The blaring lights made it difficult to see the thousands of seats in the venue, but she knew her brother was out there somewhere. As was his habit, Artem had chosen a random seat to listen to her rehearsal, so she patiently waited until he made his way up to the stage.

Like most of the D'Aire race, her brother had the same white hair and iridescent blue eyes as she did. But that was about all they had in common. While she was a free spirit, he was practical to the point of being boring. Since he preferred human styles over more traditional D'Aire clothing, her older brother was dressed in a pale blue dress shirt with gray pants and a matching vest.

Unlike her, Artem wouldn't be caught dead wearing casualwear in public.

As he came into view, Ayla was surprised to see he wasn't alone. One of the members of Contagious, the band that had been opening for her over the last few months, was with him. As they made their way onto the stage to join her, their smiles confirmed what she already suspected.

The acoustics in the arena were almost magical.

"You sounded good, sis," Artem praised.

"You always do," Nolan Dovico added shyly. "This place is amazing. I can't wait until we get a chance to play in here."

Nolan was the lead guitar player of Contagious and one of their main songwriters. Contagious was a talented band, but they'd had little exposure and had been poorly managed before Ayla had invited them to join her on tour. Now, they had risen to the top of the charts and were being managed by a bright young female who had personally been trained by Artem himself.

The pop-rock band was known for wearing black masks over the lower portions of their faces during their performances, and for their skull and crossbones logo. The other three members of the band weren't present, but the young human males had gone out the night before, so she was shocked to see any of them already awake and functioning.

"What are you doing here so early?" Ayla asked. "I figured you would still be sleeping after your late night out."

"I...I was hoping you might have time to look at the new song I've been working on after you are done with rehearsal,"

Nolan said.

“Sure. I can give it a listen.”

Since she thought of the band members as her adopted younger brothers, she was always willing to help them out. She often collaborated with other artists and had even written songs for others on occasion.

“Hey!” Sebastian Vales, the lead singer of Contagious, shouted as he hurried over to join them. He looked like he had just rolled out of bed, but there was a manic excitement shining in his dark eyes. “We’ve been asked to do a livestream with Shout Out Loud. Can you fucking believe it?”

He let out a loud laugh as he lifted Ayla off her feet and spun her around in a circle. Shout Out Loud was another band that would be performing at the concert. The older rock band had been at the top of their game for many years, and it would be a great opportunity for the younger band to appear with them.

“No shit?” Nolan grinned. “That’s awesome!”

“Thank you so much for introducing us to them yesterday,” Sebastian gushed as he set Ayla back down.

“No problem.” When he leaned in to hug her again, she laughed and used two fingers against his forehead to push him back. “You guys performing or playing the game?”

“It’s going to be a little jam session. They said we should just keep it casual and fun. They plan on filming it in the gardens outside of the new casino at the sanctuary, so it’s bound to draw a crowd. We have to go get ready to meet them there.”

Nolan's eyes widened. "Right now?"

"Now." Sebastian slung his arms around Nolan. "Sunni is already setting up our own livestream," he said, mentioning their new manager. "So, we have to go get ready."

"Wait!" Nolan exclaimed before Sebastian could drag him away. "Ayla, you should join us."

"Thanks, but I'll pass." Ayla waved them off. "Have fun!"

As they walked away, Lina leaned in and nudged her. "You didn't mention you already turned down the livestream last night."

"No need. It was nice of them to ask the boys to join them, though."

Artem snorted. "You suggested it, didn't you?"

If she had brought up how nice it would be if the two bands did something together, it had only been a casual suggestion.

Ayla had known Shout Out Loud for close to two decades. It was rare to have true friendships in their industry, but they were one of the few bands she'd gotten close to over the years. She had even introduced Steven Fletcher, the lead singer, to Kora, the love of his life and keeper of his heart. Kora had been Ayla's old assistant, but after she had mated with Steven, she had taken over being in charge of his life.

"Are you done here?" Artem asked. "We're going to have to meet with Evo's Chief of Security soon."

Ayla shook her head. "Actually, I have a new song I want to try out."

Lina's eyes went wide. "You finished it already? Stars, that was fast!"

"I was struck with inspiration last night. I couldn't sleep until it was finished."

"But the band hasn't even gotten a chance to learn it yet," Artem pointed out.

"That's fine. I'm thinking about just doing an acoustic version for now. I can always do a full version or a remix later."

"I'll go grab your guitar," Lina offered before scampering away.

"You sure you want to perform a new song for this concert?" Artem asked after she'd left. "It's a ballad, right? That doesn't really go with the upbeat theme you were going for."

"I feel like I have to play it here. Listen, and you can tell me what you think. You can tell the band they can leave if they want. I'm satisfied that we have a good feel for the room."

"I'll go tell them, but they are probably going to want to hear the new song, too. We'll go sit over there," he said, nodding toward the front row of seats.

A few minutes later, Ayla was seated on a stool in the center of the stage with a single spotlight shining down on her. It was just her and her guitar, the way she had started out all those years ago. She began to play, bringing the beautiful melody to life before she added her voice to the mix. The lyrics she had written burst out of her like they were being torn straight from her soul.

It was a song of longing, of an endless search for a love just beyond her reach.

She closed her eyes as she sang, surrendering herself to the music, but when she got to the chorus, something changed. She suddenly felt a new energy in the room. Someone was watching her. Ayla opened her eyes again to search the darkness for whoever was out there. Even though she was used to being stared at, she should have felt afraid. She had crazed fans and stalkers who would use an opportunity like this to get to her, but she wasn't the least bit worried.

Her voice took on a sultry tone as she shamelessly used the lyrics as a lure, beckoning the stranger into her musical web. Her skin tingled with awareness, and her heart started to pound within her chest.

But not in fear.

It was pure excitement.

Suddenly, she realized who she was singing to. She might not know his name or face yet, but she knew who he was to her. He was the keeper of her heart, the male fate had chosen to belong to her...and she couldn't wait to meet him.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE MOMENT ZENIX stepped into the arena, he knew he was in big fucking trouble. He could feel it, sense it, as the energy raced along his skin and up his spine. He was in danger, but this was a situation unlike anything he had ever experienced before. He wanted to turn around and escape, but it was already too late.

His fate had already been sealed.

The beautiful voice that filled the arena was absolutely mesmerizing. He had heard Ayla D’Nye sing enough times to instantly recognize her voice before he even saw her. Not only did her songs get played in just about every public venue imaginable, she’d also been featured in countless soundtracks and ads. Her concerts were always sold out, and she had a legit army of devoted followers who would probably go to war for her if she only asked.

Ayla’s songs were memorable, the beats catchy, and the lyrics meaningful. A number of other artists had covered her music, but very few could even come close to the originals. She was one of a kind, and her talent was undeniable. Hell, even Zenix considered himself a fan.

But he’d never heard her sing live.

The words she sang seemed to reach out to him, grabbing him by the throat and making him feel like his heart was going to leap right out of his chest. He slowly rounded the corner and walked out of the darkness, getting his first good look at the female who had utterly captivated him with her voice.

Besides singing like an angel, Ayla looked like one. Her white hair was almost silver under the spotlight, and she was breathtakingly gorgeous without a speck of makeup on. While she might have looked similar to other D'Aire females at first glance, she had a special quality that made her unique. It was as if her very soul was shining out of her, illuminating her from within.

She was a bright star shining in his dark galaxy.

And he was being pulled into her orbit.

Zenix slowly made his way toward the stage, then paused halfway down the wide steps. He'd stopped mainly to see if he could, but it just felt like fighting the inevitable.

"Nix? What's wrong? You've gone a little pale. Are you feeling okay?"

He could vaguely hear Anissa speaking to him, but he couldn't pull his attention away from Ayla long enough to glance in her direction.

"She's..."

"Yeah, she's pretty amazing. I forgot you are a fan of her music. No wonder you took a detour in here. The security team is waiting for us to—"

"They can fucking keep waiting," Zenix bit out.

"Okay, then. Take your time," Anissa said with a chuckle. "I'll go meet them in the security center, and you can join us after you finish drooling over the superstar."

Ignoring his friend, he remained frozen in place as she walked away. He knew he was probably going to get shit for it

later, but he just didn't care at the moment. He frowned when the song cut off as Ayla dropped her guitar and abruptly stood up. Beautiful white wings burst from her back a few seconds before she launched herself into the air.

Zenix blinked in surprise when she flew directly toward him. When she landed right in front of him, his breath caught in his throat. She was even more dazzling up close. She stepped toward him until their bodies were only a whisper apart, and the tip of her tongue swiped across her lower lip.

“Do you know who I am?”

Zenix instinctively knew she wasn't asking if he knew what she did for a living. He felt like he was standing on a precipice, and the rest of his life depended on how he answered that question. He could try to be logical about it, or he could just give into what he was feeling and throw caution to the wind.

Going with the latter option, he slowly lifted a hand and wrapped it around the back of her neck, drawing her even closer. “You're mine.”

Her lush lips curved up into a brilliant smile. “And you are mine...keeper.”

“Keeper,” he whispered.

Zenix had suspected it the moment she had come to him, but hearing it confirmed was a whole different story. It made it real. Excitement and shock surged through him, but he didn't have time to dwell on that. Not when her wings curled around them, shielding them from view as she pressed her lips against his in a fervent, claiming kiss.

Caught off guard by her ardor, Zenix's hold tightened on her. His other arm wrapped around her waist, pulling her flush against him. The feel of her pressed against him made his cock harden and strain against the confines of his pants. His mouth opened under hers, allowing their tongues to twine together in a sensual dance. He growled low in his throat at the taste of her, but it wasn't enough.

He needed more.

As if reading his thoughts, she whispered, "More. I need more."

Not giving him a chance to respond, she boosted herself up and wrapped her legs around his waist. The move had his thick erection rubbing directly against her heated core, and she moaned as she squirmed against him.

He muttered a low curse. Desire made it difficult to think, but her safety wasn't something he could overlook. Beyond being his, Zenix could never forget that she was one of the most famous celebrities in the known universe. Even though the arena was closed off to outsiders at the moment, the space they were in was too damn open to continue what they were doing.

"Wait. We can't do this here."

"I don't want to wait," she countered, pressing kisses along his jaw and down his neck. "I feel like I've already been waiting forever for you."

As if punishing him for that fact, she nipped at the tender flesh of his neck with her teeth. Then, she soothed the ache away with her lips and tongue.

“Fucking hell, your mouth is dangerous,” he groaned.

“So I’ve been told,” she said with a little chuckle. “At least, when I’m singing.” She murmured something else against his neck, but the words were too muffled against his skin for him to understand.

“What?”

“Dressing room, over there,” she whispered against his ear.

He swore again as she sucked his earlobe into her hot mouth. Thankfully, he had enough brain cells left to remember where the dressing rooms were located, but he couldn’t see around the wings that were still curled around them.

“Put your wings away, sweetheart.”

Ayla did as he asked and felt the cool air caressing her back through the holes her wings had made in her sweater. It had been years since she’d let her wings tear through her clothes like that, but she didn’t care. Finding the keeper of her heart after all these years alone had shocked her to her core, so it wasn’t difficult to understand why she had lost control.

As her keeper carried her toward the dressing room, she was unable to stop herself from rubbing against him. She was shameless, not caring who was watching them or what anyone else thought. There was a desperate ache building inside of her, and she moved against her keeper in a sensual rocking motion, seeking the relief only he could give her.

She continued to press kisses along the long column of his neck, then she let out a loud moan when her back hit something hard. Her eyes opened, and she blinked in surprise.

She saw that he had already whisked them into her dressing room, and her back was now pressed up against the wall.

Since she was almost the same height as he was, she wasn't a small female. Still, he was twice as large as she was and far more muscular, allowing him to hold her up against the wall with ease. The door to the dressing room slid shut again, closing them in the room together and away from prying eyes.

Or so she'd thought.

"Evo, lock the door."

"Already done, Chief Li. And the monitoring system inside the room has been temporarily disabled."

The sound of a feminine voice had Ayla pushing back from her keeper. He continued to hold her propped up against the wall as she scanned the room. "Who is that?"

"That's just Evo. Ignore it."

"It?"

"I am Evo, the computer mainframe that runs this planetoid. Congratulations on finding your keeper, Ayla D'Nye, and welcome to our family."

"Thank you," Ayla said, shooting a baffled grin at her keeper.

He muttered something under his breath, then raised his voice again. "Evo, I need you to wipe the recording of us in the arena—"

"Don't worry. All evidence of your friendly introduction with your mate has been wiped from the system as priority security protocol. Commander Lazuli and her team are

handling the briefing with Artem D’Nye and the protection team, and I will retain a copy of all relevant notes and data for your personal threat file.”

“Good, now go away.”

“I cannot go away. I am always present, watching, waiting...” Evo said ominously.

“Evo!”

“Just kidding,” Evo chirped, once again speaking in a cheerful tone. *“Have fun!”*

Ayla let out a laugh and shook her head. “I didn’t know an AI system could be so amusing. She seems like—”

“A fucking menace,” he growled.

Ayla wrapped her arms around his neck as she stared into his dark brown eyes. “So, shall we get back to our friendly introduction, Chief Li?”

“It’s Zenix. Zenix Li. Or just Nix,” he said, sounding slightly nervous in a totally endearing way. “Hell, you can call me whatever you want.”

She’d heard all about the big, badass Chief of Security before arriving on Evo. While most of his file was classified, Ayla had enough connections to confirm that he’d had a stellar record with the Alliance before he’d officially retired. She’d initially been interested in him to see if he could help her with her security issues, but she’d never in a million years expected him to end up being the keeper of her heart.

The mate she’d been longing for.

“I’m Ayla D’Nye.”

“Trust me, I’m well aware of that.”

“Great! Now that we’ve got that out of the way, can we get back to the kissing part of our friendly introduction?”

He wheezed out a laugh. “Anything you want, Ayla.”

Hearing him say her name made her smile, and she pressed her lips against his again. This time, she tried to keep the kiss light, teasing, but he was having none of that. Need shot through her as he pressed her back against the wall and took her mouth in a savage kiss. He let out a low, hungry growl, then his tongue delved deep, relentlessly touching and tasting.

The slight tug of his hands in her hair made her arch against him, and her legs tightened around his waist. Desperate need surged back to life in an instant. The need to feel him filling all of the empty spaces inside her. Her hands moved to tug at his clothing, but the lightweight black armor he wore seemed molded onto his muscular body.

Pulling her mouth away from his, she huffed out an irritated breath. “Is this thing painted on you?”

He let out a sharp bark of laughter, then carried her across the room to sit her down on the long dressing table in front of a mirror backlit with a soft glow. “The zipper is hidden. Are you sure you want to continue this here? I could take you to my home, or we could—”

In response, she pulled her sweater over her head, baring herself to him. Raw hunger flared to life in his dark gaze, making her shiver with awareness.

“You were prancing around on that fucking stage with nothing underneath that sweater?” he asked darkly.

“The material is thick, and I don’t prance around on stage. I dance,” she corrected primly.

He swore softly before taking her mouth again in a possessive kiss filled with passion and need. She moaned as his hands reached up to cup her breasts, teasing her nipples until they hardened to the point of pain.

“These are mine,” he growled.

“Yes,” she whispered back.

“I’ll kill anyone who sees you like this.”

That dark promise thrilled her. Since she felt the same way, she didn’t bother feeling bad about it. If their love was selfish, so be it. Some might view jealousy as a dangerous emotion, but she saw it as proof of their feelings for one another and the depths of their mutual need.

Feeling bold, she gave up on removing his armored jacket and went straight to work on his belt, yanking it free before pulling his zipper down. Pulling back slightly, she met his dark gaze as she curled her fingers around his hard cock. She pulled his large shaft out of the confines of his pants, and his breathing increased into a sharp staccato rhythm as she tentatively stroked him from base to tip.

“This is mine.”

“Fuck, yeah, it is. Every fucking inch.”

When she glanced down, her eyes widened. There were certainly a lot of inches to consider. Her long, slender fingers barely fit around the thick shaft, and she was fascinated by the way his cock jerked in time with his throbbing pulse. A pearly drop of liquid appeared out of the tiny opening on the bulbous

head, and she rubbed her thumb over it, spreading the silky liquid over his flesh.

Zenix knew he should slow down and take his time to show her exactly how special she was to him, but her touch had pushed him past his limits. She had awoken an animal inside of him that he hadn't even known was there, and now there was no caging it back in. Reaching down, he tore her leggings open, ripping the material apart as easy as tissue paper. When he jerked her panties off, her exultant laughter was like an aphrodisiac shot straight into his bloodstream.

He stroked a testing finger over her pussy and was relieved to find the proof of her desire for him. Zenix wanted to fall to his knees so he could taste her, but when he tried to pull away, her hold on his cock tightened. In retaliation, he pushed his finger into her tight pussy and groaned with satisfaction when the thick digit slid through her liquid heat with ease.

He gently parted her tight muscles, stretching her open for him. Her hips began to rock as she rubbed her clit against the heel of his palm. The tightness of her body dampened some of his urgency, reminding him that he needed to be careful not to hurt her.

Zenix continued to stroke his finger inside of her, then added another digit to push her closer to the edge. When her head fell back and her body shuddered with her release, he pulled his fingers free and settled himself more firmly between her parted thighs.

Fire ignited in his veins as he slowly pushed his cock into her, feeding the thick shaft into her inch by glorious inch. Wrapping her legs around his hips, she tried to pull him

deeper, but he insisted on taking his time. He refused to rush things for the sake of his own pleasure, not when he could potentially hurt her.

“Let’s take this slow, sweetheart. You’re so tight, and I don’t want to—”

“I’m fine, Nix. You are the keeper of my heart. My mate. The male born to belong to me as I belong to you. Now, bond with me, Zenix. Show me you need me as much as I need you.”

Conceding to her demand, he captured her gasp with his mouth as he slowly thrust all the way into her. Once he was fully sheathed inside of her, he forced himself to remain still for a few seconds, then pulled out and slowly thrust in again. Her tight muscles hugged his thick shaft, driving him out of his mind with pleasure.

“You’re mine, Ayla.”

Before she could respond, his mouth captured hers again, and he kissed her with a wild desperation that bordered on madness. Yanking her hips forward, he braced his feet further apart and began thrusting into her harder, faster. Needing more leverage, he plucked her right off the table and carried her a few steps until her back was once again pressed up against the wall.

With his hands digging into her ass, he thrust hard, driving himself deep inside her over and over again. Her breathless moans and sighs sounded like music to his ears, and he felt pure satisfaction surge through him when she clung to him tightly and began chanting his name.

Zenix lost himself in the pleasure, moving mindlessly as the pressure slowly built inside of him. He felt his body tighten with his impending release but forced himself not to give into temptation. He refused to let himself go over the edge without her. When her pussy began to flutter around his cock, he tore his mouth away from hers.

“Come for me, Ayla. Come and take me with you.”

“Yes, my love,” she panted. “Anything you ask of me is yours.”

She threw her head back and moaned as she came, and her pussy clenched around his shaft so hard he could barely move. He continued to thrust into her using short, sharp jabs, prolonging her release until he finally gave in to his own.

Shudders wracked his body as he came, filling her with pulse after pulse of his hot seed. He slumped against her, pinning her to the wall with his large body while energy raced along his skin, burning him alive with white-hot pleasure. That energy seemed to seep into him, filling him until he felt utterly consumed by it. He felt their bond flare to life, growing stronger with each pulse of his climax until they were fully merged.

Ayla was his mate, the keeper of his heart, the other half of his soul.

However, he wasn't the only one who loved her.

And now he was going to have to figure out how to build a future with her while keeping her safe from millions of adoring fans.

CHAPTER FIVE

LOVING A SUPERSTAR wasn't easy.

That had become very clear to Zenix when he'd had to jump through several hoops in order to get Ayla back to his house without anyone finding out. Luckily, she'd had several changes of clothes stored in the dressing room, so that part had been simple enough.

But getting out of the building unnoticed was another story.

Dozens of fans had camped out in front of all of the arena exits after someone had revealed that Ayla had been practicing there. While most of them were probably harmless, there was no guarantee. The information leak had made Zenix's blood boil, and whoever had put her in danger had better hope he never figured out who they were.

Because if he ever got his hands on them, he would make them pay.

Unfortunately, getting past the fans hadn't been the only obstacle. Even some of the arena staff members and security team had stuck around, hoping to take a pic or vid of Ayla. Everyone wanted a minute of her time, but there wasn't enough of it to be spared. However, if she refused, loyal fans could turn into haters in the blink of an eye.

Fame was a strange concept. While some actively sought it, others just sort of fell into it. No matter how it happened, the price that came with it was the same. Some people believed that being a celebrity made someone public property, as if the masses were entitled to every detail about their lives

and images were required to be shared. That type of dehumanization was a dark and dangerous path, and it was easy for admiration to turn into obsession.

Claiming Ayla wasn't entitled to privacy strictly because she liked to sing in front of an audience was fucking insane. Putting her songs out into the universe didn't mean she had to share every other facet of her life, and it certainly didn't mean the public had the right to make demands of her.

Zenix emphatically denied that reality. Even if someone was famous, they were still allowed to have a private life. There needed to be boundaries established between her and her fans in order for her to live a semblance of a normal life.

But that was easier said than done.

While Ayla had been willing to sign some autographs and take several pictures before she had left the arena, Zenix had gotten more upset with each passing minute. It seemed like the more she gave, the more people wanted to take from her. He'd drawn the line at letting her step outside to greet her fans. Even though she'd felt she owed them for waiting, he had adamantly pointed out that she hadn't asked them to. In fact, they had tried to keep the rehearsal quiet so people wouldn't show up at the arena.

In order to keep her safe, Zenix had broken a rule and used the emergency teleporting pad hidden in the lower level of the arena. While he had taken Ayla directly to his secluded home on the island, one of the female security team members had pretended to be Ayla when her team had been escorted back to the resort. Keeping up the pretense of her staying at the resort

was one way to stop people from searching for her real location.

That wouldn't last, but it gave them some temporary cover.

Zenix had been pleased when Ayla had fallen in love with his home at first sight. She had been shocked to discover that he was the only one who lived in such a huge place, though she liked the privacy aspect. As they had strolled down the short dock toward the house, she'd laughed when he'd told her the story of the Dragon Warriors who had created it for him. Since she was friends with a few Dragon Warriors herself, Ayla knew just how extra they could be.

Although her beauty and aura were quite intimidating, Zenix was amazed at just how comfortable he was in her presence. For a superstar, Ayla was shockingly normal. She was a cheerful, intelligent, talented individual with an easy smile and an infectious laugh. However, even though their minds had been linked when they'd bonded, they were still essentially strangers.

Because of that, they talked and shared tidbits about their lives over huge bowls of pasta they had ordered in from one of the restaurants on the mainland. As they ate, Zenix kept wanting to pinch himself to see if he was dreaming. Honestly, he couldn't believe that Ayla actually belonged to him. He was the luckiest bastard in the entire universe, but he felt completely undeserving of the honor of being her mate.

Still, there was no way he was ever going to let her go.

Zenix had snorted in amusement when he saw that Evo had added a ridiculously large strawberry and cream cake with pretty pink buttercream frosting to their dinner order without

asking. When his mate had inquired about how Evo had known that was one of her favorite sweet treats, he'd reminded her that the AI system had access to every article and social media post ever written about her.

“Handy,” had been her only response to that.

After the worst of his hunger had been appeased, Zenix paused to simply stare at the beautiful female sitting across the table. It felt like she was too damn far away from him, though her feet were wrapped around one of his under the table. It was as if she couldn't bear the distance between them any more than he could.

“I still can't believe you're really here,” he blurted out.

She cocked her head to the side and studied him. “Why? We're mates now. Did you expect me to return to the guest villa instead of coming home with you?”

“That's not what I meant. I just...this is all very new to me. I never thought I would actually have a mate, let alone have her be one of the most famous females in the known universe. I'm not exactly sure how to proceed. I mean, you are Ayla-fucking-D'Nye.”

“And that means what?” she inquired with a baffled laugh. “It would be the same between us if I was just someone working in a café. I'm not some wild, exotic bird that comes with special care and handling instructions.”

“But you do have wings,” he said, trying for a little touch of humor as he raised his beer in salute. “I get what you are saying, but no, it's not the same. While you might not

personally need special care and handling, your unique situation does.”

“I guess that’s a fair assessment. This is all new to me, too, but we’ll figure everything out together.” Instead of beer, Ayla had opted for a glass of D’Aire wine. Lifting the glass, she took a sip before saying, “You know, the fame thing isn’t real. Most of it is just a façade put on for the public. In reality, I’m just me...a pretty simple D’Aire female who likes to make music and sing. I’m just fortunate that people like to listen. That doesn’t make me any different than anyone else you know.”

“Simple?” He snorted in derision. “Says the female with a million hit records.”

“Surely, I don’t have that many,” she teased, squeezing his foot between hers under the table.

“It sure seems like it,” he countered. “Over the years, your songs have literally made up a soundtrack to my life.”

Zenix was aware she was a few decades older than he was, but it didn’t bother him. The D’Aire lived much longer than humans did, and now that they were fully bonded, his lifespan would be extended to match hers.

“Oh?” She raised a brow and sent him a seductive smile. “Are you saying you are a fan?”

Grinning back at her, he nodded. “Of course, I am. I even play a few of my favorite songs on repeat to help me calm down after I have one of my premonition dreams.”

Her fork froze halfway to her mouth, and her eyes widened in surprise. “You’re a precog? That’s frosty.”

“My abilities aren’t very strong, but they’ve helped keep me alive.”

She set her fork down again. “How does it work? Your premonitions come to you in dreams?”

“Eat more, and I will explain.” He scowled down at the food in front of her. “I don’t understand how you can survive eating so little when you are constantly running around and performing.”

“I ate,” she protested. “It just doesn’t look like much since these bowls of pasta are large enough to feed an entire pack of Krytos.”

When he continued to glare at her, she rolled her eyes and gave in. She made a show of twirling some of the creamy pasta around her fork, then shoved it into her mouth. Her eyes were bright with amusement as she chewed with her cheeks puffed out, making her look freaking adorable.

He’d originally ordered the chicken Alfredo for himself, while she had chosen a spicy red sauce with meatballs served with bowtie pasta. He thought it was cute as fuck how she had been alternating their bowls every few minutes so that they were sharing both like a real couple. Normally, something like that would have annoyed him, but with her, it simply felt right.

Fuck, did he have it bad.

It had only been a few hours since he’d met her, and he’d already turned into one of those obsessive mated freaks he’d accused his friends of being. But he couldn’t help it. He loved everything about her, from the way she looked to the way she moved. He also loved the way she used her hands to

emphasize her words while she spoke. She was expressive in everything she did, which was the complete opposite of himself.

But together, they were a perfect pair.

As they continued to eat, he explained about his premonition nightmares. He'd told her some of the funnier stories that had happened during his training days back at the Academy. He also told her some of the countless ways his dreams had saved his life over the years working undercover. He'd kept his stories light on the details, but it was still enough to upset her.

“Stop!” she pleaded, patting her hands over her ears. “I knew you used to work undercover when you worked for the Alliance, but thinking about you in danger now is making me feel sick to my stomach.”

Cursing himself for upsetting her, he said, “I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

She got up and made her way around the table. Before he could ask her what she was doing, she slid herself onto his lap and settled herself there. Since he'd missed the physical connection with her, he didn't even try to protest. As if she needed to assure herself that he was alive and safe, she wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned in to brush her lips against his. His own arms tightened around her waist, holding her securely.

“No, don't be sorry,” she whispered. “I want you to share everything with me, but I reacted poorly to the thought of you in danger. I'm not used to caring about someone this much.

I've never been in love before, and I think I just need a little time to get used to it. Be patient with me, please."

His heart melted inside his chest at her plea. Stars, he fucking loved her, too. It all seemed too fast and completely illogical, but it was true.

"Of course, sweetheart."

He tried to think of a way to calm her down and stroked a hand over her hair and down her back. She had left her white hair loose so it cascaded down to just between her shoulder blades. While most D'Aire usually left their hair much longer, he knew that Ayla sometimes wore brightly colored wigs when she performed, so the shorter style was easier to work with.

After they had made love earlier, she had changed into a long-sleeved knit dress that looked like it was made of champagne glitter. The material hugged all of the beautiful curves of her body and felt as soft as velvet under his stroking hand. Even in the dim light of the chandelier over the table, she seemed to glow with an inner light.

"I had a dream about you last night," he murmured, and was relieved when the worry slowly faded from her eyes.

"Are you saying I'm dangerous to you?"

He matched her teasing tone as he said, "Very. It was a vividly erotic dream, and I've never had one of those before, so I didn't recognize it for what it was. Now, I understand it was a premonition about meeting you. I'm not sure if that means my abilities are expanding, or if it is specific to you alone."

Preening a little, she declared, “Let’s say it specific to me until we know otherwise.”

Laughing, he nodded. “I can agree to that.”

He barely held back a groan as she squirmed on his lap. His cock hardened beneath her ass, and his arms wrapped tighter around her waist, trying to hold her still. He still wasn’t satisfied with the amount she’d eaten, and he was determined to take care of her properly before he took her to bed.

He slid both pasta bowls in front of them, then lifted the fork to feed her a bite of the spicy pasta. She accepted the food, then glanced around the wide-open dining room as she chewed.

“Is there room in here for me to build a recording studio?”

“You want to live here?”

Her brows furrowed. “I assumed we are going to live together. Was I wrong?”

Fucking hell, his brain didn’t seem to be working right. He waved his fork at her. “Of course, we’ll live together. I was asking if you want to live here on Evo. Don’t you travel for most of the year?”

She sighed and leaned back in her chair. “I do, but I was planning to take an extended break after this concert anyway. All of the traveling has started taking a toll on me. I own property on Earth and the D’Aire home world, but I’m barely there enough to call either place home. If anything, I spent most of my time on my space cruiser. Settling down somewhere sounds wonderful, especially if I get to be with you.”

“We can build a studio, or we can add another building onto the property if you prefer more privacy while you work. We certainly have the room for it.” He paused, then asked, “Are you really okay with living here on a secluded island?”

“Are you kidding me? This is my idea of pure paradise. A quiet, private home with easy access to busy places with lively atmospheres for when I need inspiration. It’s the best of both worlds.”

“Evo is definitely busy. At least, the mainland is. I’m sure some of the other islands will be once we open everything up to the masses, as well.”

“I can’t wait to explore everything.”

Since that was a weight off his shoulders, he smiled. “Then, we can stay here when you aren’t touring.”

“About that...what do you think the chances are I’ll be able to convince the Artanes to let me set up a residency here? It’s something I’ve been considering for a while now, but I never found the right place. I think doing it here on Evo would make sense since you work here.”

That made him laugh. “No convincing necessary. The Artanes would jump at the chance to have you here permanently. They’d probably build you a whole new arena if you only asked.”

She considered that for a moment. “Actually, I was thinking about something a little smaller. I would love to be able to do more intimate shows where I could scale back on the whole production part of the concerts and focus more on the music.”

“I’m sure they will agree to anything you want,” he assured her. He hesitated briefly, then added, “I just want to make sure this is something you really want, and you aren’t just doing it for me.”

Ayla sighed happily. His concern for her made her heart sing, but he didn’t have to worry. She hadn’t been lying when she’d said she wanted to stay on Evo with him. Perhaps that would change in the future, but for now, she was ready to make a home with him.

Zenix was her mate, the keeper of her heart, and there wasn’t anything she wouldn’t do for him. However, setting up a residency on Evo wasn’t just for him. It was something she was doing for both of them.

She was well aware that being mated to her wasn’t going to be easy for him. Zenix was a protective and possessive male, and with the amount of attention she attracted, he was probably going to spend a lot of time worrying about her. So, she would try to make things as easy as possible for him by staying in a place that was under his control.

“You know, I almost gave up hope of finding you,” she said softly. “Searching for my keeper was one of the reasons I’ve toured so much over the years. But now that we are finally together, I have no need to go anywhere.”

“I just want to make sure—”

She cut him off by brushing her lips over his again. “I’m sure.”

“Fine,” he grumbled. “At least I can protect you if you perform here. I read over your threat file, and you have a lot of

fucked up people stalking you.”

She really did, but she didn’t want to say that out loud. “I guess that depends on how you define stalking.”

He scowled at that. “Not funny, sweetheart.”

“I’m not being flippant. It’s just part of the gig.” She shrugged. “Most of the people who write to me or send me gifts are harmless. A lot of them just want to share that one of my songs touched them or helped them through a difficult time in their lives.”

“I’m not worried about those fans. I’m talking about the ones to claim that you are their soulmate and that you are meant to be together,” he bit out. “The fucking crazy ones.”

She let out a squeak of protest when his arms tightened around her. Stroking his chest to calm him down, she marveled at the hard muscles beneath her palm. He had finally removed the armored jacket right before they had sat down to eat, and now only wore a plain black shirt. She couldn’t wait to see all of him, but unfortunately, that was going to have to wait.

He put a hand over hers to stop her from stroking him. “Keep that up, and I’ll forget about our meal and devour you instead.”

She smiled sweetly at him. “While I would totally be up for that, we’re not going to be alone long enough to indulge in that little fantasy.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’m sure my brother and my assistant have probably decided we’ve had enough time alone for now and will be coming to find me.”

“She is correct,” Evo announced through the speaker system embedded in the house. *“Not only are they already on their way, Alpha Magnus and Alpha Brielle are with them. So, get ready for company because you are going to have a full house soon.”*

CHAPTER SIX

ZENIX AND AYL A chose to greet their uninvited guests out on the back deck. Cuddling up together on the porch swing, they watched as the small group of people made their way down the short dock and up toward the house.

Artem D’Nye and Magnus Artane each carried two huge suitcases, while Ayla’s assistant, Lina, carried a couple of much smaller bags toward the house. Once they were on the deck, the males stacked the suitcases by the door. Without stopping, Lina simply walked straight inside. Zenix did a double take at her impudence, but he relaxed again when Ayla just shrugged and patted his thigh.

“Hi! I’m Brielle Artane,” the cheerful Helios-human hybrid gushed as she hurried over. “I’m a huge fan!”

Ayla started to get up to greet her, but Zenix kept her seated on the swing by wrapping a strong arm around her waist. She shot him a disgruntled look, but he just smiled in response and refused to let go. Giving up, Ayla smiled sweetly at the other female as she vigorously shook her hand.

“Hi, I’m Ayla. After all of the vid calls we’ve had over the last few months, it’s nice to finally meet you in person.”

“Stars, I didn’t mean to shake your hand off. I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“I’m fine,” Ayla assured her.

“Sit down before you collapse,” Magnus ordered, gently pushing Brielle down onto one of the chairs. When she clung to his hand, he sighed. He plucked her off the chair and took a

seat with her on his lap. “Good to see you again, Ayla. Congratulations on finding your keeper. Sorry you got stuck with this guy.”

Ayla grinned. “If I didn’t already know you were good friends, I might take offense.”

Zenix snorted. “I said the same thing to Brielle after she mated with him, so it’s only fair.”

“He did,” Brielle confirmed with a laugh.

Artem didn’t bother to sit down. Instead, he pulled out a small tablet and began reading from it. “You have to be at the arena by noon tomorrow. Since you insisted on a new costume for this show, you have a final fitting with Andre as soon as you arrive to give him time to make any necessary alterations, then we have a brief interview scheduled at one. That will be held in the atrium on the VIP balcony level of the arena.”

“Andre?” Zenix bit out. “Who the fuck is Andre?”

Ayla just patted his thigh again.

“After that, you have the sound check, then you will have to start getting ready,” Artem continued without pause. “The concert begins at six, but you will be closing the show. As agreed upon, you will be doing five songs, but since you are the headliner and the last to perform, you also have the option for more if you decide to do an encore.”

“The band and I have already decided on the potential encore list.”

“I have that recorded here,” Artem confirmed. “After the concert, we have agreed to attend the VIP cruise hosted by some of the game’s sponsors.”

“Thanks for that,” Brielle chimed in.

Ayla sighed. “Right. I forgot about that.”

“Are you afraid of the water?” Zenix asked, concerned.

“Not really. But I don’t particularly like the idea of being stuck on a boat all night with a bunch of people I don’t know.”

Brielle nodded. “Agreed. Besides, someone always ends up getting seasick during these things. A cruise isn’t fun if some of the people are miserable.”

“Have you done one of these here before?” Ayla inquired. She gestured toward the bioluminescent waves. “The water on this planetoid is beautiful.”

“But we don’t know enough about what lives in it,” Zenix reminded.

“Most of it is harmless,” Magnus insisted.

“That we know of,” Zenix countered. “Which isn’t much.”

Brielle sighed. “Thanks for that, buzzkill. Now, if the boat capsizes, I’m totally going to blame you for jinxing us.”

“Ayla and I would be able to fly ourselves to safety if that were to occur,” Artem pointed out blandly, making the rest of them stare at him incredulously. “What? It’s true.”

“Don’t worry,” Ayla whispered. “I’d save you.”

“Gee, thanks,” Zenix replied dryly.

Magnus muttered something to Brielle that made her giggle.

Artem glanced back down at his tablet. “We agreed to the cruise with the understanding that the vessel would remain

close to the shoreline. At least within viewing distance. The cruise will not last for more than two hours before docking again, where the party may continue. Again, so we aren't stuck on the vessel all night with a bunch of strangers. Our attendance on the cruise will also keep the sponsors from bothering you backstage at the concert."

As Zenix listened to Ayla's brother rattle on, he thought the male sounded even more robotic than Evo did. As if somehow sensing the insult thrown his way, Artem turned to frown at him.

"It would have been better if you had waited to deal with all of this mating business until after the concert—"

"Brother..." Ayla warned.

"—but it is useless to worry about that now. I assume you will be backstage with Ayla during the concert?"

"I will."

"Then, try not to get in the way."

Both Magnus and Brielle coughed to cover their laughter, while Zenix tried to decide just how upset Ayla would be if he knocked her brother the fuck out.

"*Very,*" she answered through their mind connection. "*He's a pain in the ass sometimes, but I love him. He also loves me and has dedicated his life to helping me.*"

Startled, Zenix turned to gape at her. "*I can hear you in my head.*"

"*We are fully bonded now. That means our minds are now connected.*"

“I forgot about this part of being bonded,” he admitted, smiling at her. *“Communicating this way is pretty handy.”*

Artem leaned closer and snapped his fingers in front of his face, making Zenix scowl at him. Surprisingly, the pain in the ass finally smiled. “Congratulations, brother. Welcome to the family.”

“Thanks,” Zenix said, a little thrown off by the sudden change in attitude.

“We brought over some of your things from the guest villa,” Artem said to his sister. “So, you should be set for tonight.”

“Some?” Magnus choked out in surprise. “Those bags weighed a ton.”

“They are just the necessities she brought to the guest villa,” Lina announced as she came back outside. “She has a lot more on our space cruiser. I placed all of your things in the main bedroom since I’m assuming you will be sharing with your keeper.”

“You assumed right,” Ayla confirmed. “Thanks, Lina.”

Zenix blinked in surprise when he saw all the luggage was now missing from the deck. While he and the others had been listening to Artem, Ayla’s assistant had silently moved everything inside. Lina might seem a little strange, but she was definitely efficient.

“I didn’t see the need to have any of your belongings from the space cruiser transferred over until I knew how long we would be staying here,” Lina explained.

“You can’t leave!” Brielle gasped out. “You just got here, and you are mated to Nix now.”

Lina’s chin lifted in challenge. “While Ayla might be Chief Li’s keeper, she is also one of the most important vocalists of our era. You cannot expect her to give up performing for love!”

“I’m mated, not dying,” Ayla pointed out, but the other females just ignored her.

“Perhaps Chief Li should give up his position here to travel with Ayla.”

“He can’t,” Brielle argued. “He’s our Chief of Security. He is needed here.”

As the two females continued to argue, Zenix turned to Ayla. *“What is going on? Why do I feel like they are trying to decide our future for us?”*

Ayla sighed. *“Lina is just very protective of me. She also helps me organize my life. I honestly couldn’t do what I do without her. At least, not without a constant stress headache.”*

“Hey!” Razar Tolvar Artane shouted to be heard over the raised voices as he arrived with Travis McClain. “Whoa, what’s going on here? Looks like we are missing out on quite the party.”

“You already know Razar, right?” Zenix asked his mate. *“And that is Travis, the computer expert I told you I used to work with.”*

Since Travis was also a fan, Zenix expected his friend to hurry over to introduce himself to Ayla. Instead, the other male seemed frozen halfway up the steps to the deck. It took Zenix

a moment to realize that Lina had also stopped speaking mid-sentence and was now staring wide-eyed at Travis.

“What’s going on?” Zenix asked out loud.

“Well, well.” Ayla laughed softly. “I think Lina just found her keeper.”

Startled, Zenix blinked at her. “Wait, what? Really?”

Lina’s shoulders straightened, and she stomped over to the stairs where Travis was gaping up at her. She slowly walked down the steps until she was standing next to him, then reached out and grabbed his hand.

“Come on. Let’s go.”

“Where?” Travis asked, sounding dazed.

“Home.”

“Okay.”

As she walked down the rest of the steps and down the path, Travis followed after her like a love-struck puppy. When she started in the wrong direction, he gently tugged her in the direction of his own house.

Zenix shook his head in disbelief. “I can’t believe it. Seriously, what are the odds that your assistant would be mated to my friend?”

“Fate is a strange, mysterious force.” Ayla smiled brightly. “At least Lina won’t complain about spending time on Evo now.”

Artem frowned as he watched them leave. “I hope this isn’t catching.”

“What do you mean, brother?”

“Matings always seem to occur one after another, like falling dominos. I have no time for a mate at the moment.”

Razar clasped him on the shoulder. “It really isn’t something that happens on a schedule, buddy.”

“Now that Razar is here, we have something we’d like to speak to you about.” Getting straight to the point, Magnus announced, “We’d like you to stay. What would it take to convince you to set up a show here on Evo?”

“See? I told you,” Zenix said smugly through their bond.

Ayla wanted to smile but kept her expression blank. She’d done enough negotiating in her life to know it wasn’t good to give her position away too soon. “A residency here might be interesting, but I would have to have complete control of any show I do.”

Razar inclined his head. “Naturally.”

“I would also require a different venue other than the arena. Something more suitable for smaller audiences, like a concert hall.”

“That can be arranged,” Magnus agreed after a moment.

“You can have anything you want,” Brielle broke in, too excited to wait any longer. “Just agree, and we’ll make it happen.”

“Diva,” Razar groaned. “You can’t just—”

“What?” Brielle asked innocently. “Why waste time bantering back and forth when we are going to give her anything she wants anyway?”

Ayla laughed. “Then, I agree. I’ve been hoping for an opportunity like this. Right, brother?”

Artem nodded. “If we stay here, I will need a residence close to my sister.”

“What about one of the guest villas on the island?” Brielle suggested. “What if you just kept the one you are staying in now and made it your home?”

“That would work nicely. We will also need to discuss housing for the rest of the band and crew. I’ll make a list, and we can set up a time to go over all of the terms once the concert is finished.”

Razar smiled. “Great. Now, that that’s settled, Evo told me you have dessert here. I haven’t eaten in hours, and I’m starving.”

“Dessert?” Brielle perked up. “What kind of dessert?”

“Strawberry and cream cake,” Ayla said, getting to her feet. She took the other female’s hand and pulled her toward the doorway leading inside. “It’s my favorite, and Evo was kind enough to order us a big one. How do you like living on this planetoid so far? Maybe you can give me a tour of your favorite places sometime.”

“I would love that!”

As the females disappeared inside, Zenix got to his feet. “We were eating dinner when Evo informed us you were on your way here. We can order something for you if—”

“What were you eating? Never mind, I can smell whatever it is from here. I’ll just finish whatever you have left,” Razar called over his shoulder as he hurried inside.

“We weren’t actually done,” Zenix said belatedly.

“Well, you are now.” Magnus slapped him on the shoulder.
“But now, we can have some cake.”

Zenix gestured him in, then waited for Artem to enter the house before he followed them inside. Instead, the D’Aire male paused by the doorway.

“What?” Artem probed curiously. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“That’s it? Just...welcome to the family?” Zenix frowned.
“Aren’t you going to warn me not to hurt your sister or something?”

Artem shot him an amused look that was the equivalent of a condescending pat on the head. “Zenix Li, you have a lot to learn. You are my sister’s keeper, and because of that, we are family. I have no need to warn you of anything because if you are ever stupid enough to hurt my beloved sister, there are millions of people all around the known universe who would gladly tear you into tiny little pieces for me. I wouldn’t even have to lift a finger to ensure you paid dearly.”

Strangely, that made Zenix feel better. “Okay, then. Let’s go have some cake and discuss security for the concert.”

“Now, that is something we can agree on.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE NIGHT OF the concert, Ayla set the stage on fire...literally and figuratively.

As she began singing the final song of her set, the crowd screamed and cheered. It wasn't a song they knew, so they couldn't sing the lyrics along with her. Still, they were going wild since it was the first time they were hearing the brand-new theme song she'd created for the Evolution game.

As pyrotechnics burst to life around the stage and sparklers rained down from above, Ayla danced and sang her ass off. A group of dancers performed the choreography perfectly, and when she hit the chorus, Ayla fell into step with them. The crowd went crazy as she performed the seductive moves along with her dancers, and she was glad the sparkly skinsuit she was wearing was made of a material with a lot of give as she went into a series of acrobatic flips and spins.

When she skipped away from the group to focus on singing again, the dancers spread out on the stage, making sure the entire audience felt included in the performance. It might have looked random, but every moment on stage had been carefully planned.

Ayla had been nervous while she had waited for the other acts to perform, but all of that had faded away the moment she had stepped out on the stage. She had rocked all of her songs, but she was always a little unsure when performing something new. Now, as she sang the chorus of *Evolution of Us* for the second time, the crowd began singing it along with her.

That was when she knew it was another hit.

Instead of feeling tired and ready for the night to end, she felt exhilarated. Like she could keep singing all night. Love had given her an abundance of energy, and knowing that Zenix was watching her made Ayla want to give her all for the performance. Because she wasn't just singing to her fans.

This time, she was singing to the keeper of her heart.

Performing so soon after bonding with Zenix had left her feeling conflicted. A part of her had been excited about the concert, while the other half of her had been resentful of the time she'd had to spend away from her new mate. In all the long years to come, she knew without a doubt that she would never get enough of him.

That was the way it was between mates.

After their guests had left the night before, she and Zenix had taken a long shower together. They had made love again under the cascade of hot water, then they had fallen asleep wrapped around one another. They hadn't stirred again until his alarm sounded, and even then, he'd let her sleep a little longer while he'd gotten ready for the day.

A true night owl, Ayla had always had trouble falling asleep. But once she was out, it was almost impossible to wake her up. Zenix had been worried something had been wrong with her when Artem had shown up with Lina and Travis and an abundance of food. Her mate had been appalled by the way her brother had forcefully dragged her out of bed and shoved her into the shower, but that was completely normal for them.

Thankfully, she had been back to her lively self once they'd settled down to eat breakfast. During the meal, she had gotten a chance to meet her assistant's new mate. Travis was

the complete opposite of Lina. While she was serious and almost fanatically sensible, Travis was fun and had a carefree attitude that would surely drive her insane. Even though they were mismatched, they seemed happy together.

Ayla had been deeply relieved that she wouldn't be losing her assistant, and Lina and Travis had both been thrilled to hear about the new show they would be putting together on Evo. There had been mixed opinions about Ayla announcing it to the public already, but she wanted to make it clear to all her fans that she was in love and ready to settle down in one spot for the foreseeable future.

As the song came to an end, she struck the final pose and listened to the roar of the crowd. After waiting for the lights to dim, she relaxed again. When the spotlight was turned back on her, she laughed and waved to the people in the audience, making them scream even louder.

“Thank you! Thank you so much,” Ayla shouted over the noise as she bowed. “Give it up for my band. Aren't they wonderful?” She held her arm out to gesture toward her band, giving them the accolades they deserved.

She paced around the stage while she waited for the noise to die down a little, and she gave her band the subtle signal for them to remain on stage for an encore. But first, she had an announcement to make.

“I hope all of you have been having fun on Evo. This place is amazing, isn't it?”

People clapped and cheered. She spent a few more minutes talking about the Evolution game and the beta testing but kept most of her remarks pretty basic. While she was happy to

promote the game, she didn't know enough about it yet to really comment on the more technical aspects.

“I would also like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has come out to join me during this last tour. I've loved sharing my most recent songs with you, as well as some of my old favorites. However, now, I'm ready for a break.”

As expected, the audience fervently protested.

Knowing she had them in the palm of her hand, she sent them a wink. “But...” she stressed. “While I have you here, I have a secret I'd like to share with all of you. Well, I actually have two things to tell you. The first is I found the keeper of my heart.”

Gasps and cries of dismay mixed with shouts of joy and applause. Since she'd expected that mixed reaction, she wasn't fazed by it. She laughed again and twirled in a circle, letting the happiness she felt beam out of her.

“Being in love is an amazing feeling. He's truly a wonderful male, and we are very happy together. Thank you for all the well wishes. This is all so new to me, and we appreciate you giving us some privacy while we get to know each other better. But you can be sure that I will have a ton of new music to share with all of you soon.”

A little incentive to make them behave didn't hurt.

Adding to that, she said, “And speaking of new music, while I might not be touring anymore, that doesn't mean you can't come see me. Yes, you heard me right. I'm pleased to tell

you that I will be setting up a residency show right here on Evo!”

She had to wait until the screams and shouts had died down again before she could continue.

“I can’t tell you much yet, but I will definitely share the details as soon as everything is finalized. So, be on the lookout for updates soon! Now, how about I sing one last song for you before we end the show?”

Ayla and the band had decided to do one of her most popular songs as the encore, and the crowd surged to their feet to dance and sing with her. When the song was finished, she blew kisses to the crowd and waved before leaving the stage. Lina was waiting for her with a towel to pat down her face, and her protection team immediately moved in to surround her.

Even the backstage area was chaotic, and people pushed and shoved, trying to get closer to her. Before she could stumble, a strong arm wrapped around her, holding her steady. She immediately smiled when she saw it was her keeper and relaxed against him as he used his much larger body to shield her from the crowd.

“It’s nice having you here waiting for me,” she said, using their bond since it was easier to be heard over the noise.

“Where else would I be?” Zenix responded. *“Come on, sweetheart. It’s not safe here. Let’s get you into your dressing room. This is fucking chaos, and we need to figure out a better way to keep all of these assholes away from you.”*

That made her laugh. *“They are fans. Not assholes.”*

“Same difference.”

“You’re mated?” Sebastian Vales demanded as soon as they entered the private area near the dressing rooms.

Ayla glanced over and grinned when she saw all of the members of Contagious. Since they had performed much earlier than her, she had wondered if they would stick around to the end of the concert. She was glad they had so she could share her good news with them.

She took Zenix’s hand in hers and said, “Yes! I found my keeper.”

“Congrats, that’s amazing!” Sebastian moved forward as if to hug her, then the singer shot a tentative glance over at Zenix before taking a step back. He laughed nervously. “You’re that security guy, right?”

“Zenix is the Chief of Security here on Evo,” she corrected.

“So, I guess that means this is the official end to our tour together,” Nolan Dovico said with a sad smile.

“Don’t worry. I didn’t forget about your new song. I promise to take a look at it before you leave,” she assured the guitar player.

“We’re really going to miss traveling with you,” Holland Beckett said as he wiped a fake tear from his eye. He was in charge of keyboards and electronics and often had trouble sleeping, so she’d spent a lot of late nights chatting with him during the tour.

“You’re just going to miss my space cruiser,” she teased.

Evan Krasse, the bass player of the group, laughed. “Well, that, too.”

“I’m going to miss you guys, too. But this is only the beginning of your journey. Now, you get to enjoy every minute of it together and pave your own path forward.”

“What about letting us play a few shows with you here once you get your residency set up?” Mike Cheval, the drummer, asked with a wide grin.

“Of course,” she readily agreed. “That would be fun.”

“Ayla, we have to go,” Zenix said, squeezing her hand. “You still have to get ready for the afterparty.”

“We’ve got to go, but you guys are going on the VIP cruise later, right?” she asked as she started backing away, trusting Zenix to keep her on her feet. “I’ll see you there.”

As they made their way toward her dressing room, they kept getting stopped every few seconds by someone who wanted to praise her performance or ask about the new show. When Zenix had finally had enough, he simply lifted her into his arms and bulldozed his way toward her dressing room.

Once they were safely inside the quiet room, he set her back down on her feet. She turned around to blast him for being so impatient, but the words got trapped in her throat. Alarm swept through her when she finally noticed his expression.

“What is it?” she asked, gripping his hand tight. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m not exactly sure...” he began carefully.

“Tell me.”

“I just got a premonition,” he said ominously. “My skin is tingling with energy, but I’m not sure what it means yet or where the threat is coming from. Until I figure out what is going on, I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

KEEPING AYLA CLOSE to him turned out to be easier said than done.

As Zenix leaned against the railing on the upper deck of the large luxury boat that the VIP party was being held on, he obsessively watched his mate's every move. He was relegated to tracking her from across the room since he had been banished to the sidelines before the boat had even left the dock.

After his fierce scowl and brooding manners had scared away several of the sponsors she'd been trying to charm, Anissa had taken over accompanying Ayla around the party. While she should be safe enough on the boat since she was away from the masses, he still didn't like being so far away from her. Watching his mate smile at other males was akin to torture, but Zenix knew she was just being her friendly self.

That didn't mean he had to like it, though.

In fact, he'd hated every minute of the damn party since they had stepped on board, and he wished he had tried to convince his mate to skip the event. Not that it would have done much good. She was there for business purposes, not to have fun. And her attendance wasn't just to benefit herself, but to promote the entire Evo project as a whole.

That was something he had to keep reminding himself.

Truthfully, he'd never really considered everything that went into being a professional singer. It wasn't just about picking up a guitar and singing. Sure, that was part of it, but there was so much more. Most people saw her as a songwriter

and singer, but she was also a businessperson. She promoted herself and her brand by doing interviews, livestreams, advertisements, and by going to parties like the cruise they were currently attending.

And that was on top of performing at all her concerts.

Ayla was involved in every aspect of her shows, from the costume designs to the choreography. She spent countless hours rehearsing and gave it her all during a concert. But she didn't just do it for herself. A lot of people counted on her for their livelihoods, and she did her best to make them all proud. It was all physically and mentally exhausting, but she never complained about any of it.

As her mate, the last thing Zenix wanted to do was make things more difficult for her, but his jealousy and concern for her safety were slowly driving him insane.

“So, how does it feel to be the most hated male in the entire universe?”

Zenix shot Xian a vicious glare as he and Nico walked over to join him by the railing. “Fuck you.”

Xian chuckled. “Who knew you could become a celebrity just for being Ayla's plus one.”

“I am not a celebrity.”

“Sorry, but you are,” Nico countered sympathetically. “Word has spread that you and Ayla are mated, and it's all over social media already.”

“Fucking hell, don't people have anything better to do than gossip about this shit?”

Xian shook his head. “No, they don’t. I think you are going to have to lay low for a while. Since the people on this boat are mostly business moguls and celebrities in their own right, there isn’t a huge uproar. But back on shore, there is a mob waiting for both of you.”

Zenix groaned. “This is a fucking nightmare.”

“I heard social mags and other publications are offering a huge amount of credits for pictures of you together,” Nico added.

“Evo warned me,” Zenix said glumly. “Which is why I’m going to have to get Ayla off of here before the boat docks.”

“You could take one of the rescue boats on the lower level and head straight back to the island,” Xian said.

“That’s an idea.” They were close enough, Zenix thought as he glanced over at the island the boat would soon be passing by. “Speaking of, I think we are going to have to keep the island strictly private and closed off to visitors. Since Ayla’s brother is planning on moving into one of the guest villas, it would be simple enough to offer the other dwellings on the island to Ayla’s band members and personal protection team.”

Nico nodded. “That’s a good idea.”

“What’s a good idea?” Ayla asked as she joined them.

After the concert was over, she had quickly showered and changed into a long, silvery-white gown that matched the color of her hair perfectly. He’d been amazed as he’d watched her stylist change her hair into soft waves, and the makeup

artist had given her a sultry, seductive look with some dark eyeshadow and red lip stain.

While he thought she looked like a fucking goddess, he didn't like that other men were looking at her. Zenix immediately wrapped his arm around her waist and drew her closer to him, then he cursed when a couple of flashes went off as someone snuck a few pictures. Nico and Xian moved so that their large bodies blocked the couple from view, but the damage was already done.

“What did you say about people on the boat not caring?” Zenix hissed.

Xian shrugged. “Guess I was wrong.”

Ayla patted her keeper's chest in a soothing motion. She knew he had been upset and tense for most of the night, but she didn't know how to fix it. Attending events like the cruise was simply part of her job. It might look glamorous, but she would rather be home with him, eating the leftover cake from last night.

Although her mate had wanted to wear his standard uniform, as her official date, Zenix had changed into the suit she had chosen for him. He'd been amazed to discover that the black glittery suit had been made of a thin armored material that was similar to his uniform, and she'd thought that little detail might make wearing it more tolerable.

Her stylist had altered one of the suits that had been made for Artem, and since her brother had a closetful already, she'd figured he wouldn't miss one. While Artem was slightly taller than Zenix, her mate was far more muscular. Because of that, her stylist had added a strip of a different armored material to

the center of the suit jacket as well as down the sleeves and the sides of the pants.

The addition of the matte black stripes gave it a tuxedo-like look that was both stylish and elegant. They had paired it with a plain black shirt underneath to complete the monochrome look. Even though there were actors, models, and other musicians at the party, Ayla thought Zenix was the most handsome male there.

“We were talking about keeping our island private,” Xian explained.

“That would be fantastic,” she said, truly meaning it. “Having a safe space away from all the crazy would be a blessing.”

“Then, that’s what we’ll do. Once we—” Nico’s eyes narrowed. “Isn’t that the singer from that band you traveled with? Why the fuck is he standing so close to my mate? And why is he smiling like that?”

Startled by the fury in his tone, Ayla glanced around until she found Brielle in the crowd. Sure enough, the female was speaking to Sebastian, but there was an ocean of distance between them. Not to mention Razar was also part of their conversation. No one in their right mind would find the situation inappropriate, but Nico didn’t seem to care.

“Sebastian is a harmless flirt,” she tried to explain. “He smiles at everyone, male and female.”

“Let’s see if he can keep smiling once I rip one of his fingers off,” Nico growled before stomping off.

“He won’t really hurt him, will he?” Ayla asked, worried for her young friend.

Zenix rubbed her back. “No. And see? Sebastian saw him coming and managed to escape in time.”

“You mated males are ridiculous,” Xian accused, shaking his head as he walked away.

“We really are,” an amused voice said from behind Ayla.

She turned and grinned at the couple standing there. “Zenix, this is Steven Fletcher and his lovely mate, Kora.”

“The lead singer of Shout Out Loud, right? I’m a big fan,” Zenix said. “And you used to work with Ayla.”

“I did, then she introduced me to my keeper.” Kora smiled. “I heard Lina just met her keeper as well. You seem to have the magic touch when it comes to finding your assistants’ mates.”

“At least Lina isn’t quitting on me,” Ayla teased.

“It was much easier working for you than keeping this one in line,” Kora quipped back.

“You wound me, mate.” Steven groaned in mock pain, then he laughed. “But it’s all true. We just wanted to come over to congratulate you two.”

Kora nodded. “We are so pleased you found your keeper, Ayla. You have a wonderful female for a mate, Zenix Li.”

“I know it.”

Steven sobered before saying, “Contact us if you need anything. Seriously, you two are in for one hell of a ride from here on out.”

Zenix sighed. “That’s right. You were in a similar situation to us when you first mated. How long did it take for your fans to calm down?”

Steven and Kora exchanged a look before he said, “I’ll let you know when it happens.”

Well, fuck.

That was definitely not the answer Zenix had been hoping for.

CHAPTER NINE

LIKE FEMALES OF any race, Ayla and Kora made a trip to the bathroom together to gossip and retouch their hair and makeup. They still kept in regular contact, but it had been a while since they had gotten to hang out in person.

“I’m glad Zenix is getting a chance to chat with Steven,” Ayla admitted as she fussed with her wavy hair. “He can give my mate the human perspective of being mated to a D’Aire.”

“Being a D’Aire keeper isn’t the hard part. Being mated to a celebrity is,” Kora corrected. “Steven and I will be here for a few more days, so we should get together and chat more when we have some time. I’m sure I can give your mate some advice about how to handle some of the worst of the fans. Then again, he is the Chief of Security here, so I’m sure there is not much he can’t deal with.”

“True,” Ayla said proudly.

Suddenly, Kora slapped a hand over her mouth and raced into one of the bathroom stalls.

The sounds of her retching made Ayla wince. “Kora, are you okay? Are you feeling a little seasick?”

The water was quite calm, but the slight swaying motion could still distress some people.

“It’s not the boat. It’s the baby,” Kora moaned.

Ayla’s eyes went wide. “You’re pregnant? Congratulations!”

“Thanks. I’m going to need to just hang here for a while. Do me a favor, will you? Go tell Steven what happened and

where I am. I can't reach out through our bond, or he'll sense how crappy I feel and will totally panic."

"I'll go tell him right now. Do you need anything? Water? Ginger ale?"

"Steven is carrying a scent inhaler that will help me a little, but mostly, I just need time."

"Okay, I'll go grab him for you."

"Thank you."

Zenix reached out through their bond. *"I can sense something is wrong. What happened?"* he demanded. *"Are you okay?"*

"Kora is pregnant and feeling sick. Can you tell Steven she isn't feeling well and needs her scent inhaler?"

"Of course."

"Thank you. We came up to the bathroom on the top level since it was less crowded."

"Wait up there for me. We're on our way."

While she waited, Ayla decided to grab a bottle of water for Kora. She made her way toward the bar that had been set up on the top level, then gasped when a hand reached out and grabbed her arm in a bruising grip. She blinked in surprise as Nolan Dovico slammed her back against the railing. The usually quiet, gentle male looked completely disheveled. His eyes were red as if he'd been crying, or perhaps he'd had too much to drink.

"Nolan?" she asked, trying to pull her arm free. "Are you okay?"

His grip on her tightened, and he pressed his body closer to cage her in against the railing. "I'm not okay! How could I be okay? You didn't give me any time. It wasn't supposed to happen like this."

"What wasn't?"

"How could you have a human keeper? It just doesn't make sense. Why wasn't it me? I'm the one who understands you. I'm the one who understands your music."

Ayla reached out to Zenix again. "*Umm, Nix? Nolan is saying some crazy things to me right now. I don't know if he's drunk or if something is really wrong with him.*"

"I'm almost there, sweetheart."

She glanced over Nolan's shoulder, and relief swept through her when she saw Zenix coming toward them. Unfortunately, Nolan must have sensed him coming as well because he suddenly pulled a knife from his pocket and swung her around in front of him. He pressed the blade against her throat, and the slight sting of pain made her freeze.

"Stay back!" Nolan screamed as he used her body as a shield.

"Let go of her, Nolan," Zenix demanded, holding up a blaster that Ayla hadn't even known he'd been carrying with him.

"No, no, no! You're ruining everything! We were supposed to spend the rest of our lives making music together. You promised," Nolan cried. "You promised!"

With the sharp knife pressed against her, Ayla was too afraid to speak. Hell, she was afraid to breathe. She had

promised to look at his new song, but she'd never suspected that he might have misconstrued her offer to help as something more.

"Don't. Nothing you did caused this," Zenix assured her.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Anissa approaching from the right, while Xian crept closer from the left. Both of them were holding weapons, but with Ayla standing in front of Nolan, she was sure none of them had a clear shot. Still, seeing them made her feel a little better, but she kept her focus on Zenix.

Her mate would save her.

"You don't want to hurt Ayla," Zenix said softly as he slowly moved closer. "She needs to see your music. You need to show it to her."

"I do," Nolan whispered. "I need to show you that we're meant to be together forever."

With that, he wrapped his arm around her waist and tumbled them both over the railing and into the water below. She barely had time to gasp before they were sinking under. The splash they made as their bodies hit the bioluminescent water made it flare with light, making it impossible to see.

"Fuck!" Zenix shouted as he rushed toward the railing.

Without thinking, he vaulted over the railing and jumped, following them into the water. He heard Anissa and Xian shouting his name, but he didn't bother responding. His mate was in danger. The light in the water was disorientating, but he managed to surface again pretty quickly.

He immediately started searching for Ayla and wanted to sob with relief when he saw her pale hair. Then, he noticed she was busy trying to fight Nolan off as he tried to drag her under again. Zenix swam toward them, immensely glad for his countless hours of water training. He narrowed the distance between them in no time, then slammed his fist into the crazy man's face once, twice, three times until he finally let go of her.

Before Zenix could say anything, Ayla wrapped herself around him. Her wings burst free from her back, and he clung to her as she lifted them straight up into the air.

“Umm, sweetheart? I don't mind flying, but—”

“There's...something...in the water,” she panted out.

He noted the terror in her voice and glanced down in time to see a giant shark-like creature rise out of the depths below. The creature had a razor-sharp sail for a dorsal fin, and a long snout with rows of jagged teeth that reminded Zenix of a dinosaur from the ancient past.

Nolan let out a scream as the creature bit down on his leg as he tried to swim away. The water churned as he struggled against its hold on him, then they both disappeared as he was dragged under. The only thing left behind in the sudden silence was a small circle of light that slowly faded.

“What the fuck?” Zenix wheezed out.

“No more boat rides,” Ayla said, shivering slightly.

He could tell she was still in shock, but at least she was safe. And that was all that mattered. “Yeah,” he agreed. “No more boat rides. Can you carry me back to the island?”

Instead of answering that question, she started flying toward home. “Zenix?”

“Yes, mate?”

“I don’t think any of my fans will be bothering us on the island.”

Hugging her tightly, he pressed his lips against the small cut on her neck. “I guess there’s a bright side to every situation.”

EPILOGUE

ZENIX WATCHED AS Ayla danced her way across the stage of the new concert hall. He felt immense pride each time he watched her perform, but this time was extra special since it was the opening night of her new show.

What should have taken months to construct had only taken a few days after Dragon Warrior Eden Nazira had shown up on Evo. While the Dragon Warrior had no interest in the mixed reality game, she had been curious enough to visit Evo in order to study the dangerous creatures living on the planetoid.

News of the tragic death of one of the members of Contagious had traveled fast. In honor of Ayla's friendship with the rest of the band, they had kept the truth of the situation quiet. Instead, they had told everyone that Nolan had fallen overboard after getting drunk, and Ayla and Zenix had tried to save him.

Sometimes, a lie was more humane.

While they had all been worried the death would cause problems for the game launch, it actually had the opposite effect. More reservations had been made in the wake of Nolan's tragic demise since everyone had been talking about the incident for weeks.

Ayla's shock and grief had left her feeling heartbroken. She'd thought of Nolan as a friend and a surrogate little brother and had never even considered that he might mistake her kindness for something more. Zenix had tried to assure her that nothing she'd done had caused Nolan's actions.

Sometimes crazy was just crazy.

Zenix hadn't been able to make himself care about Nolan's death. The bastard had tried to hurt Ayla, so the crazy fucker had gotten the end he'd deserved. He kept that opinion to himself, though he knew his mate had probably heard it through their bond.

Her friends and family had rallied around her, helping her through the worst of her grief and sadness. But what had helped her the most was simply spending time with Zenix. Every day they spent together, their bond grew stronger. So did his abilities, which had shocked them both.

He'd started getting premonitions about whenever she was in danger, both in dream form and in flashes while he was awake. Perhaps it was his love and worry for her that had caused the change. Whatever the reason, he was grateful for it.

So far, he'd been able to prevent her from being injured in big and small events. He had saved her from breaking a finger while playing the game on one of the other islands and had stopped her from getting hit by a ball thrown by a careless visitor on the mainland. He'd even prevented her from getting a paper cut from reading an old book and had caught her seconds before she'd fallen after the heel of her shoe had broken.

He loved being her safety net and had truly learned how to appreciate his abilities by using them to protect her. Keeping her safe was certainly a full-time job, and he felt better knowing that she had a team of guards that followed her wherever she went.

Because of Ayla's unique security issues, their island had been kept private and closed off to visitors. After mating with Travis, Lina had quickly changed her opinion about staying on the planetoid. Both of them had been overjoyed with the idea of Ayla setting up a show on Evo, and Ayla had been equally as thrilled to have them as her closest neighbors.

Artem had officially moved into one of the villas, while Ayla's guards, band members, and some of their permanent crew members had also decided to make their new homes there on the island.

Since some of her staff and crew might not want to relocate to Evo, Ayla had called a meeting with them, giving them all the option to stay or go. Whatever they had decided, she supported their decision. Fortunately, most of her crew had decided to stay on, excited about the prospects of the new residency on Evo.

And while they had been busy planning the new show, Eden Nazira had shown up.

Ayla had become friends with the Dragon Warrior after she had attended one of her concerts. After that, they had met up several more times as Eden traveled around exploring the different space stations and planets.

Zenix had never met Eden, but he did know her sister, Amari, who was mated to his friend, Roman Newgate. It had been a little strange for him when Eden had arrived out of the blue and announced she would be staying with them, but seeing Ayla happy about their visitor had made him automatically agree.

Thankfully, the Dragon Warrior had simply meant she would be staying close by. Using her magic, she had created herself a guest house further down the beach. While she'd been at it, she had also built Ayla a brand-new recording studio next door to their home.

Since she liked Ayla's music, Eden had also constructed a new concert hall on the mainland. The Artanes had been a little irritated when she had put it right in the center of a large park, but they had stopped complaining when she had simply lifted the entire building and moved it somewhere more suitable.

"She sounds happy," Eden murmured beside Zenix.

He smiled at that. "She does."

"The last of her grief is gone," she said. "Which means I shall be leaving now."

Surprised, he glanced over at her. "So soon?"

"I will return to visit again." Her lips quirked up in a grin. "So, do not think you are rid of me yet."

"You've grown on me, Dragon Warrior."

She chuckled, then sobered again. "Your mate has a gift. Her voice, and what she is able to give to people, is something that needs to be preserved. Guard her well, human."

"I—"

Before he could finish speaking, Eden disappeared.

Sighing, he muttered, "I hate when they do that."

The sound of applause had him focusing his attention back toward the stage. Ayla was bowing and waving to the crowd as

she finished up the show. Just as she'd wanted, it was a small venue with a more intimate setting. She wore a long midnight blue gown that shimmered like starlight as she hurried toward him.

Meeting her halfway, he lifted her off her feet and kissed her passionately, sending the audience into an absolute frenzy.

While he couldn't do anything to stop the rumors circulating on social media about them, he *could* use it to his advantage. Setting Ayla back on her feet, he cradled her neck and dipped her backward, taking the kiss even deeper.

If her fans wanted gossip, he'd give them something positively salacious to talk about.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laurie Roma mainly writes contemporary, romantic suspense, fantasy, and sci-fi romance. She can usually be found tapping away on her keyboard, creating worlds for her characters while she listens to music. Of course, her playlist depends on her mood...but then again, so does her writing. She loves to hear from her readers, so be sure to reach out!

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3013: SALVATION
3013: CHAOS
3013: GENESIS
3013: SYNERGY
3013: PRIMAL
3013: EXODUS
3013: ALLEGIANCE
3013: KISMET
3013: UNITY
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3013: STARFALL
3013: GLITCH
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