



STAR JUSTICE

8

SHADOW EAGLE

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Chapter 1

“Does Zea know about me losing control? How about the twins?” I asked after Eve’s news of my fate had a few moments to sink in.

“I have not told Zea yet,” Eve answered.

“Why? But you told Paula and Kas--”

“My love, I am sorry,” Eve interrupted me with a sigh. “Perhaps I should have told you sooner. I did not want to distract you from our mission. Also, I was not sure until you shifted at Queen’s Hat.”

“But you told Paula and Kasta? They couldn’t have built that arm lock contraption in--”

“That is when I told them,” Eve interrupted me again. “You know they work quickly. It was done while you were sleeping at Juliette’s police station. Adam, I love you. I intended no betrayal with this. I just thought--”

“I know,” I said as I closed my eyes. “I’m sorry if my questions have a rough tone to them.”

“But your thoughts--”

“Look, maybe for a second I freaked out, but I’m fine now. Well, fuck, I’m not fine, you pretty much just told me you think I’m going insane, and you know me better than anyone else.”

“We will figure out a way,” she said as she leaned her head on my shoulder again. “We can find this President Yu and make him tell us about your condition. There might be a drug or process we can use to stabilize the beast in your soul.”

“We don’t even know where to look,” I said. “We also have these superpowered asshole vampire overlords to worry about. Before we fight them, we have to figure out how to get these Nordar behind us. Before we do that, I have to complete this rite for Odin or figure out how to get the Jotnar to be friendly with us.”

“Perhaps some of that can wait,” Eve said as she raised her fingers to touch my cheek.

“You know it can’t,” I said as my heart grew heavy. “My life doesn’t matter when there are millions of people on Uraniel. Hell, there are trillions of people in the Milky Way. If these SAVO fucks are really waking up, they are not going to stop until their bellies are full again.”

“Yes,” Eve whispered. “Defeating them is our priority. I know this, but my heart aches for you. Adam, you are my love, and my soul, and while I know we may die in our mission, I do not want to lose you. The thought almost makes me want to give up. To run away. To spend the rest of our lives together in peaceful bliss.”

“Yeah,” I said with a chuckle. “But we’d just be a few steps ahead of the SAVO, or Elaka Nota, or whoever the fuck else wants to come after us. We have too many enemies now.”

“But the galaxy is impossibly large,” Eve whispered.

“I don’t have to be a mind reader to know you aren’t serious,” I said with another laugh.

“You seem to be taking this news better than me,” she pulled away from me so that her red eyes could peer into mine.

“We need to tell Zea,” I said. “I don’t want to keep this from her.”

“She will be upset,” Eve replied.

“Yeah,” I said as I thought about the level of angst Zea would probably experience if I told her I soon wouldn’t be able to change back from my tiger form. “Do you know if there is anything I can do to slow the beast down? Can I not shift? Will that help?”

“I believe so,” Eve said with a nod. “But I may be wrong. As I said, I am observing your thoughts and the thoughts of the animal who shares your body. You two are allied most of the time, but it aims to take over. It knows it

is slowly winning.”

“So I just won’t shift,” I said.

“Can you keep from shifting?” Eve asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Sure,” I said, but as soon as I spoke I realized the answer wasn’t so simple.

“Yes, that is what I mean,” she said as she cupped my hands with her fingers. “When we are in danger, you are compelled to shift and save us.”

“I can resist the urge,” I said, but I knew I couldn’t lie to Eve.

She shook her head as soon as the words left my mouth.

“When the Black Heart leader, Warren Royzar began to kill the police at Juliette’s station, you knew that he would soon murder her, so you shifted.”

“Yeah,” I admitted.

“When Zea was programming the missile launchers, and the Vaish warriors approached, you feared they would shoot her legs, so you shifted. There are other examples. The primary reason you change is to keep us safe.”

“I guess I can lie to myself, but not to you.” I smiled at Eve, and she leaned in to kiss me on the lips. I matched her passion as I returned her kiss, but we soon parted with soft gasps.

“Perhaps Madalena is correct, we should stay in her battlefortress while you and she galavant across the galaxy and rid it of SAVO.” Eve’s mouth turned into a grin, and I knew she was joking.

“I don’t think you’d like that,” I said as I returned her smirk.

“No, I would not. Also, you would still shift anytime Madalena was in danger. You will die to protect us. You will die to defend a planet full of people whom you do not know.”

“Yeah,” I agreed again as I brushed back her hair behind her ear. “You said Zea was working with Paula and Kasta? I want to take a shower, but then we should all talk.”

“We will be back at the battlefortress soon.”

“Alright. Let’s talk over food. Can you let them all know?”

“Yes,” Eve said as she slid off our bed and stood. The skin tight suit she wore fit her body perfectly, and I contemplated asking her to take a shower with me.

“That will take us much longer than a half hour, my love.” Eve smiled wide when she read my thoughts, which actually caused a bit of red color to bloom across her white cheeks.

“Yeah, I’m hungry for more than food though.”

“Hmmm.” She bit her bottom lip, and I could clearly see her fangs.

“It can wait.” I laughed as I threw off my sheets and stood naked from the bed.

“Hmmm,” she said as her red eyes darted across my chest, arms, and legs. “I should go get Zea...”

“That will take too long, for sure.” I laughed and then walked into my bathroom. “I’ll meet you all in the galley.”

“Yes, my love. See you soon.” Eve turned to walk out of our suite, and I poked my head out of the bathroom so that I can watch her ass.

As soon as I heard my door open and close, I put some toothpaste on my brush and then went to work on my teeth. While I brushed, I stared into the mirror and tried to fight against my emotions.

Fuck it. Was Eve right? Was the beast winning? Did I only have eight months left?

Part of me wanted to scream. I wanted to slam my fist into the mirror until it broke into a thousand pieces. I wanted to break everything because I was feeling so helpless and broken.

But there was another part of me that was still grateful. Eve gave me a second chance. I was a slave with a control collar on. I should have died a thousand times before she saved me. After that, I’d cheated death another hundred times. Now I had a spaceship, a crew, the love of three incredible women, and a mission.

I didn’t want to die, but I’d lived one hell of a life so far. I was more grateful for the love I had than I was angry at the tiger who lived in my soul.

There had to be a way to fight against this. I was good at fighting. I just needed to find the right arena to battle this creature. Battling in my mind

wasn't working out, so maybe there was another way?

I finished brushing my teeth and jumped in the shower. The hot water eased some of the tension in my muscles, and I shoved my head under the stream so that it would wet my hair. My eyes were closed, and I almost jumped out of my skin when I felt someone's arms wrap around my waist.

"Eyyye yahhh?" she whispered just loud enough to be heard over the water.

"Persephone?" I asked as I pulled my head back from the spray of water. I could feel her breasts push against my back, and I didn't feel the usual fabric of her lingerie-like outfit, but I knew she would disappear as soon as I turned around to see her.

"Eye yah." I felt her lips on my bare shoulder. She kissed first, then her teeth gently bit me. A shiver of pleasure descended my spine, and my heart started to slam in my chest like a bass drum.

"You seem to like showing up in my shower," I whispered as I resisted the urge to turn around.

"Eye yah." Her breath was hotter than the water when she whispered in my ear.

"I'm going to turn around and you'll be gone. Are you a ghost, or is it really you?" I still didn't turn around. Her wet body felt damn good against mine.

"Eye yah," she replied, and then I felt her sigh as she leaned her head against my back.

"I don't understand what you say. Can you speak English?"

"I... Yooouuuu... Noooo... Wannnnntteeee... diiiiiieeee..." Her words were softer than her usual whisper, and it took me a few moments to make sense of what she meant.

"You don't want me to die?" I asked hesitantly.

"Eye yah!" Her voice raised a bit, and I could feel her arms tighten around me.

"Yeah, me either. Is it the tiger you worry about, or the SAVO?"

"Beeeeeaaastsss... saaaameee..."

“I don’t understand,” I said with a sigh as I moved my hands over my chest where she clutched me.

“Eye yahhh...” She pressed her face against my back again, and I moved my hands so that she couldn’t escape from my grasp. She didn’t seem to make any movement to elude me, and I tried to figure out the best time I could turn around.

“Can I fight it?” I asked.

“Yahhhh,” she said as she pulled her face away from my back.

“How?” I didn’t know if “yahh” meant “yes,” but I guessed that it did.

“Dreemmmm. Meeee. Sleepppp.”

“Sleep? Do you mean dream?” Every time I tried to see Persephone, she had disappeared, but her answer surprised me, so I pushed her hands against my chest as I turned around inside of her arms.

But the strange woman was no longer there.

I still felt her hands on my chest though, and I looked down to see her arms still around me.

“Yaaahhh. Sleeeeeeep. Meeeeee. Gooooooo... Annnn uuuuu.” I felt her body still pressed against my back, but I also felt the water from the shower hit there. It was like the water was passing through her to hit me.

Maybe she really was a ghost.

“So sleep with you?” I didn’t mean sexually. Or maybe I did. The small bits of memory from my dreams painted an image of a beautiful platinum haired woman with black wings, and I felt a powerful attraction toward her.

“Drrrrreeee meee meee...”

“Dream?” I asked. “That’s where I see you. That’s where--”

“Captain?” I heard a voice come through the intercom in my bathroom, and Persephone’s arms faded from my chest as if I had imagined her touch.

“Yeah, Nikki, What do you need?”

“I am sorry to disturb you, but we are leaving warpdrive in fifteen minutes,” she said.

“Thanks. Get everyone else on the bridge. I’ll be there soon,” I replied as I grabbed a handful of soap from the dispenser and went to work on washing myself.

I expected Persephone to make another appearance, but the Shadow Eagle didn’t speak to me again, and I hit the shower’s dryers a few minutes later.

After I threw my suit on, I walked onto the bridge. There Hegeia, Uma, and Waiola were at the gunner’s stations closest to the elevator. Uma shouted out a word in Nordar as soon as they saw me, and my three friends stood from their chairs along with Mikhael, Josefinna, Lux, Milda, and Calisto.

“At ease,” I said after they saluted, and the crew returned to their stations. But as they moved, I saw Milda’s hand miss the armrest of her seat, and she almost tumbled out of her chair.

“Hey, Milda, are you okay?” I asked as I stepped beside her gunner station.

“Yes, Adam,” she said, but now that I was standing next to her, I could feel her exhaustion through the connection I shared with Madalena.

“You don’t look good. Are you sick?” I asked.

“No, my lord,” she replied without looking at me.

“Alright,” I said. “If you need anything. Let me know.”

“Yes, my lord.” Milda nodded, and I turned to walk to the far end of the bridge.

Nikki was in her usual spot in the center of the front three pilot’s seat. She was whispering to Zea, and the hacker leaned over the side of the control terminal wall so that she could inspect the controls Nikki was pointing at.

Paula sat in the third seat, and Kasta leaned over the side wall of the station in a similar manner that Zea leaned over Nikki’s. The twin blonde women were also whispering to each other, but they stopped as soon as they saw I had walked past the officer’s chairs.

“Captain on the bridge!” Kasta squealed as she stood at attention and smiled at me. The group of beautiful women all followed the android’s example, and my eyes fell on Madalena and Eve.

“At ease,” I said, and the women nodded before they each returned to

their seats.

I smiled at Eve and Madalena before I sat in the center officer's chair. Madalena took her seat on my left while Eve sat on my right. After I gave the vampire a smile, I leaned into Madalena.

"Is Milda pregnant?" I asked.

"No, why do you ask?"

"She looked pale, but she said she wasn't sick," I explained.

"Pier, Baki, and Arno are on *Dance to the Dirge*," the Prime Valkyrie said.

"Okay," I said. "What does that--"

"They are submitted to her, so she is beginning to suffer from their separation."

"Shit," I said. "Aren't they submitted to you also?"

"Dana Fabto is a Valkyrie and is submitted to me. Arno, Baki, and Pier are submitted to Milda, who is submitted to me. I have thirty other support crew on board, but only my bridge crew are bound to me.

"She's feeling like shit because she is separated from them?"

"Yes," Madalena answered.

"But you don't feel bad being separated from Dana?" I asked.

"It is uncomfortable, but the pleasure of being around you makes the sensation easier to bear."

"I'm still trying to get my head around this submission stuff," I said as I shook my head and tried to puzzle how the weird shackles actually impacted everyone. "If we don't get the *Dance to the Dirge* back and find the rest of your crew, what will happen to Milda? What will happen to you?"

"They are far away, we will hurt for a time, but then recover."

"So you know they are still alive? How? They must be light years away. Do you even know where they are?"

"I have an idea, as does Milda. The distance affects our connection, but our souls are bound. The space between is small when compared to the All Father's powers."

“Yeah, Odin,” I sighed. “So if they die next to you, then you might die, but if it is far away, you just become uncomfortable?”

“They are more uncomfortable because they submitted,” Madalena explained, “but our wills are used to being bound, so you do not need to worry.”

“What about Goran?” I whispered so that Nikki didn’t overhear our conversation.

“The traitor?” Madalena’s eyes narrowed.

“He was bound to Nikki, wasn’t he?”

“Yes,” the Prime Valkyrie said.

“So? You put a bullet through his skull and she didn’t look like it affected her.”

“It did, but Nikki is my strongest warrior.” Madalena shrugged.

“I thought the Valkyries were the strongest, and they don’t--”

“Nikki was a Valkyrie,” Madalena explained. “She may have beaten me if she chose to become Prime. However, she was in love with Goran and agreed to marry him.”

“Hold up. Fuck.” I realized my words were getting louder, and I turned to make sure Nikki was still talking to Zea. Once it was clear the pilot wasn’t interested in our conversation, I turned back to Madalena’s ear.

“So Nikki was a badass warrior Valkyrie woman, who might have given you a run for your money if she decided she wanted to be Prime Valkyrie, but then she retired from being a Valkyrie so that Goran could submit to her?”

“Yes, Adam.” Madalena nodded.

“And then you killed him?”

“He disobeyed me. He was a traitor.” Madalena shrugged, but I could feel no emotion from her.

“Fucking shit,” I sighed as I replayed the scene in my head half a dozen times.

“It is unfortunate. He and I grew up together, but I cannot tolerate anyone on my crew being disobedient.”

“Isn’t Nikki fucking pissed?” I asked.

“Yes, she was angry at him,” Madalena replied.

“No, I mean at you. Isn’t she angry at you?” I asked.

“Why would she be? I did not betray an order from the Prime Valkyrie.”

“No, that’s not what--” I sighed and then shook my head. Perhaps I was too “civilian” about this. The price for betrayal or disobedience in the Jupiter Marines was either death or imprisonment. In the Yakuza, it would be torture, then death. Goran’s slight hadn’t seemed that offensive to me, but then again, when he set the course for Nordar - 13 instead of Queen’s Hat, it set into motion a chain of events leading to the death of Madalena’s father and a small civil war.

“You will come to understand our ways,” she whispered in my ear. “You are king of our blood overlord clan now. Soon you will unite the Nordar and be Prime King. Then we will defeat the Draugr.”

“That’s the idea,” I said, but my eyes focused on Nikki and Zea. The pilot must have said something funny because the hacker started laughing. “Is she no longer a Valkyrie?”

“Women who become Valkyries are always Valkyries, but they do not carry the title once a man is submitted to them,” she explained.

“But you are still the Prime Valkyrie, even though you submitted to me?” I asked.

“Yes,” she replied. “I am the Prime Valkyrie, for now.”

“For now?” I asked.

“If another woman challenges me, I will not contest. I am your wife now.”

“How soon will that happen?” I asked.

“As soon as word spreads through the Nordar. The next year will be bloody. I have not been challenged recently, so many will attempt to claim the title.”

“But you don’t have to fight?” I asked.

“I can if you wish me to keep the title,” she replied.

“Is there any benefit to having it?” I asked.

“Five minutes until warpdrive exit!” Nikki called out.

“Got it,” I replied to the Vaish pilot.

“If our clans were not united, perhaps there would be, but you will complete your rite soon, and then we will bring the other clans under heel,” Madalena continued in a whisper. “I have already been the Prime Valkyrie. Now I am submitted to you. I am your wife and the queen of your people.”

“What are you two whispering about?” Zea asked from her seat. My lover’s face seemed more curious than angry.

“We are all going to have a talk once we dock in *Odin Geirr*,” I said.

“Who is everyone?” Zea asked.

“You, Eve, Madalena, Paula, and Kasta,” I answered. “We have to talk about our next steps.”

“Two minutes,” Nikki said.

“You mean my ten spa days with you?” Zea smirked.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Hmmm.” Her eyes did narrow now. “When you say it like that, it makes me think you are trying to wiggle out of it.”

“No. I’m not. We just have to talk about what our next steps are.”

“Okay, good.” Zea smiled at me, and I thought about spending ten days in the spa with her. I wanted to be with her, give her pleasure, and enjoy her as much as I could.

But ten days was a long time when I had less than three-hundred.

She will understand once you explain what is going on.

I turned to Eve and nodded, but Zea caught the expression, and I saw the hacker’s grin fade from her mouth.

“Sixty seconds,” Nikki said.

“Madalena, I’m guessing we aren’t going to have any problems in Nordar - 13 once we get out, but I still want to be ready.”

“Agreed,” Madalena replied. Then she called everyone to their battle

stations, and we waited for Nikki to count down the seconds we were in warpdrive.

Then we were out, and Persephone's display screen's flashed the three planets, endless stars, and an armada of ships.

"Skyad fleet detected!" Paula shouted half a second before Persephone let out a buzz that sounded like an old-fashioned electrocution noise. The display began to fill with green text, and Persephone outlined a group of fifty ships clustered together in the middle of the Vaish armada.

"Skyad?" I asked Madalena.

"They are another one of the Nordar Blood Overlord Clans," Madalena explained. "They are not attacking, so I will guess they have come here in peace."

"We have communication coming from *Odin Geirr*," Zea said.

"Put it on screen," I said, and then I saw a burly Vaish man appear. He was wearing the same type of tight-fitting black uniform that the rest of my Vaish crew wore, but his chest and shoulders were decorated with gold metal and cord.

Madalena and the man spoke for a few moments, and then the man disappeared from the screen after he saluted her.

"What did he say?" Zea asked.

"The Skyad have heard of my father's betrayal and my new husband. They are here to speak with me about uniting the clans," Madalena answered.

"Great! That's gonna make all this shit easier! We don't have to pay them a visit." Zea did a little fist pump in the air.

"Does that mean more spa time?" Kasta giggled.

"You aren't happy," I said as I looked at Madalena, I could feel her anger.

"No," the Prime Valkyrie said. "The Skyad king and queen are here, and they have demanded my husband prove his worth to them."

"Uhhh, what does that mean?" Paula asked.

"Why does Adam have to prove anything to them?" Zea asked.

"Can't we just blow the fuck out of them?" Kasta asked. "We have

way more ships, and we have them surrounded.”

“Hold,” Madalena said as she raised her hand. “This would have happened with the Jotnar if we tried to make peace with them before Adam completed his rite. The Skyad are far from our allies, but they are not looking for immediate war. There is something unusual about their presence. They arrived here too quickly, and their demands are sudden. They have come to either find a way to destroy you, or to beg for a favor.”

“So what do you think is going on?” I asked.

“I am unsure,” Madalena said. “However, I know someone who can figure out what their strategy is.” The Prime Valkyrie leaned out a bit past me and then looked at Eve.

“I will be happy to help you, Madalena,” Eve said.

“You would be helping Adam as well,” the Prime Valkyrie said.

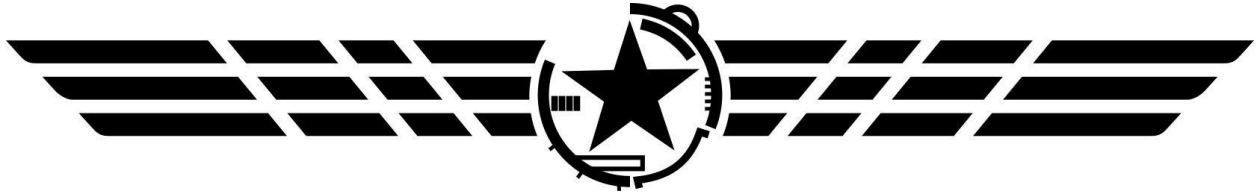
“Yes, but I would help you if you asked,” the vampire replied, and I could feel Madalena’s annoyance began to heat.

“If we are going to meet them, it needs to be on our turf,” I said as I looked to Madalena. “Can they visit us in the *Odin Geirr*?”

“Yes, but I believe we should delay meeting them for as long as possible,” Madalena replied.

“Why is that?” I asked.

“Husband, they are either here to beg a favor, or they are here to destroy you. Until I am sure of their reasons, having you meet with them will put you in a political maze that our people might not be able to escape from.”



Chapter 2

We docked inside of the *Odin Geirr* ten minutes later. When I first arrived at Nordar - 13 with Madalena and her crew, the entrance inside of the massive battle fortress had seemed like a perfectly timed dance through a swarm of bee-like craft. Now all traffic halted in mid-flight, and Nikki flew Persephone to land at a spot beside the white control tower in the middle of the harbor.

The sight brought home the fact that I was now the ruler of the Vaish Clan, and I felt an oppressive weight fall upon my shoulders.

“Madalena, how many Vaish are there?” I asked.

“Hmmm?” The beautiful woman turned from Persephone’s screen and raised an eyebrow.

“Total citizens, between the three planets and the fleet,” I clarified.

“Our last census said we have thirty-eight billion citizens,” she answered as she unbuckled her harness.

“Thirty-eight billion?” the weight on my shoulders felt like an elephant now. No, it felt like it weighed as much as thirty-eight billion people.

“Yes, my lord.”

“Uhhh, is Adam in charge of all of them?” Zea asked.

“Yes,” Madalena asked. “Well, he should finish his rite, but he is still king and my husband.”

“Damn. This is crazy,” Paula said. “Should we like kneel whenever he comes onto the bridge or something?”

“I’ll get on my knees,” Kasta offered.

“Oh God, Sis--”

“I’m joking!” The android laughed as she unbuckled her own harness. “Adam, do you still want to talk to everyone, or do you have to take care of these Skyad people first?”

“I need to talk to all of you.” I thought about dismissing Nikki, but the pilot was performing her engine checks, and the seating arrangement wasn’t going to be the best for the type of discussion I wanted.

“Let’s go to the galley,” I said. “We can grab some wine and talk.”

“I must go speak with our admirals about the Skyad,” Madalena said.

“No, I need you here also,” I replied. “It’s important.”

“Yes, Adam.” The Prime Valkyrie nodded quickly, and I could feel her pleasure at my request.

“Uhhh. Communication coming through to us again,” Zea said. “From the control tower.”

“On screen,” I ordered, and the same burly uniformed Vaish man appeared on Persephone’s display.

“Speak English,” Madalena ordered after the man began to talk in Nordar.

“Yes, Prime Valkyrie. The Skyad’s are requesting immediate docking access and a visit with you and your husband.” The man turned his cold eyes to me and gave me a respectful nod.

“And I told you to stall,” Madalena replied.

“Yes, Prime Valkyrie. They are complaining that they have already waited a full day. We did not tell them you were out of the system.”

“They are a touchy people,” Madalena explained to me. “Very emotional, and they feel incredible slight at anything that they feel disrespects their honor.”

“This sounds like it’s going to go realllllllyyyy well.” Zea’s voice was full of sarcasm.

“What do you suggest?” I asked Madalena.

“Keeping them later will be a slight to their honor, I will need to see them.”

“Prime Valkyrie, they asked to see both you and your husband,” the man on screen reminded.

“I really need to speak to all of you, but we can wait a bit. Is there a way we can just greet these Skyad’s briefly and then delay any major conversation with them a few days?”

“Yes, that was what I planned,” Madalena said to me. Then she turned to the man on screen. “Is Admiral Birger docked? Or is he in orbit?”

“He is in orbit, Prime Valkyrie.”

“When was his last contact with you?”

“A few hours ago, Prime Valkyrie,” the man replied.

“Excellent. He lived through my father’s death. I want his fleet docked inside of the *Odin Geirr* and his presence in the meeting with the Skyad. He has had the most dealings with them. Set the meeting inside one of our receiving rooms in the Spire.”

“I will tell him and the Skyad, Prime Valkyrie.” The screen returned to our view of the white control tower, and I guess the structure was the “Spire” that Madalena had mentioned.

“What do you need us to do?” Paula asked.

“You all can come with--” I started to say, but Madalena interrupted me.

“Adam, it will be somewhat of a transgression to have Eve in the room with us, since she is not Nordar. Paula, Kasta, and Zea’s presence might cause them insult.”

“Can’t we just say we are Adam’s women?” Kasta asked with a shrug. “The women that gave us massages said your father didn’t go anywhere without all his wives.”

“They were Nordar,” Madalena explained. “I do not wish to exclude you from this meeting.”

“It is understandable,” Eve said as she stepped down from the officer seats to stand next to Madalena and I. “We will return as soon as we can so

that we can all speak together.”

“In the spa?” Zea asked as she wiggled her eyebrows.

“Yeah, that sounds good,” I said. “Thanks.” My three friends nodded at me, and then Madalena, Eve, and I turned to walk from the front of the bridge.

“Lux and Calisto,” Madalena said as she passed the team standing around the gunner’s stations. The two women nodded and then they fell into step behind us as we walked to the elevator.

“Do you think they might try something during the meeting?” I asked when we stepped into the lift car.

“No, but they most definitely will not if they are in a room full of Valkyries.” Madalena’s lips twisted up a bit.

“Ha,” I laughed. “What if they bring their own Valkyries?”

“They will,” Madalena said with a short nod. “But as I said, I am doubtful they will decide to attack inside of our own battlefortress. They will attempt to either challenge your leadership or ask you a favor, perhaps both.”

The elevator door opened, and we walked out toward the armory.

“So what do I need to do to ensure we don’t go to war with these people?” I asked.

“Let me do most of the speaking, Husband. They might try to pull responses out of you, but if they come under the guise of a treaty, we have committed not to battle or ambush them.”

“These Skyad aren’t as bad as the Jotnar? You didn’t seem to like my idea of visiting them to talk peace, but the Skyad are approaching us in the same manner.”

We entered the armory, and I went to put on my armor plates with Eve.

“The Jotnar are equal to us in power, but it is because they are brilliant tacticians and shipbuilders. They are also skilled warriors, but they would not let their emotions cloud their battle tactics. The Skyad burn with passion and rage. They are mighty warriors who would be worthy of fear in ground combat.”

“So, they are like berserkers,” I said.

“That is a close description, but there are subtle differences. I fear they will try to anger you. Then they will challenge you or demand reconciliation for an honor slight. They are like children, but they are powerful, and we will need their help to defeat the Draugr and save the galaxy.”

“I can control my anger,” I said to Madalena, and Eve laid her hand on the plates of my shoulder. I turned to the vampire woman, and she blessed me with a smile.

I finished putting on my plates, helped Eve with two of her back pieces, and then walked to our wall of guns. I found my chest holster, but my revolver was missing from it.

“Where is my--”

“The barrel was ruined by the fall,” Madalena said.

“I have not had time to repair it,” Lux added. “I will work on it after we deal with the Skyad.”

“Ahh, thanks, Lux,” I said to the obsidian haired woman. She nodded at me but didn’t respond. I grabbed my belt that held my two heavy pistols and then reached for the double magazine shotgun Juliette gave me.

“No long weapons, Adam,” Madalena said as soon as I touched the handle of the shotgun. “This is intended to be a peaceful meeting.”

“But they still might try to kill us?” I smirked.

“If they are foolish.” She shrugged.

“Earlier you said they are berserkers,” I commented as I checked my pistols.

“Bringing long weapons will escalate the situation. If they attack us, they will die.” Madalena gestured the doorway, and we all exited the armory. I noticed that Eve was wearing the Vaish pulse pistols, and I recalled I needed to spend some time training with the weapons.

A group of ten armored figures met us at the hold. The guards only carried pistols, but their armor was bulky and had the same feather etchings on the metal as the rest of my crew did. I figured that they were the magical armor Aegis pendants.

We walked down the ramp of the hold with our entourage and proceeded a hundred meters to the base of the white control spire. More

guards joined us as we walked, and there were soon forty armored Vaish marching beside us. No one spoke as we walked, but the original ten guards were the only ones who accompanied us inside of the building.

I had been in this building before, when I was sent down to Nordar - 13 - a for my rite, but we entered through a side door. Now we took the main entrance, and I had to force myself not to rubberneck at the mesmerizing tapestries hanging from the wall, or the metal warrior sculptures set every ten or so meters. The grand foyer of the Spire was more futuristic looking than the inside of the castle. The walls here were steel and the lights on the ceiling were bright bulbs that cast a cold blue color. The sculptures and hanging artwork still had the ancient Earth feel to them, but I didn't have much time to appreciate them.

We walked past a set of polished metal stairs and into a large meeting room. The place was built almost like an auditorium, with a center stage and some hundred seats in a circle. The stage area was about ten meters wide and twelve long, and I saw a table laid out there. Servants were placing food, water, wine, and beer on the table, and they all bowed low as soon as we arrived.

Calisto barked an order as soon as the servants bowed, and they stood to continue what remained of their work while the ten guards accompanying us set up a perimeter around the stage. As soon as the servants finished placing all the food on the table, their leader spoke a few words to Calisto. The Valkyrie nodded, and the group retreated to a hallway that dipped between the raised audience chairs.

"When will the--" I started to ask, but the door above us opened and Admiral Birger walked in. He was a big man, maybe four centimeters taller than me and a bit wider in the chest, but he moved down the stairs to the auditorium floor gracefully.

"Prime Valkyrie," he said as he kneeled on one knee and lowered his head. Madalena reached out her hand, and the old man grasped it.

"Admiral Birger, thank you for coming," Madalena replied.

As soon as she let go, the man stood and stepped over to me, and repeated the kneeling movement with his head bowed. "My lord, we have not met yet, but I look forward to serving you. The Prime Valkyrie would not submit to one that Odin has not chosen for her."

“I look forward to it also,” I said as I let the man grab my hand. “The woman next to me is Eve.”

“Ahh,” Birger said as he looked up from his bow and set his gray eyes on the vampire. “It is a pleasure.”

“You need not fear me, kind sir,” Eve said. “I might appear as a Draugr, but I have love for all life.”

“Then let us be friends,” Birger said with a slight smile.

“What are your thoughts about the Skyad visit?” Madalena asked once Birger released my hand and stood.

“They would not come seeking war.” His voice was deep, and he spoke with careful words. “News of your rise has traveled quickly to the other Blood Clans. I sensed your father’s demise, but there is no way they will know of it yet, so they will think he still lives.”

“Do you think they will offer to help find him?” Madalena asked with a half smile.

“The Skyad has always suffered from the weakest navy, and their territory borders the Jotnar’s where ours does not. They tried to form a closer alliance with your father, but he was not interested in their offer.”

“Do you recall what they offered?” Madalena asked. “I believe the last meeting happened before I was born.”

“The time was different then. Skyad had a larger piece of the galaxy, and your father did not have as strong of a navy. The Jotnar were also less powerful. They were interested in training our troops if we provided our starship technology. Your father believed that our navy would be our future, and he did not believe the Skyad fighting prowess mattered.”

“These guys must be good warriors,” I said.

“They are,” Birger said with a nod. “There is little difference between our elite warriors and theirs, but their standard troops are excellent.”

The door opened above us, and a man wearing a black and red Vaish uniform stepped inside. “King Nar Skyad, his queen Sivaha, and entourage.”

I looked up to the door, and a tall man stepped through the doorway behind the herald. He wore a golden crown, white plate armor, a white fur cloak, and a golden crown upon his head. His hair was dark blond, and his

blue eyes sparkled in the auditorium light. He wore a sword on his hip but didn't seem to be carrying a pistol or firearm.

Behind him was an elegant woman with silver colored hair that fell down past her waist like a wall of rain. Her skin was almost as pale as Eve's, but her eyes were an amber brown. She wore a long silver dress that glittered with a trim of green emeralds.

Behind the king and queen, a trio of women walked. They didn't wear armor, but the chokers they wore around their necks glowed with the same kind of power Madalena's Aegis necklace did. These three women each carried pulse pistols, and their eyes were the sharp blue color of their ruler.

Behind the women walked three shirtless men. Their muscular torsos were decorated with swirling boar tattoos, and their long auburn beards fell to the middle of their chests. Each of the men carried single bladed axes over their shoulders, but I didn't see any pistols on their belts.

The group descended the stairs regally, and they moved like skilled warriors. Even the queen looked like she could handle herself, and I felt a bit of tension in my shoulders.

They are here to find out about you. If you appear weak, King Nar will have one of his warriors challenge you in mortal combat. If you appear strong, they will ask for an alliance against the Jotnar. The three men are his best warriors and have hundreds of kills. The three women wish to challenge Madalena for Prime Valkyrie, they are more dangerous than the men.

Queen Sivaha has a psychic mutation that lets her increase sexual desire. She will attempt to seduce you and either murder you in your bed chambers, or blackmail you against Madalena so you bend to her husband's wishes. She is very difficult to read. Her mind is guarded, and I believe she may be the one who has the real power in their clan.

I let out a slow breath and fought against my smile. I had been nervous about getting involved in politics, but having Eve with me would be akin to playing poker when I knew what everyone's hands were.

These fuckers had no idea who they were dealing with.

"Welcome to Nordar - 13," Madalena said once the eight Skyad's reached the bottom stage of the auditorium. "We are honored to receive you."

The other man said something in a language I didn't understand, but

Madalena shook her head. "Please speak English."

"Very well. We share the honor, Prime Valkyrie," King Nar said as he tilted his head to Madalena. "You and I met once some ten years ago. I believe it was the year after you became Prime Valkyrie."

"Yes. I do recall. One of your sisters challenged me. Eriut? Was that her name?" Madalena's face was emotionless, but I could feel a bit of her pride.

"Yes, it was an excellent match," the Skyad King said with a slight frown. "I wished she would have trained a bit longer, or not contested you at all. She was my favorite sister."

"It is a dangerous pursuit," Madalena said. "This is my husband and king, Adam." The group of Skyad men and women turned to me, and I gave them a slight nod.

"He is not Nordar?" Sivaha asked with a perfectly raised eyebrow, and I wondered how she could tell.

"He will be completing Odin's rite soon."

"Ahhh." The queen turned her amber eyes to me, and I was again struck by how absolutely beautiful she was.

She already knew you were not Nordar, but they are both surprised you are attempting Odin's rite. This is a slight change to their plans since they believe you will die. Now they will be more focused on Madalena.

"When will he complete the rite?" Nar asked Madalena without looking at me.

"Soon," the Prime Valkyrie added.

"Yet, you are submitted to him?" he asked.

"Yes, of course. He is my husband and king," Madalena answered without emotion. "We have provided refreshment." The Prime Valkyrie gestured to the table laid with fruit, dried meat, cheese, and bread. "Will you join us for a meal? While we eat, we can speak of your reason for visiting us."

"Yes, we would like that," Nar said, and I could sense his entourage relax a bit.

This throws a wrench in their plans since they worry that Madalena will die when you do. King Nar's thoughts are somewhat empty. He is considering what his wife will tell him to do. Queen Sivaha's thoughts are still somewhat difficult to perceive, but she will try to nail down an exact time for your rite. She has not decided on if they will ask you for help, or try to attack the Vaish after you and Madalena are dead.

The group moved to the long table and took seats. Eve, Madalena, Admiral Birger, and I sat on one side, and the Skyads sat on the other. One of each of the men and women in their entourage sat so that we had an even four on each side, but the table was small enough for us to speak without yelling at each other. Both Eve and Birger were at the ends, and they were seated next to a Valkyrie and one of the shirtless warrior men.

Servants emerged from their alcove and went about preparing plates of food for each of us. The food had been covered by silver serving bowls, but as soon as the servants began to put food on my plate, I felt my mouth water. I couldn't remember the last time I'd eaten, but it had been way before I battled with Madalena's father. The beast, and my stomach, both growled when I smelled the meat and vegetables laid out on the table.

For a few minutes, the conversation shifted to talk of the meal and their travels. Perhaps I should not have been surprised by Madalena's social skills, but she was able to flutter between topics easily, and kept our guests answering her questions instead of asking their own. She must have felt my pride because I could feel a wave of her love come from her and wrap around me.

"Who is this woman?" King Nar asked as he gestured across the table at Eve.

"That is Eve. She is my husband's lover," Madalena answered honestly.

"You invite a concubine to eat with us?" Sivaha raised both eyebrows with a bit of surprise.

"She is not my concubine," I growled, and the four Skyad at the table turned to me.

It is fine, my love. Let them think what they will. I have no ego. Just love for you.

“Ahh, the future king speaks.” Nar’s handsome face twisted into a bit of a smile. “For a few minutes, I thought you were actually submitted to the Prime Valkyrie.”

“I can speak,” I said. “Do you know Admiral Birger?”

“I have heard the name, yes.” King Nar nodded to the older man. “Our people have not had a conflict in many years, but I recall my father warning me of your fleet.”

“It is good we are sharing a table, instead of battling,” Admiral Birger answered. “As I grow older, I have less taste for war, and more desire for fine cheeses and meat.”

“Wise words,” Nar said with a slight smile.

“My husband is king,” Madalena said. Her face was emotionless, and I was a bit surprised by the lack of emotions I felt from her.

“But he has not completed his rite?” Nar asked with fake confusion.

“He has killed my father, he is my husband, I am submitted to him. Our people follow him without question.”

“Tanal is dead?” Nar asked as his eyes darted quickly to his queen. “We did not know of such news.”

“It is interesting since your father was known to be a fierce warrior.” The silver-haired queen turned to me “Adam, how did you kill the man? Was it in solo combat? Where did you train?”

“Yes, it was in solo combat,” I answered. “I was once in the Jupiter Marines.”

“Exciting,” the woman said as her amber eyes studied me.

“Let us eat,” Madalena said to change the subject. The servants had finished setting out the plates of food, and we all turned our attention to the feast.

“Who are the warriors sitting with us?” Birger asked as he nodded to the bare-chested man sitting next to him.

“I am Arga, Champion of the Skyad Boars,” the big man said before he pushed a hunk of meat into his mouth.

“I am Neeahla, Valkyrie,” the woman replied as she bowed her head

slightly to Madalena.

These are the Skyad's top warriors. Each of them has killed over sixty people in combat. I am still unsure about which path Sivaha wishes to take, but one of her plans involves Arga challenging you while Neeahla challenges Madalena. Now Sivaha believes that might not matter since you will both die after your rite, but she is also considering how to conquer the Vaish.

The servants poured drinks for everyone. There were a few moments of polite conversation between Madalena and the two Skyad rulers, but nothing of importance was really said.

"Thank you for visiting us." Madalena raised her glass as soon as everyone had a drink in their hand.

"We are delighted to be received," Sivaha said as she raised her own glass. "Skal."

"Skal," everyone else repeated as we drank our wine.

"You have come to visit our clan during a time of change," Madalena said after everyone had enjoyed the first sips of their drink.

"Our people have always enjoyed a somewhat tense alliance," Nar said with a slow nod. "Mostly because of our mutual dislike of the Jotnar." The man paused his words to cut into the meat on his plate. I fought against a snicker since our servants had placed a giant roasted pig on the table, and I know the Skyads totem animal was a boar.

"We would like to strengthen our bonds," Sivaha said as she gave me a half smile. Her eyes, mouth, and neck held my attention, and for a few moments, I forgot about the full plate of food in front of me and the growls of hunger in my stomach.

She is using her powers on you. Interesting. I am not sure you can fight it, but focus on eating to see if that helps.

I forced my eyes down to my food and focused on eating. My hunger turned out to be more real than whatever kind of strange power the beautiful silver-haired woman had, and I felt my desire for her fade as soon as I took the first bite of the baked ham.

"I am sure your reason for visiting is urgent," Madalena said. Her face was emotionless, but I could feel her annoyance.

“We mean no treachery,” Sivaha said with a gentle smile. “We heard of your father’s displacement and felt it was time to re-introduce ourselves to you. Our relationship with Tanal was strained, but we would like to form a friendship.”

“My husband and I are open to friendships,” Madalena said after she took a small bite of food.

“Excellent!” Nar said as he raised his glass of wine. “Might we speak of trade then?”

“I would prefer we speak of the Draugr first,” Madalena said.

“Ahhh,” Nar sighed and leaned back in his chair. “I will admit some disappointment. I thought the talk of these creatures would end now that your father was gone.”

“No,” Madalena said. “If anything, the matter is more pressing. We have knowledge of an invasion happening in some two-hundred and fifty days. My husband and I intended to visit you soon so that we could ask for your loyalty against these monsters.”

“Your father never gave proof of the Draugr,” Sivaha said as she shook her head. “He expected us to kneel and then follow him into battle against an imaginary foe.”

“I will admit that his methods were heavy-handed,” Madalena said. “But the Draugr are real, and they wish to consume all life in our galaxy.”

“But do you have proof?” Nar shrugged.

“I have encountered their remains and their legends,” Madalena turned to me and nodded. “My husband has battled with one and was victorious.”

The group turned to me and I finished chewing before I spoke.

“I do not know what Tanal told you of them, but they are powerful. I was able to defeat one, but not before it alerted the rest of its kind. I am expecting them to arrive at a planet named Uraniel in less than nine months. They will destroy all life on that planet and then begin their conquest of the galaxy.

“It is hard to believe,” Nar said as he shook his head. “It is especially hard when the man with the story is not Nordar.”

“Adam will be completing Odin’s rite shortly,” Madalena said. “I am

the queen of the Vaish, and he is my husband. Treat him as Nordar until he is Nordar.”

“No one has lived through Odin’s rite,” Sivaha said as she focused her amber eyes on me.

“Not many have tried,” Madalena said. “I am the Prime Valkyrie, and I believe Adam was brought to me by Odin so that we could unite our clans against the Draugr.”

“How much longer will you be Prime Valkyrie?” Nar’s mouth curled up into a bit of a smile when he asked the question.

“I have held the title for many years,” Madalena said. “But now I am a queen and wife.”

“You will be surrendering it?” Sivaha asked with a raised eyebrow.

“If that is what my husband wishes,” Madalena said as she nodded to me. “I care only about his pleasure and the future of my people now.”

“And you are fine with the Prime Valkyrie giving up her title?” Nar asked me.

“We have not discussed it at length,” I said as I cut into my food, “but she is right when she says that we have bigger issues. The Draugr are real, and we need to unite the clans.”

There was a pause as Nar and Sivaha glanced at each other, but the rest of us occupied ourselves with the food on our plates. I was famished, and my stomach growled uncontrollably, but I wasn’t enjoying the food. I didn’t need Eve to tell me what they were thinking to know that they were snakes. They wanted an angle, and I didn’t want to fail Madalena during my first political dance.

I know for certain now that Sivaha is the real power. Nar is wrapped around her finger and will do her bidding. He is nothing but a figurehead. The woman believes she can negotiate a fleet of ships from you in exchange for a consideration of your request, and she will try to use her powers on you during dinner so you will agree. When you die during Odin’s rite, she will use that fleet to help her conquer the Vaish. She is a bit overconfident in her abilities of seduction, but she isn’t used to a man who battles with a beast every day. Even without my help, I believe you would resist her.

As if on cue, the beautiful Skyad queen turned her eyes back to me and smiled. I forced myself to return her smile and then forced myself to look back down to my food.

Fuck, this was a bunch of bullshit, and the beast in my stomach begged to be released so I could tear through all of them.

“We would be interested in a lasting relationship with the Vaish Blood Overlord Clan,” Nar said as he turned away from his wife. “These relationships take time to build, and they require both sides to give tokens to each other.”

“We would have no problem opening trade again,” Madalena said.

“Yes,” Sivaha said as she blessed me with a soft smile. “But first, we must get to know each other better. Much better.”

The beast growled in my stomach, and the sound resonated in my chest and mind. It didn’t like being controlled.

It was time to do something.

“How many ships did you bring with you?” I asked, even though I knew the answer.

“Fifty,” Nar answered.

“Madalena, how many ships do we have in this system?” I asked without looking at her.

“Over eight thousand, my lord,” she answered, and I could feel her concern splash into me.

“What will the Jotnar ask of us when we go to visit them?” I asked Madalena as I stared at Sivaha.

There was silence at the table, but I could hear my heart thump in my chest.

“I am unsure,” Madalena asked after a few moments.

“Admiral Birger, what do you think? We need the Jotnar to join us, would they be interested in anything we have to offer?” I was starting to become annoyed with this process. Knowing what these fuckers were planning was just pissing me, and the tiger in my soul, off.

“My lord, the Jotnar clan and Vaish are not on friendly terms,” he said.

“But they dislike the Skyad? Do they dislike the Skyad more or less than us?”

“Ahhhh,” Birger cleared his throat. “They dislike both, but more of their territory borders Skyad systems.”

You have caught Nar and Sivaha off guard.

“Adam, your words seem less friendly than when we first met,” Nar said as his mouth formed a fake smile. “Have we said something to offend you?”

“My husband is not offended,” Madalena said as she rested her arm on my bicep. “We are happy that you have decided to visit us, and we wish to form a partnership with your clan.”

“That is what we wish as well,” Sivaha said as her eyes focused on me again. I found myself focusing on her lips when she spoke, and I wondered what they tasted like.

I let out a long sigh, and everyone in the room turned to face me.

“I am not yet Nordar,” I said. “I become offended easily. You asked to come into our maw and thought that I was weak because I am not Nordar. You hide behind your tradition and the rules protecting your people. I will ask you plainly, Queen Sivaha, can we form a lasting alliance where we defend the Milky Way against our enemies? Or are you just using our meeting as a way of exploiting our weakness so you can betray me?”

The room didn’t quite gasp, but surprise was plain on everyone’s face.

Nar’s already pale skin turned a few shades whiter, and his blue eyes narrowed.

“You doubt our honor? You insult--”

“Shut your face,” I interrupted him as I glanced at Sivaha. “I’m talking to the queen, not her puppet. I know exactly what she is up to.”

“What do you speak of?” Sivaha’s eyes narrowed.

She believes you might have a spy in her group, she suspects one of the warriors standing behind her named Iutan. The man used to be her lover, but she cast him aside for Arga when he became champion.

“I have no spy in your entourage,” I said. “But your thoughts and plans

show a disrespect for my clan. We will extend a hand in friendship, will you do the same?"

"Of course," she said as her face calmed. "But you speak of disrespect. Neither my husband nor I have done anything to deserve such an outburst. You attempted to tarnish our honor, and I believe that we will require a blood debt to put us on equal footing."

I knew this was the angle they were looking for. They'd use this excuse to challenge either Madalena or me in combat. The beast in my soul growled and wanted to put an end to this charade. He was tired of these bullshit politics. These people intended to harm us, and he wanted to kill them first.

I agreed with him, but my pistols were out of their holsters before I even finished my thought.

I pulled the handguns under the table with a quick twitch of my shoulders. I doubted that the movement fooled anyone, but my first pair of bullets left my massive guns before Arga or Neeahla could grab their weapons.

My weapons barked in unison, and the heavy slides racked back as the bullets left the barrels. The table we sat at was made of wood, and each round punched up through the material, and into the two Skyad warriors. My left bullet hit Neeahla in the throat, and her movement toward her own weapon was cut short. The bullet on my right punched through Arga's bare chest right at the heart, and he died almost instantly.

I pulled my pistols out from under the table and shot another four bullets at the rest of the Skyad guards. The two men and two women had pulled their own pulse pistols out, but Eve made their bodies freeze, and my bullets tore into them at the same time as the Vaish guards' own pulse bullets hit them.

I turned my weapons to Nar and Sivaha. The Skyad king rested his hand on his weapon, but he released it and then laid his arms on the table when it became apparent that I wasn't going to kill him immediately. Sivaha hadn't bothered to pull a weapon, but her strange eyes were opened wide with surprise.

Every weapon in the room was trained on them, but I could feel Madalena's surprise as I holstered my left pistol.

“You have broken the truce of--” Nar started to say, but I reached across the table, grabbed a fist full of the man’s long hair at the scalp, and yanked him over the table so that he was laying across all the food. A bunch of dishes and glass broke when they fell to the wood floor, but I didn’t care.

Fuck this asshole.

“Shut up,” I growled as I shoved the barrel of my pistol inside of his mouth.

Nar wasn’t a small man, but something about being hauled over a table and having a gun shoved in between his lips caused him to whine like a lost puppy, and his body began to tremble with terror.

“Let’s talk like this, Sivaha,” I said as I looked across the table at the woman.

“My king needs--”

“I know you control him,” I interrupted. “I could put a bullet through his face and you probably wouldn’t give a shit. I’m talking to you now. Your game is up. I know what you intended to do here, and with me, so I’m going to leave you with two options.”

“Adam...” Madalena’s horror spread through me, but I ignored it. I was tired of her rules, and it was time to settle this the old-fashioned way.

With violence and bullets.

Maybe the beast really was taking control.

Sivaha’s beautiful eyes met mine, and I could feel a sudden surge of desire for the woman.

I pulled the trigger, and half of Nar’s brains exploded across the table of food.

Sivaha opened her mouth and got out half a scream before my bloody hand was around her neck, and my pistol was jammed against her forehead.

“Now you have one less option. I’d advise you don’t try to use your seduction magic on me again.” I saw her husband’s corpse twitch out of the corner of my vision.

“My people will go to war,” she hissed as her eyes narrowed.

“Fight a battle against both Vaish and Jotnar? I doubt it.”

“You honorless--”

“Ahh, ahh, ahh,” I said as I squeeze her throat a bit more. “I’m in a bad mood today, and the last thing I wanted to deal with is a group of snakes coming into my house and trying to take everything from me. I know what your plans were, and what your angle is. All I’m wondering now is if your successor will be more likely to form an alliance with us, or if you’ll be willing to strike an honest deal to save your life. I’ll let you decide.”

“You have no idea what you are doing, Adam. You have killed the King of our clan and my husband. You will--”

“He’s the second king I’ve killed,” I growled. “I’m getting used to the process. I notice that you aren’t dead, so you never submitted to him. Don’t try to wiggle out of this. I know your thoughts.”

The woman’s breath was leaving her chest with agonized gasps, and her eyes met mine with an intense challenge. I felt no desire for her, so I guessed she wasn’t trying to use her powers on me.

“There will be no bartering of ships. There will be no seduction. There will be no attempts to kill Madalena or me and then take our clan. There will be either you leaving here alive and sworn to our alliance, or I will have a conversation with Jotnar about how we split up your systems after we both ally and destroy your clan.”

“If you let me go, I will come back with my navy and--” she started to say, but I squeezed her slender throat and cut off her words.

“Here is my offer: If Jotnar attacks, we will come to your aid. When I tell you to come assist us with the Draugr, you will come. Do you understand?” I let my fingers ease a bit from her neck, and the woman sucked in air as she nodded.

She is planning on returning with all her forces to attack us.

“I know your thoughts, Sivaha,” I said with a heavy sigh. “You are planning on a war with us. It looks like you will have to die--”

“No!” Her hands were already wrapped around my wrist, and she frantically drummed her palms against my armor. “I will serve you! Don’t kill me!”

“Looks like I can’t believe you,” I said. “I’m sorry but--”

“I will submit to you! I will be your wife if you wish! There will be no way I can betray you then!”

She speaks the truth and no longer wishes to bring her navy. Her opinion might change when she reaches her home system though. It probably will. This woman is crafty, so perhaps she should submit to you. Then we will be sure she will not betray us.

“No, I want you to continue to serve your people as queen,” I said as I let my hands off her throat and lowered my gun. The silver-haired woman gasped and fell against the table as she took in massive gulps of air. “If you submit to me, you’ll have to keep coming back every few weeks.”

Sivaha wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and glared at me.

“Remember, I can kill you now, and then make my visit to the Jotnar much sweeter by offering them half of your territory.”

“You killed my husband and my personal guard,” she hissed.

“You came in here attempting to seduce me, turn Madalena against me, and take over my clan. You have magic that lets you control men, but it doesn’t work on me. The price you pay for attempting to take me down is their lives. Remember my benevolence when you are on your ship returning to your system, and wait patiently for my call to arms.”

“You will not survive Odin’s rite,” she whispered. “Then Madalena will die.”

“Then what will you do?” I asked her as I raised my pistol to her forehead.

“I will do nothing since you will not call for me after you are dead,” Sivaha replied as she shook her head with urgency.

She is speaking the truth. For now. As I said, this can change once she returns to her people.

“My lord, may I speak to you for a moment?” Madalena asked as she laid her hand on my shoulder. I could taste her spinning emotions, and I had trouble deciphering what she was feeling.

“What?” I asked as I turned to look into her gray eyes.

“If Sivaha submits to you, our people will be joined,” Madalena started. “Then the other clans will fall in behind you much quicker.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sivaha inhale and bring her hands up to touch her neck.

“Uhhh. No.” I shook my head.

“It is the only way,” Madalena frowned and then pointed at the silver-haired woman. “She will return and then bring her navy against us. We will win, but the loss of life will be massive, and we will be weakened enough for the Jotnar, or one of the other clans, to attack us. If she submits to you, her people become your people, and we will fight together.”

“No,” I said. “She will not attack us, I’m not interested in forcing someone to submit to me. I know what that is like.”

“If she submits to you, Odin’s rite would be moot. Our united clans will be stronger than all others. The Idonan and Waymund will bend knee.”

“And the Jotnar?” I asked as I let out a long sigh.

“There is a better chance since the Skyad will be bound to you through submission instead of alliance. This is what Odin wants. The clans should be united so that we can fight the Draugr.”

“And you are okay with her submitting to me?” I asked Madalena, and I saw Sivaha take a step away from the table.

“I wish to defeat the Draugr,” the Prime Valkyrie said. “You broke their truce and killed her husband. She will return to kill you. If she submits to you, you will accomplish one-fourth of our goal with very little time and blood spent.”

I shook my head to clear the growls of the monster. He liked the idea of killing the woman’s man and then taking her, but I wasn’t comfortable with it. Madalena had forced herself on me in a similar fashion, and now we were bound together for life. The Skyads came here with treachery in their heart and had intended to kill us, but that didn’t mean I needed to force her to submit to me.

It felt like I would be raping her.

I looked to Eve, and my soulmate nodded at me.

I would support either decision, my love. I am glad you feel this way, but I am also terrified of Odin’s rite. Madalena’s logic is very sensible. Having Sivaha submit to you will ensure her loyalty and prevent you from

having to complete the rite. It will save hundreds of thousands in our war, and the most important person it will save is you.

“Will you submit to me?” I asked Sivaha, and her eyes lowered to the ground.

“Yes,” she whispered as she kneeled on the ground. “If it means that I live and my people survive. Bring me a blade and--”

“Stand up,” I growled, and her amber eyes opened wide as she stared at me.

“You do not wish--”

“Get up,” I growled again as I pulled her to her feet. “You aren’t submitting. You are going home. Remember our deal. I could have killed you or made you submit to me, but instead, I gave you your freedom. We are allies now, and I will defend you against the Jotnar as you join our fight against the Draugr. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” she whispered as her eyes stared into mine. “I understand and will not forget.”

“You came here seeking to cause me harm, but I am forgiving you. There will be no second chance.”

“I understand. I will serve you, King Adam Vaish,” she said as she nodded. Her face was white, and her words came out like a waterfall. I suspected that she hadn’t expected this outcome and was feeling lucky.

Even if her husband and guards were all dead.

Yes. She cannot believe this outcome. She is grateful. For now. All that might change when she returns to her home and considers what has happened. I will pray your kindness does not cost more blood.

“Guards, escort Queen Sivaha Skyad back to her ship.”

The ring of the heavily armored Vaish guards came to Sivaha’s side, and the woman stumbled away from me. Her amber eyes quickly glanced at the corpse of her husband and the rest of her dead entourage, but her face remained impassive.

Then she walked up the stairs and out of the auditorium.

“That was unexpected,” Admiral Birger said with a dry laugh. The

table was mostly covered in the brains and skull bits of King Nar, but Birger had somehow saved his glass of wine from the carnage and took a long sip.

“Indeed,” Madalena said as she looked at me. “May we speak in private?” Her anger rolled off her like pulses of steam.

“I will ensure Sivaha departs with no issue,” the large man said as he stood from his chair, gave me a nod, and then lumbered up the stairs.

“Let’s go to another room,” I said as I gestured to the dead bodies by the table. I was still hungry, but the killing had dulled part of my appetite. I gestured for Eve to follow me, and we walked with Madalena down the hallway between the seats, a few turns later and we were inside a small room that looked to be the control center for the auditorium’s lighting.

“Eve, can I speak--” Madalena began.

“No,” I interrupted her. “She stays.”

“Fine,” Madalena spat. “I am angry with you.”

“I can tell,” I said with a shrug.

“I asked you to let me handle this, and then you--”

“They intended us harm,” I said as I nodded to Eve.

“Of course they did. That is why I needed to handle it delicately. Husband, I love you, but you are not familiar with our ways.”

“I’m familiar enough,” I said with a sigh. “The Nordar respect power. I have shown Sivaha what it means to cross the Vaish. They will respect us.”

Madalena turned her gray eyes to Eve, and the vampire nodded.

“As of now, Sivaha is grateful to be alive. She is terrified that Adam knew her thoughts, and she will come when he asks.” Eve nodded when she finished speaking, but a smile didn’t touch her lips.

“As of now?” Madalena asked.

“Thoughts and opinions change,” Eve shrugged. “Once she is safe at home, she might reconsider. I believe Adam should force her submission.”

“I do as well,” Madalena said as she turned back to me. “I will have her stopped and brought back to you.”

“No,” I said. “That’s not going to happen.”

“She will betray you!” Madalena almost never shouted, and her outburst caused me some surprise. “The woman is a viper. I can only guess what Eve found in her thoughts, but it was enough to make you feel it was appropriate to void our truce and kill her people. You need to put a leash on her, or she will bite your ass when you turn away.”

“It’s slavery,” I said.

“Or war,” Madalena. “It is the way of our people. You are showing weakness by letting her go.”

“That isn’t what she thought,” Eve said. “She was grateful for her freedom.”

“It’s settled, Madalena,” I said. “I don’t need another person submitted to me.”

“I will not disagree with you in front of others,” the Prime Valkyrie said as she crossed her arms, “but I do not agree with this. Please, I beg you to reconsider.”

“You want her as my wife?” I asked with some disbelief.

“I want her as an ally. I want her people behind us. You may have as many women as you want, but I am confident none will take my place. Odin wants our people united against the Draugr. This will accomplish that goal. The opportunity to take her, and her people, is ripe.”

“I’m not enslaving anyone. I know what that is--”

“The Nordar are conquerors, and the Vaish clan is now the strongest clan. You were brash and broke our laws, but now you must seize her as your bounty. If you let her go, it will only lead to their retaliation. This isn’t slavery, it is the way of our people and humankind throughout the ages. Please do not let her leave, or we will all regret it.”

“Sivaha knows what I could have done. I’m not going to--”

“She will believe you were weak. She was willing to submit to you,” Madalena interrupted me.

“Eve?” I asked as I turned to her.

“I know her thoughts during our meeting. She is surprised that you knew her plans, and she is angry you betrayed the truce and butchered her people, but she would have submitted to save her own life. At the moment,

she is grateful you let her go, but that might change.”

“She betrayed our truce with her plans,” I pointed out.

“Yes, so you should not let her escape.” Madalena uncrossed her arms and rested a hand on my shoulder. “Please, reconsider.”

“Eve, do you really think I should make her submit to me?” I asked, and I could feel Madalena’s emotions spike with rage. I knew she was angry that I was asking for Eve’s opinion.

“Sivaha’s thoughts were somewhat hard for me to understand because her mind was guarded,” Eve explained.

“That’s not an answer,” I said.

“You know how much I abhor slavery. In my heart, I say to let her go because the thought of sharing you with her makes me want to scream. Also, I do not wish anyone to be bound to anyone else when it is not their choice.” Eve turned her red eyes to Madalena, and the Prime Valkyrie shook her head.

“I thought we were past this, Eve,” the warrior woman said.

“We are,” Eve said as she turned to me. “Despite my misgivings about the Nordar submission, I do share Madalena’s fears. Our end goal is defeating the Draugr. I am willing to sacrifice my life to accomplish that goal, as are you both. Sivaha and her people came here with treachery in their hearts. If she betrays you, then the Draugr might win.”

“So the end justifies the means?” I asked as I ran my fingers over the bridge of my nose.

“The choice is simple,” Madalena said. “You take her as your wife, and we gain thousands of starships, billions of warriors, and the other clans bend a knee to you easier. Or you do not, and you risk the Skyad attacking us at a later date.”

“My intent wasn’t to have her submit to me,” I said. “I wanted her to know what would happen when she tried to attack us.”

“She knows, but you need to finish what you started,” Madalena said.

“Or you need to be prepared for Sivaha to strike back,” Eve added.

I looked to each of my lovers and fought against the conflicting emotions warring within me. I knew they were right, but I hated this

outcome. I didn't want to share my life, feelings, and emotions with another woman. Especially one who had come here trying to kill me.

Was there any other alternative? Should I have done things differently? The thought of Madalena and I tiptoeing around Nar and Sivaha's attempts to manipulate us pissed me off too much, and I'd acted violently.

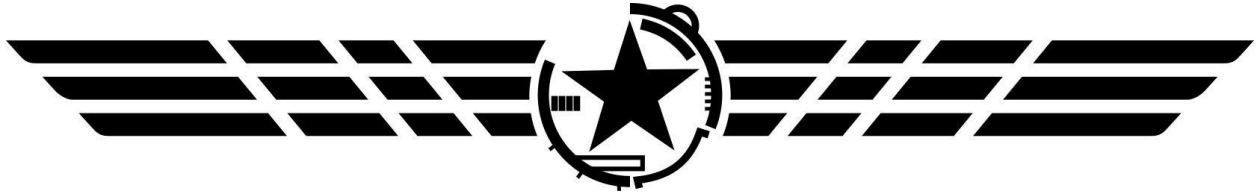
Was that the beast in my soul taking control? Or was it the Marine seeing the easy solution to a complicated problem?

Either way, I was stuck with the consequences of my action, and the only way to move forward was to ensure that Skyad could not stand against us.

"Madalena, stop Sivaha from leaving," I said.

"Yes, Adam," my wife replied. "You are making the correct decision."

"I hope so," I replied with a heavy heart.



Chapter 3

“You said I could go free,” Sivaha’s eyes were full of anger, and she pointed a trembling finger at me. Birger and the guards brought her back right after Madalena contacted them, and we had all moved to a second receiving room that was filled with couches and entertainment screens. The screens were off, but a few servants laid out a small assortment of dried meats, cheeses, and wine.

“I reconsidered,” I said.

“Is that how you are?” she spat. “Going back on your word and dishonoring your commitments?”

“You offered to submit earlier,” I said.

“And you said I was free to go,” she growled.

“We do not trust the Skyad commitment to our alliance,” Madalena said.

“Now you let your wife speak for you.” Sivaha’s glare intensified.

“You are trying to upset me,” I said. “My women are my equals.”

“That is comforting.” Her sarcasm almost reminded me of Zea.

“Would you prefer death?” Madalena asked.

“I would prefer not to be yanked back and forth,” Sivaha said with a sigh. “I told you I would honor our alliance. I was grateful for your benevolence, but now you are changing our deal. What am I to think?”

“You will think you are lucky to be alive,” Eve said. “You could just as

easily be lying dead next to your husband and your lovers.”

“But now I’ll be a thrall; after you told me I was free.”

“You will not be a thrall,” Madalena said. “You will be a wife, and our clans will be united.”

“His concubine orders me around,” Sivaha said as she pointed to Eve. “It is obvious where my place will be.”

“Eve is not my concubine,” I said as I fought against the beast’s growls. “But I am done with this conversation. Kneel before me and begin your submission.”

“Or you can kill me, and my clan will avenge my death,” Sivaha hissed.

“Your people will be wiped from the galaxy when they attack us, and whoever survives will live their existence as thralls,” Madalena growled. “You know submitting to Adam will save your life, and the life of your people.”

“I will die when he fails to complete Odin’s rite,” the silver-haired woman hissed to Madalena.

“He will not die,” Madalena said. “In either case, you will not defeat us.”

“Yes, Prime Valkyrie,” Sivaha said. “You will beat us, but you will take heavy losses. Then the Jotnar will attack you. Perhaps you can even survive them, but what of these Draugr you speak of? If you kill me, you will never accomplish your mission.”

“Our clans were once united,” Madalena said. “Now they will be united once more. This is the easy path for you, and the one that saves your people from oblivion.”

“I get nothing from this deal. The Vaish get it all.” Sivaha’s eyelids narrowed again, but the woman’s tone had an edge of defeat to it. She knew she could not escape this.

“You can cut off your nose to spite me,” I said. “But you are too clever for that. Now get on your knees and submit to me, Sivaha.”

The woman turned back to me, and I could see her jaw tense. She was absolutely beautiful. Tall and slender with perfectly sized breasts and a face

that could have graced an artist's statue. Her long silver-blond hair fell over her shoulders like a winter waterfall, and her amber eyes couldn't hide her cleverness.

I met her eyes, and we stared at each other for what felt like five minutes.

Then she lifted up the skirt of her dress and knelt before me.

"Bring me a blade," she whispered as she turned her eyes down to my boots.

I pulled my long knife out of my belt, flipped it in my fingers so I held onto the blade, and then held it out to her. She took it without looking into my face, and then the Skyad queen took a long breath.

"Before... I start..." she whispered. "Will you beat me?"

"Beat you?" I asked with confusion.

"Yes," she said. "I will do as you ask in your bed, but please do not beat me. I do not even know why I ask. You have already proven you will go back on your word, but I will ask anyway."

"I will not beat you, Sivaha. I do not beat women."

"No, you just betray them." She looked up to my face and I could see the rage in her eyes.

"Enough," Madalena spat. "Get on with it. We have work to do. I will witness."

"The concubine will not Second," Sivaha hissed as she turned her eyes to Eve.

"I will Second," Admiral Birger said with a slow nod.

"Fine." Sivaha took a long breath, looked to my face again, and then turned her eyes to the knife I had given her.

Then she began to recite the words I once heard Madalena speak to me.

"I am Sivaha Skyad. Eldest offspring of King Signond Skyad. Eldest offspring of Queen Jenna Skyad. Eldest offspring of King Lanta Skyad."

"She is Sivaha Skyad. Eldest offspring of King Signond Skyad. Eldest offspring of Queen Jenna Skyad. Eldest offspring of King Lanta Skyad." Madalena and Birger repeated in unison.

“I am Sivaha Skyad. Queen of the Skyad Blood Overlord Clan. Undefeated in combat, and victor of eight death duels.” The silver-haired woman cut her hand with my knife as she stared at me, and there wasn’t even a slight show of pain on her beautiful features.

“She is Sivaha Skyad. Queen of the Skyad Blood Overlord Clan. Undefeated in combat, and victor of eight death duels.” Madalena and Birger’s words blended together so that they sounded as if they spoke with one voice.

My head was spinning, and I felt the beast growl in my stomach. It liked the idea of claiming this woman, but it didn’t like the strange sensations coursing through my body. It felt like I was drowning in the woman’s amber eyes, and my heart was beating as if I was sprinting.

“I am Sivaha Skyad. I submit my body, mind, and soul to Adam Vaish. I will serve him as consort, advisor, eyes, arms, legs, and heart. We will be bonded both in life, and when we arrive in Valhalla. Our people will be united in one clan under him.” Sivaha cut her other palm with her knife and then handed me the weapon as her blood poured onto the metal tiles and soaked her silver dress.

Madalena and Birger repeated her words as I took the blade from her. My eyes and Sivaha’s were locked as if they were magnetized, and my vision began to tunnel around her. My head throbbed, and I realized that it was in time with her heartbeat.

Fuck. I knew this was what I needed to do, but I didn’t want it. I didn’t want her to be enslaved to me. I didn’t want to share my emotions with her. I didn’t want to have to explain this to Zea, or Paula, or Kasta, but I knew that Madalena and Eve were both correct.

I needed to take Sivaha.

I cut both of my palms and then dropped the knife. It clanged on the floor as I reached my bloody palms out to touch the woman’s raised hands. Her blood burned like fire, and her fingers dug into my wrist as my own fingers wrapped around her’s.

“I accept your submission, Sivaha Skyad,” I said with as steady of a voice as I could manage. The pressure from my head and chest released, and my lungs expelled a long breath of relaxation.

“It is done,” Madalena said after she exhaled.

“So it is,” Sivaha sighed.

I gently pulled the silver-haired woman to her feet. Once she was standing, she pulled her hands from mine and bent to pick up the knife.

“Your knife, my lord,” she said after she had wiped it clean on her once magnificent dress.

“Thank you,” I said as I took the blade from her and returned it to its sheath.

“When will you have me?” she asked as she shook her head.

“Have you? What do you mean?” I asked.

“I am in no hurry to consummate our union,” she said as she looked to the floor again. “But I will do my duty and make your dinner before you take me--”

“It isn’t going to happen, Sivaha,” I said.

“What?” she asked as her eyes met mine. There was obvious confusion there.

“We aren’t going to sleep together,” I said. “This will be the easiest marriage you’ve ever been in. Just have your people follow my orders.”

“I do not understand.” Sivaha crossed her arms and looked to Madalena.

“Your people are Vaish now,” Madalena said. “Tell your fleet admiral to send notice to your council and bring your logistics team to the *Odin Geirr*. It will take us a few years to integrate with each other, but we will first focus on defeating the Draugr.”

“My question was why he will not sleep with me,” Sivaha said to Madalena before she turned to me. “Do you prefer your concubine over your wife?”

Eve chuckled, and the silver-haired woman turned to her.

“He hasn’t seen you fit enough to marry. Or am I missing something?” Sivaha’s jaw tensed again.

“You are missing much, despite your intelligence.” Eve shrugged her shoulders.

“Fine,” Sivaha spat as she turned to me. “I am thankful I am alive, and that you will not force yourself on me. May I leave your presence? I have to explain to my people that they are now Crows.”

Her use of the word “crow” confused me, but before I could ask, the Prime Valkyrie spoke.

“Update them and return when you need to.”

“I did not ask for your permission, Madalena Vaish,” Sivaha growled. “My husband tells me when I can leave.”

“Ahhh,” Madalena said with an apologetic nod. “I apologize, Sivaha Vaish. I will let Adam tell you to leave.”

“You can go,” I said to the silver-haired woman.

“When should I return to you?” she asked as her eyes met mine with a cold challenge.

“I don’t care,” I said, and her eyes widened with a bit of surprise. “We are going to be visiting the Jotnar next. I will let you know before I leave.”

“Will I be joining you?” Sivaha asked with a bit of hesitation in her voice. I could tell she wasn’t used to indifference from men, and my lack of concern for her was throwing her off.

“I haven’t decided,” I said. “We have to plan more.”

“How long will you be gone?” she asked quickly.

“I am not sure,” I said. “As long as it takes to negotiate a peace treaty between our people and the Jotnar.”

“You will need me,” Sivaha said. “I have talents that I can use to help you.”

“I know about your talents,” I said.

“And we will both be in agony if we are separated for long.”

“I understand that, also,” I said.

“Then I need to know that you will be bringing me.”

She wants to seem useful to you. She is used to manipulating men with her powers and sex. When you declined her, she was caught off guard and now needs to find a new angle. She seeks to be your primary wife so she

might control you through influence. To do that, she will need to become indispensable to you.

“You’ll know what I want you to know, when I want you to know it,” I growled. “Now leave me, Sivaha, and tell me when you have let your people know I am their new king.”

“Yes, my lord,” Sivaha said through gritted teeth. She stared at me for half a moment, then glared at Eve before she turned to walk out of the room.

“Admiral Birger, can you please escort Sivaha to the ship that she came here upon?” Madalena asked.

“Yes, Prime Valkyrie,” the stout man said. He nodded to me, gestured to the guards, and then walked out of the room behind Sivaha.

As soon as they left, Eve, Madalena, and I were alone. I collapsed into the couch near the food table and closed my eyes. I still wasn’t really feeling Sivaha’s emotions, but I knew that would come in the next few days, and then she would be a part of me for the rest of my life.

“It had to be done,” Madalena said as she sat next to me.

“Agreed,” Eve said as she sat on the opposite side.

“She doesn’t seem to like you,” I said as I opened my eyes to look at my black-haired lover.

“She did not allow her husband or male lovers to have any other women,” Eve explained. “She is quite possessive.”

“Great,” I moaned. “That’s not going to work well.”

“No,” Eve agreed. “It will be a challenge, but I am more worried about Zea.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ll need to explain what happened. I didn’t want to do this.”

“Zea will be fine once she has become Nordar and then submitted to you,” Madalena said. “She is too emotional.”

“Her emotions are what makes her so special to Adam and me,” Eve said.

“They aren’t necessary for--”

“You have them, Madalena,” Eve interrupted. “They burn as brightly

as Zea's."

"You should take Sivaha with us to visit the Jotnar," Madalena changed the subject.

"I thought you didn't want me to go?" I asked.

"I did not," the Prime Valkyrie replied. "But now we can bring fleets from the Vaish and Skyad. Instead of showing up and asking them for peace with little to bargain with, we will come to them with a combined force of two clans."

"Why not wait until we have the other two clans as allies before visiting the Jotnar?" Eve asked as she prepared a plate of food.

"It is somewhat moot. Jotnar's systems are bordered by the Vaish and Skyad, they would care somewhat about the participation of the Idonan and Waymund clans, but I do not believe it will be much of a factor."

"Ahh," Eve said as she handed me a plate of meats and cheeses. "Please eat my love, you are still hungry from your shift."

"Thanks, Eve," I said as I took the plate from her. As soon as I took a bite, my hunger returned, and my stomach growled loud enough for both women to hear.

"I will pour some wine," Madalena said as she reached to the table closest to her. "As much as I dislike Sivaha, and the Skyad, this was an unexpected outcome that is beneficial to both our clans."

"Agreed," Eve said.

"Yeah, I suppose so," I replied as I thought about the anger and betrayal I saw in Sivaha's eyes.

I would have to live the rest of my life with her resentment.

"Perhaps she will come around to liking you," Eve said. "When you said you would not consummate the marriage with her, she became more intrigued with you."

"Hmmm," I sighed as I took another bite of dried meat and thought again of Zea. Soon I would have two women mad at me.

"Wine," Madalena said as she passed a glass to Eve and me. We thanked the Prime Valkyrie, and then the three of us said "skal" before we

drank.

Then we sat on the couch in silence for a few moments.

I finished eating, and Eve gave me a new plate. I was halfway done with this second serving before I realized there was some tension in the room.

“Something wrong?” I asked as I glanced to the women who sat on either side of me.

“Nothing is wrong,” Madalena said, and I felt her desire flood into me. I hadn’t noticed it before because of my hunger, but I was almost immediately aroused, and I felt my mouth begin to water for her.

“Feels like you are--”

“It was foolish,” Madalena said. “What you did. It was unexpected, and not the Vaish way. We are not impulsive.”

“You submitted to me,” I said as I took a sip of wine. “That seems rather impulsive.”

“That was different, since Odin sent you,” she replied as she shook her head.

“Ahh right,” I replied.

“But you are following his will again. He wants the Nordar united against the Draugr, and you have accomplished that goal with four bullets. As I said, the action was brash, and you broke our laws, but I am aroused by your actions.”

“I will leave you two then,” Eve said as she arose from the couch.

“Wait, Eve,” Madalena said.

“I know your thoughts, Madalena,” Eve said as she turned to the other woman.

“Then you know that I have come to respect you,” Madalena said. “You knew Sivaha’s plan, and you will use those powers again with the Jothar.”

“Yes, I will,” Eve said. “And I would join you and Adam in lovemaking, but Zea would not like that, so I will wait.”

“Fine,” Madalena scoffed.

“Before I leave, I have two topics I wish to address,” Eve said.

“Eve, you don’t need to go,” I said as I set down my wine.

“No, Adam, I am not your wife yet, and you have not been with Madalena in many days.”

“You will complete the rite, and--” Madalena began, but Eve cut her off.

“Zea is expecting to spend ten days with you in the spa. She is looking forward to it. Please do not forget.”

“I won’t. We’ll do it before we head to visit the Jotnar. That will give us some time to organize Skyad resources.”

“That brings me to my second point,” Eve said as her red eyes stared into mine. “King Nar and Queen Sivaha came to us under a flag of truce, and you killed Nar and then claimed Sivaha as your wife. You plan on visiting the Jotnar under the same flag of truce.”

“That is a good point,” I said as I turned to Madalena.

“The differences will ensure our safety,” the Prime Valkyrie said as her hand rested on my shoulder.

“Which are?” I asked.

“You will have the Prime Valkyrie with you. I am the chosen warrior of the gods. They will not kill me outside of combat.”

“Hmmm. I don’t know if I buy that, but go on.” I reached up to touch her hand.

“Eve will be with us,” Madalena said as she turned her gray eyes to the vampire. “She will know what they are thinking. Truce meetings are held with the number of guards that were in attendance during our meeting with the Skyad. The host clan will have a slight edge in numbers, but we should be able to defend ourselves.”

“You are arguing for us to visit, when before you wanted to wait until we had all the clans behind us.”

“Sivaha has changed my strategy,” Madalena said. “The third reason is that we can visit their system with a few thousand warships of combined Vaish and Skyad making. They will still have the edge in numbers, but

killing us will mean a long battle, and they will lose a large chunk of their navy. Then our forces will attack again to avenge us, and Jotnar will be wiped from the galaxy.”

“You sound confident,” I said to Madalena before I turned back to Eve.

“I agree with the logic.” Eve nodded to the brunette. “I look forward to the next part of our mission, and getting to know Sivaha better. Should I have Hegeia, Uma, and Waiola prepare a room for her?”

“Yes,” I said. “She’ll have to come with us when we visit the Jotnar.”

“Excellent,” Eve said as a slight smile touched her beautiful lips. “I will leave you two and let Zea know you will be spending the ten days with her.”

“I need to talk to everyone about what you and I spoke of earlier,” I reminded her.

“When you get back,” Eve said as she glanced at Madalena.

“We can walk back--”

“No, my love. It can wait for an hour or two. Spend some time with Madalena.”

“Thanks Eve,” I sighed.

“Of course, my love.” Eve gave both of us a final smile and then she floated out of the room.

“Is there a bed--” I started to ask Madalena, but her lips met mine with a fierce passion, and her legs shifted so that she was straddling my lap on the couch.

“Do not talk. Just make love to me, Husband,” she whispered in my ear as she kissed my neck. “You have ended a thousand year conflict over a meal and conquered an entire nation. I need you inside of me.”

“Yes,” I whispered back to her as my own fingers tore off her uniform. “Let’s hope the Jotnar will be this easy.”

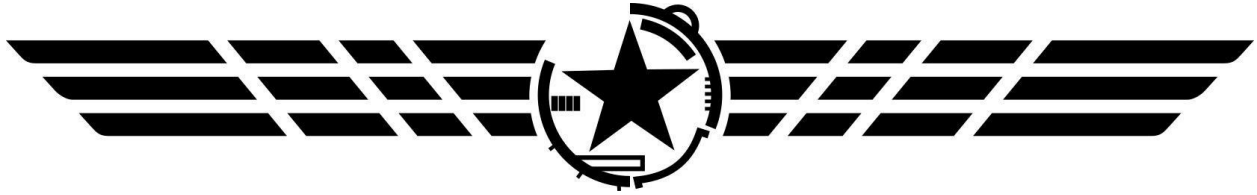
“They won’t be,” she gasped as I lifted her off my lap so she was standing. I ripped the buttons on the front of her uniform pants and then pulled them down as she wiggled out of them.

“But you will find a way,” she continued once she was naked and

straddling me once more.

“We will find a way,” I said as I kissed her again.

Then Madalena finished prying off all my armor, I finished ripping off her clothes, and our whispers turned into moans.



Chapter 4

“Sooooo, what’s up?” Zea asked once Madalena and I returned to Persephone and asked my friends to meet with me in the galley.

“We need to have a talk,” I said as I led them from the bridge and into the elevator.

“About the Skyad?” Zea asked. “How did it go?”

“I’ll talk about it when we get to the galley,” I said.

“Hmmm,” the hacker said as she glanced to Paula and Kasta. “Do you know what this is about?”

“Hold on a few minutes,” I said as I wrapped my arm around her shoulders.

“Yeah, okay.” Zea smiled up at me and then we leaned into each other for a quick kiss. The touch of her lips reminded me that she was going to be really angry in a few minutes, so I squeezed her to me.

The elevator opened, and we walked through Persephone’s hallway and entered the kitchen.

“I will open some wine,” Eve said as she went to the storage fridge, and I directed Madalena, Zea, Paula, and Kasta to sit down at one of the long tables.

“We celebrating?” Zea asked when Eve set down the glasses.

“I have bad news, good news, and even worse news,” I said after I took my own seat.

“Uhhh, why are you looking at me when you say that?” Zea smirked.

“What do you want to hear first?” I asked.

Zea looked at the other women, and then her blue eyes narrowed “Why do I feel like I’m the only one in the dark here?”

“I’m losing control of my shifts,” I said.

“Huh?” Zea asked.

“What does that mean?” Madalena leaned forward in her chair.

“Eve feels confident that the beast I fight with is gaining ground,” I said as I watched the vampire pour me wine. It was a dark burgundy in color, and I studied the swirl of the liquid to avoid eye contact for a few moments.

“I thought you just shifted when you wanted to,” Zea said as she shook her head.

“Kind of,” I replied as I looked up from my glass. “There is another presence inside of my mind. It’s like the tiger creature. He’s an angry monster that wants me to change into a full tiger.”

“Adam has fought with him since he was first experimented on,” Eve said as she finished pouring the wine for Zea.

“So it’s like one of those alien tiger-men? Or like what?” Zea asked.

“It is my own mind, just an animal. It wants to shift into the other form all the time, it is angry. I don’t really understand how it works, but I start to lose control when I’m in my tiger-man form. If I don’t change back in under thirty minutes, he begins to take over.

“Is that what happened in Queen’s Hat when you left District H after Byron died?” Paula asked. “You fell on the street and your body began to change.”

“What? No one told me this happened?” Zea growled. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want you to be worried,” I said. “I believed it was a one time case because I had been shifted for too long.”

“But you knew this thing was winning?” the hacker asked.

“No,” I said as I turned to Eve.

“I know Adam’s mind,” the dark-haired beauty said as she sat down next to Zea. “I know this creature inside of him. It is slowly taking over. I am unsure of the specifics of how long, but I believe it will win in the next eight or nine months.”

“Explain what happens after this creature takes control,” Madalena said. The Prime Valkyrie hadn’t touched her wine, and she sat with her arms crossed over her chest.

“Again, I am unsure,” Eve said. “I believe he will change into a tiger and lose all of his humanity.”

“We will stop it,” Madalena growled as she looked to me.

“We don’t know how to stop it,” I said. “I’ve been fighting him since that fucker President Yu experimented on me. I thought I had it under control.”

“I might be able to force him to change back into his human form,” Eve said.

“How?” Madalena asked.

“Adam and I share a telepathic connection,” she explained. “When Adam almost lost control in Queen’s Hat, I was able to calm and reverse his shift.”

“Hmmm,” Madalena didn’t seem pleased with Eve’s answer, and she turned her gray eyes to me. “I feel your anger constantly. Is that the part of your mind?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“I am connected to it as well, then,” The Prime Valkyrie said. “Perhaps I can help you as well.” I could feel her concern.

“That is a good point,” Eve said. “You share the emotional connection with Adam. It might help if you and I work together.”

“Wait. Wait. Wait.” Zea tapped her fingers on the table. “What about this Yu asshole? Let’s find him, grab him by the fucking puppy scruff, and make him fix Adam.”

“We don’t know where he is,” I said before I took a sip of wine.

“So we hit up every station we can find starting with Queen’s Hat. We

ask around, and I do some terminal dives. We'll figure out who this guy is and the company that experimented on you. Then we'll do what we are good at: putting bullets through assholes until we get what we want." Zea's hands waved through the air as she spoke, and her voice was an excited rush.

"But we have to worry about the Draugr," I said. "Hunting down President Yu will take us months. We don't have time. We need to unite the Nordar and then get ready to defend Uraniel."

"I might have a lead," Kasta spoke for the first time, and we all turned toward her.

"You know this fucker?" Zea's mouth hung open.

"No, no, no." Kasta waved her hands. "But I've got something better. Did you all forget about Adam's sister? I've done the math with the speed of their ships and the navigation ports. I have a good idea of where she met with Warren Royzar to hire the Black Hearts to kidnap Adam and Eve.

"I don't think looking for my sister is going to help us find Yu," I said. "It sounds like a wild goose chase."

"Well, I've been thinking," Kasta said as she swirled her wine with her finger. "You said your family was broke?"

"Yeah, the Yakuza swore to take care of them, but that would have been living expenses and maybe a bit of extra spending credits. Not the thirty-thousand she put up to Warren to find me."

"Yep, that's what I thought." Kasta stuck her finger in her mouth and sucked on it a moment as she sat back in her chair. "Who gave her the money?"

"I don't know," I replied.

"Occam's Razor it," Kasta said with a shrug.

"Orca who?" I asked.

"Occam was an ancient philosopher," Zea said as her eyebrows came together. The hacker turned to Kasta and slowly nodded. "I see where you are going with this."

"I don't," I replied. "How did my sister get the money?"

"Occam's Razor states that when there is a conflicting hypothesis, the

simple and most likely answer is the actual answer,” Kasta said.

“So Adam’s sister is working for President Yu,” Paula said with a nod.

“Maybe,” Zea said. “That still seems like a pretty big jump.”

“What are the various hypotheses?” Kasta asked. “Who wants Adam and Eve? Elaka Nota is a likely suspect since they originally experimented on Eve, but how would they know about Adam? How would they be able to find his sister all the way on Ganymede?”

“Good points,” Zea admitted.

“How about the Yakuza?” Kasta asked. “They might have the money, but why would they want Adam back? He took the heat for them and went to jail. Also, they would have no idea who Eve was.”

“Yep,” Paula said. “There is only one person who has that kind of rhodium, knows about Eve, and knows where Adam came from. If Yu’s organization bought you from the prison, it would be easy enough for him to connect the dots to the Yakuza, and then to your family.”

“I get it,” I growled as the beast clawed in my stomach. “But why my sister? Why would he have her hire Warren Royzar?”

“He wants you to know,” Madalena said, and we all turned to her.

“What do you mean?” Zea asked.

“If Warren were successful, he would have you and Eve. If Warren failed, then he knew you would try to find out who hired the man. It might be common knowledge that Warren has a recording eye. You’ll see your sister hired the Black Hearts, and you’ll try to find her.”

“That part does seem like a stretch,” I said.

“Does it?” Kasta asked. “How else would he capture you? He knows you visit Queen’s Hat, but all the other information your sister gave came from Trappist - 1e.”

“Your sister is the bait,” Madalena said as she nodded her head. “I agree with Kasta’s theory. Yu is behind it all.”

“It’s still a lot of hurdles,” I said. “He’d have to plan on Warren failing, and me investigating his eye recording, and then seeing my sister, and then doing the math to find out which location she could be on.”

“It was all pretty easy, actually,” Kasta said with a shrug. “Only took me a few minutes to put together. I had it figured out when we were heading to find Madalena’s father, but I didn’t want to distract you all from that mission. Granted, I’m super smart, but it would have taken any other navigator only a few days to figure out. There are only two possible locations given the speed of their ships.”

“What are the locations?” I asked.

“First is in a system named Bevnnee - 886. The third or ‘c’ planet is a ‘Goldilocks,’ and it was already in Persephone’s navigation system.”

“Madalena, do you know the place?” I turned to the Prime Valkyrie.

“No,” she said.

“Second place is a station located in Janar - 2884. It’s called Wobbegong.”

“Could there be other places not in Persephone’s navigation system?” I asked.

“Could be,” Kasta admitted, “but her system was already pretty robust thanks to Elaka Nota, and then we uploaded a bunch of stuff from the Vaish. We’ve got a lot of data now, and the areas where the Black Hearts might have come from are pretty well mapped.”

“Madalena, have you heard of Wobbegong before?” I asked.

“I have heard of the name, but have never visited,” the Prime Valkyrie replied.

“So we’ll pick one and find your sister. She’ll lead us to Yu, and we’ll make him fix you.” Zea gulped her wine and then set the half-full glass on the table.

“This is a trap,” Madalena said.

“Of course it is!” Zea hissed. “But what are we gonna do? Just sit here and let Adam go insane?”

“We are going to visit the Jotnar, make an alliance, and then visit the other clans,” I said. “After that, we’ll worry about my sister.”

“Are you kidding?” the blonde hacker asked. “How long will it take us to reach either of them from Nordar - 13?”

“About eighty minutes to get to Bevnnee - 886 - c and ninety-five to get to Janar - 2884,” Kasta answered.

“This is a no-brainer,” Zea said. “We have to pause our Nordar conquest plans and make sure you are okay.”

“Zea, nothing is more important than stopping the SAVO,” I said. “We can’t afford to waste any time.”

“This is hardly a waste of time,” Paula sighed.

“I agree with Sis,” Kasta said. “Look, Adam, you are super cute with your self-sacrificing and all, but the five of us need you in our lives. Especially Madalena. If you die or go crazy, won’t she suffer?”

“It’s not just Madalena,” Zea moaned. “Eve and I are going to do this Nordar rite and then submit to you.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I said. “I don’t need you two submitting to me to know you love me.”

“We have not yet spoken of Sivaha,” Madalena said. “Perhaps she should be included in this conversation.”

“Who is Sivaha?” Zea asked Madalena, but when the Prime Valkyrie didn’t answer immediately, the hacker turned to me.

“That is the other news,” I said. “The meeting with Skyad ended abruptly. The good news is that they will ally with us. The bad news is that their queen is now submitted to me.”

Zea blinked a few times.

“Huh?” she asked.

“They intended various plans to destroy the Vaish,” Eve said. “One plan was to seduce Adam and turn Madalena against him. Another was to challenge him to a deathmatch. When they found out Adam was attempting Odin’s rite, their plans shifted, but in the end, they came here because they knew our clan was under new leadership, and they wanted to worm their way into taking us over.”

“Sooooo, how did this queen end up submitted to Adam?” Zea asked. Then Zea’s eyes opened wide, and she turned back to me. “Does this mean she is like Madalena? Can she feel your emotions? Is she connected like--”

“Yes,” Madalena said.

“Fuck!” Zea chucked her glass on the floor and it broke into a thousand fragments. Most of her wine was gone, but a few drops sprayed across the wall and her suit. “Why? How? This is bullshit!”

“Zea, it will be okay--” Eve started, but Zea turned to point at her.

“And you are fucking fine with this again. I shouldn’t be surprised.” The lanky blonde woman was out of her chair now, and her breath was coming out in angry huffs.

“None of us wanted this to happen,” Madalena said.

“Nope. Nope. Nope.” Zea shook her head. “Adam didn’t want you to submit to him, but you did anyways. Now you are married, and he fucks you every night. Eve just wants to love everyone, and I’m the only one keeping this whole crew from turning into a nonstop orgy.”

“Zea, that isn’t at all what happened,” I said.

“Is she beautiful?” Zea asked with a quivering voice. “I bet she is. She’s a Viking queen after all. She probably looks just like Madalena.”

“Please, sit down,” Eve begged. “This is not as bad as you are making it out to be.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Zea said as she wiped the back of her hand across one of her eyes. “I’m being unreasonable again. I’m wrong. I’m the idiot.”

“Maybe we should go,” Paula said as she and Kasta pushed back their chairs.

“No!” Zea hissed as the tears poured down her cheeks. “You two stay. You want Adam also. You might as well just have him. I’ll take a number and wait my turn. Serves me right for falling in love with him when he was already Eve’s.”

“Zea, can you let us explain?” I asked as I fought against the pain in my chest. I couldn’t stand to watch her cry, and I got up so that I could walk around the table and hug her.

“Doesn’t matter,” Zea said. “I get it. You probably needed to make her submit so our clans would be joined or something barbaric like that.”

“Yeah,” I sighed as I walked around the table to her. “That’s pretty

much it.”

“It is a political move,” Madalena said. “It was not made out of love or desire. Adam cares nothing for her.”

“He didn’t care for you either!” Zea spat as she pointed at Madalena. “But how could he not fall for you? You two feel each other’s emotions, Eve reads his mind, and I’m just a poor computer programmer who is in way over her head.”

“No, you are important to me. I’ve told you how many times I love you.” I moved my arms to circle her, but she stepped away as she waved her hand at me.

“I need to leave,” she said.

“Uhhh. Like the ship?” Paula gasped.

“Yes. No. I don’t know.”

“Zea,” I said as I moved toward her again. “I promised you some alone time. Just you and me in the spa. Let’s talk then. We can start now while Persephone is resetting her warpdrive and Madalena’s admirals are working with Sivaha’s to get logistics set up.” She let me touch her this time, and she pushed her teary face into my chest.

“You just said we don’t have a lot of time to waste,” she whispered, and I could feel her shoulders fighting back sobs.

Fuck me. I did this to her. I broke Zea’s heart, and it was the last thing I wanted to do.

“You aren’t a waste of time,” I said. “I need you in my life. I want to be with you. Let’s go visit their spa and spend some time together.”

“No,” she whispered.

“No?” I asked.

“I love you,” she said. “I know you didn’t do this to hurt me, but it hurts anyways. I just want to be close to you. I just want your love, but I have to share you.”

“Sharing does not mean that he loves you any less,” Eve said.

“Oh, shut the fuck up, Eve,” Zea growled, and the vampire’s red eyes opened wide as silence blanketed the six of us.

Eve didn't reply to Zea's words, but I could see the disappointment on her alabaster face. I didn't think my heart could hurt anymore, but the thought of my two lovers fighting with each other made me ache, and I regretted asking Sivaha to submit to me.

"Is she pretty? Be honest." Zea's voice was muffled against my chest.

"Yes," I admitted.

"Oh fuck," she sighed. "Damn it."

"This is just to control the Skyad," I said. "She won't be a part of my life."

"She's bonded to you. She's a part of your life."

"Will you come with me to the spa?" I asked "We can rest and talk more about it. I care for you. I need you by my side. I love you, Zea."

"No, we aren't going to the spa," Zea said as she pushed her face away from me. "I'm not going to take time away from searching for your sister so that we hang out in a bath. You wanna make me happy? I want you not to turn full-time Kitty Boy. Let's go find your sister and this Yu fucker."

"We don't have ti--"

"You just said you could hang out in the spa with me!" Zea pushed her hand against my chest while she wiped her tears with her other hand. "Fuck you, Adam. You care too much about us. I know you didn't want this bitch to submit to you. I'm guessing that Eve and Madalena told you to do it."

"Uhhh," I started to say, but Madalena interrupted me.

"Yes. That is what happened." The Prime Valkyrie crossed her arms.

"Figured," Zea sighed and finished wiping her eyes. "Whatever. I'll fucking deal with the new girl. I dealt with you."

"Dealt with me?" Madalena asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Yeah. Do you want Adam to go crazy, or do you want to find President Yu and get a cure?"

"We have time," Madalena said as she turned to me. "We could leave to visit the Jotnar now, but extra weeks will allow more of Sivaha's navy to arrive. Then we can make more of a show of force when we do visit."

"It is agreed then," Eve said as her eyes turned from me to Zea.

“Yeah, fine.” Zea leaned back into me, and I wrapped my arms around her again. “Sorry I got mad at you, Eve.”

“It is fine. I understand.”

“Yeah, you always do,” Zea replied as she exhaled.

“Which place do we visit first?” Paula asked, and the women turned to me.

“Wobbegong seems like the best bet,” I said after a few moments of consideration. “I don’t know the population of Bevnne - 886 - c, but I have to imagine an Earth-like planet is going to have more people and space than a station.”

“I agree,” Madalena said. “It will be easier to investigate Wobbegong first.”

“When can we leave?” I asked. “We need to hurry with this.”

“I will ask,” the Prime Valkyrie pressed her transponder, and the device made a beeping noise “Lux, when will Persephone be re-supplied?”

“Less than an hour, Prime Valkyrie,” the woman replied.

“I will need to speak to my Admirals about Sivaha,” Madalena said. “It will take me four or five hours to ensure that we have a plan to combine our people.”

“Four or five hours?” I asked with a bit of disbelief.

“It will take more than that,” Madalena smiled a bit. “But I should be able to get the process started in five hours. I will need Sivaha with me.” The Prime Valkyrie turned to Zea, but I couldn’t read the expression on her face. “Five hours would still be an enjoyable visit to our hot springs.”

“Ha,” Zea chuckled. “Are you saying I can have your husband for a few hours? How about you fuck off?”

“Hey, we don’t need--” I started to say.

“I have work to do,” Madalena growled. “You do not want to mock me, Zea.”

“I’ll--” Zea started to say, but I interrupted.

“Enough,” I growled. “Emotions are high. Let it go.”

Madalena turned to me and nodded before she finished her wine. Then she stood. "I will return with Sivaha when we have finished planning. Then we will leave. If you wish to visit our hot springs, let any of the crew know and they will arrange it."

"Thanks," I said, but Madalena was already walking out the door of the galley, and she didn't respond.

As soon as the Prime Valkyrie left, Zea sighed.

"Maybe I was a bit mean. It's not ten days, but I'll take four hours alone with you at the spa," Zea said as she turned in my arms.

"Great," I said as relief poured into my stomach. I had known she was going to be unhappy about Sivaha, but I was glad we worked through the conversation. I just needed to make sure that Sivaha didn't replace Zea in my heart.

"Eve, do you want to come with us?" Kasta asked. "I recall them saying we had multiple hot springs."

"I will--"

"Eve, you can come with Adam and me," Zea interrupted. "I'm sorry I was so rude to you earlier."

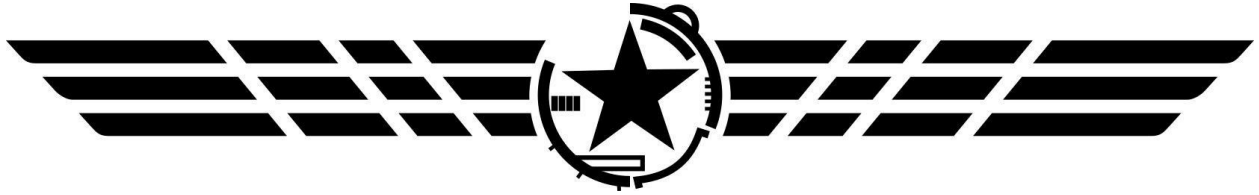
"No, Zea. It is fine," the dark-haired beauty smiled. "Enjoy your time with Adam. Kasta, Paula, and I will be fine together."

"Thanks," I said as I turned to Zea. "Let's go spend some time together. It's not ten days, but--"

"It's fine," she said. "We are in a rush." The blonde woman patted her face where her dried tears were.

"I'm not going to rush some things." I winked at her.

"Ohhh goody."



Chapter 5

“Damn,” Zea sighed as she sat in the hovercraft next to me. “I could have done ten days of that.”

“Yeah,” I said as I wrapped my arm around her slender shoulders and pulled her into my chest. It had been a great four-ish hours of bathing, eating, relaxing, and lovemaking.

Mostly lovemaking.

I’d pleased the beautiful woman’s slender body in a dozen different ways, and then I’d done it again after we took a break for food and more bathing. The experience had been relaxing because we hadn’t felt rushed. All we had felt is the desire to pleasure and enjoy each other.

“Fuck, you can get married as many times as you want, as long as you do that to me each time,” she whispered in my ear as the group of guards started the hovercraft and sped away from the glass castle.

“Really?” I asked.

“Uhh. Fuck no,” Zea laughed lightly. “This is the last one. Deal?”

“Deal,” I said.

“Ugh. I don’t even know her, but I fucking hate her already.”

“I don’t know her either if it makes you feel any better.” I squeezed Zea’s shoulder and tried to push thoughts of Sivaha out of my head.

“It doesn’t, but thanks for trying.”

“I’m surprised you took it so well,” I said.

“Maybe I’m getting used to it,” she sighed. “Don’t get any ideas though.”

“I didn’t want this,” I said.

“I know, and I forgot about it when we were at the spa, but now we are returning to reality. We’ve got a galaxy to save, and the man I love is involved with two other women.”

“Two?” I asked.

“I’m not counting Eve,” Zea said. “I’m uhh. Fine with her. I mean. Yeah. Well, you get it. I love her. I love you. I... uhh. It’s complicated.”

“No shit,” I said.

“Yeah,” Zea sighed again. “No shit is right. If I could only go back in time and tell the old me that this job I was taking was going to change my life forever. I probably wouldn’t have believed it.”

“Do you regret meeting me?” I asked.

“Fuck no. You are the best thing that ever happened to me. Don’t be such a meathead.” Zea let out a laugh and then leaned up to kiss me.

Our lips pushed all the other worries out of my mind for a few minutes, but we were soon back at the harbor, and we had to switch hovercraft so that we could make the last leg of the drive to Persephone.

“I just don’t know how I fit in with all of this,” Zea suddenly picked up the conversation from where we left off, and I guessed that it had been churning around in her head.

“I get it,” I said as I turned my attention from the endless but organized traffic of the harbor so I could look at her.

“Yeah, you say you do,” she said, “but how could you? Everyone loves you and brings more to the crew than I do.”

“Zea,” I started with a sigh. “You are the best damn hacker in the galaxy.”

“Oh yeah sure, but let’s look at the rest of the crew. Eve can fucking read minds, has telekinesis, and can speak into your brain. Madalena is a warrior goddess who could probably kill me with her pinky finger, and the twins are fucking genius engineers. Paula might be the smartest person in the

universe, and she's hanging out on our ship just because she has the hots for you."

"I don't think that's the case," I said. "She likes our mission, and she wants to help."

"Oh sure," Zea said. "That too, but you are kind of oblivious to her presence. She hangs on every word you say, and just like... well. I'm a woman, and I know women. She's in love with you. She has been since Queen's Hat, but she's too polite to say or do anything. That's probably why Kasta just goes so overboard."

"Look, Zea. You don't need to compare yourself to anyone else. I love you, and I need you. We've already talked about this a bunch. We'd be dead a hundred times already if not for your abilities."

"I get it, and I knew you'd say that, but it doesn't change how I feel." She shook her head and her blonde bangs bounced across her forehead. "I know I'm being dumb. Sorry. I just need to work on it. I'm just surrounded by amazing women, and they are all in love with my man. It's kind of discouraging."

"You don't need to be discouraged," I reassured her.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Now you've gone off and married some super gorgeous queen." Zea sighed and then wiggled against me. "Whatever. She didn't just spend the last four hours fucking you. I win, bitch."

"Will you try to get along with her?" I asked. "This is different than with Madalena. Yeah, she came here trying to take advantage of the situation, but I'm basically enslaving her so our clans will be joined. I care nothing for her, but I'd rather she has a friend."

"You are such a fucking nice guy," Zea said. "Ugh. I'll try to be nice to her. Okay? It will be hard. I like Madalena, and I still want to claw her eyes out every other sentence she speaks, but then I remember she can kill me with her pinky, and I have to keep myself in check."

"This is you keeping yourself in check?" I asked with a laugh.

"Hey. I never had a problem standing up to other women. I've just always been mixed up with men. You can probably guess why."

"Yeah," I said as I recalled her backstory. Zea's dad had left her and

her mom to fend for themselves. Just like my dad.

It was probably why I worked so hard to make all the women around me happy. I didn't want to be like that piece of shit.

The hovercraft pulled up to Persephone's ramp, and Zea and I got out. The guards also exited the hovercraft, but it was just so they could bow low to me before standing again. I thanked them for escorting us, and they jumped back into the hovercraft.

"How's it feel to be a king?" Zea asked as we walked up the ramp. Her arm was wrapped around mine, and our fingers intertwined.

"I feel the same," I said. "Just feels like it is eventually going to be a lot of work."

"Madalena seems to be handling all of it," Zea said as we reached the top of the bridge.

"For now," I said. "I'll need to learn how to do it, eventually."

"Or you can just sit on the throne and fuck your women, just like her dad did." Zea smiled at me.

"You know that's not my style," I said.

"I kind of wish it was. What are we going to do when all this SAVO stuff is over? Spend every day at the spa? Sign me up."

"I remember you thinking that we were all going to die," I chuckled.

"Yeah, we probably will, but I'm trying to look on the bright side here. If we don't die, and we kill all those fuckers, let's just come back here and live out the rest of our lives soaking in hot water and having sex. Deal?"

"Maybe," I said. "A lot of people still need our help, even if we take care of the SAVO."

"Ugh. I knew you would say that." Zea squeezed my hand and smiled to show she wasn't really disgusted with me.

We walked through Persephone's hold, and I passed Hegeia, Uma, and Waiola. Hegeia held a datapad, and the other two women were standing on top of a two-meter high stack of boxes. It looked like they were taking inventory, but they paused their work to wave back at Zea and I as we passed.

"They are a little too pretty, but I like those girls," the hacker said as

we entered the hallway.

“They saved my life,” I said.

“Yeah, so bonus points to them.” She hit the button for the elevator. “Soooooooo... is this queen as good looking as they are?”

“Ahh. I’m not sure,” I said. “Zea, you don’t have to worry. I love you.”

“I know. I know,” she said, “and you are sure, or you would have told me that she wasn’t as hot as them, and they are pretty fucking hot. Ugh.”

“You said you would try,” I reminded her.

“Yeah. I’ll try,” Zea said without looking at me.

The door opened, and we stepped inside of the lift. I hit the button for the bridge level, and we rode the next few seconds in silence. When the door opened to the bridge, we stepped out and then walked past the gunner’s stations. Mikhael, Josefinna, Lux, Calisto, and Milda were sitting in their chairs, but as soon as Zea and I entered, the crew stood and saluted us.

“At ease,” I said, and they nodded as they sat. I was starting to become better attuned to their emotions through Madalena, and I could tell that they were beginning to warm up to me. I guessed it had something to do with me killing Madalena’s father, but I didn’t know if it was because I was now actually the Vaish King, or if they just admired that I beat the man in combat.

Maybe it was a bit of both.

Nikki, Paula, Kasta, and Eve, were in their usual seats at the front of the bridge. They all stood when Zea and I turned past the officer’s chairs, and I motioned for them to sit down again.

“The Prime Valkyrie notified me that she has just left her meeting, my lord,” Nikki said. “She will be onboard in ten minutes with Queen Sivaha.”

“Thanks, Nikki,” I said. “We good to go?” I had asked her not to call me “my lord” before, but I didn’t mind the title now.

“Yes,” Nikki replied.

“Hey, Nikki,” Kasta called out, and the blonde pilot turned in her chair to face the blonde android. “I noticed you never call Madalena ‘Queen’, but you just called Sivaha by that title. Why?”

“There are many Nordar queens,” Nikki said with a slight smile. “But

there is only one Prime Valkyrie.”

“That is a good explanation,” Kasta said. “Thanks.”

“How many Nordar queens are there?” Paula asked. “Aren’t there just five clans?”

“There were five,” Nikki said as she turned her steel colored eyes to me. “Now there are four, thanks to our lord.”

“But Sivaha is still a queen?” Paula asked.

“It depends on who rules the clan,” Nikki said. “If a queen rules the clan, then there can be multiple kings. If a king rules the clan, there can be multiple queens.”

“So Adam is the only king?” Kasta asked, and I could actually see the confusion on the android’s face.

“Yes,” Nikki said. “He will need to work out the system, but the easiest solution is for Madalena to rule the original Vaish people, while Sivaha rules over the Vaish who were once Skyad. At least for the next few dozen years until our clans have assimilated.” The pilot turned to me. “You will need to work that out with both of them and their advisors.”

“I haven’t even met any of Madalena’s advisors,” I said as I sat in the captain’s chair. “Too much shit to do. The Draugr is our first priority.”

My transponder beeped, and I pressed the button.

“Adam, I am returning to Persephone,” Madalena said. “I am bringing Sivaha with me. She cooperated during our meetings with my admirals. Should I bring her to the bridge, or do you wish for her to stay in her room during this mission?”

I looked at my friends. Zea’s face was a bit sour, as was Kasta’s, but Eve showed no emotion and Paula just shrugged. Nikki had turned around to study her control terminals, but her opinion didn’t really matter in this case.

“Yeah,” I said. “Bring her up so she can meet everyone.”

“Understood,” Madalena said, and then my transponder beeped.

“Are we going to have to babysit this one?” Kasta asked. “Or can she kick ass like Madalena?”

“Queen Sivaha is, or was, Skyad,” Nikki said as she turned around

once more. "They are fierce warriors and should not be underestimated."

"And she is cunning," Eve said. "Please be careful what you say around her."

"What do you mean?" Paula asked.

"She is looking for an angle," Eve explained. "She is stuck with Adam for the rest of her life, so she will be looking to make her position by his side so that she can whisper in his ear. I do not know her well enough, but I would not put any sort of manipulation past her."

"Ugh. She sounds delightful," Kasta said.

"I'll try to make friends with her," Zea said, and the other women's eyes opened with a bit of surprise.

"Huh?" Kasta asked.

"Look, I can be nice," Zea laughed. "I love you two beauties, and I'm warming up to Madalena. I'm gonna give her a chance, okay?"

"My lord," Nikki interrupted. "The Prime Valkyrie and your queen have just arrived. Do I have your permission to depart?"

"Yeah," I said. "Set course for Janar - 2884."

"Yes, my lord." Nikki's fingers danced over her controls, and Zea took her seat to the right.

A few seconds later, Persephone's screen showed the traffic in the harbor grind to a halt, and we lifted off without any sort of jarring movement.

"Damn, girl," Zea said. "You are smooth."

"I'll show you some things when we have more time," Nikki said.

"I've been watching, but yeah, I'd like some private instruction," Zea said.

I saw movement out of the corner of my eye and turned to see Madalena and Sivaha walk onto the bridge. The Prime Valkyrie nodded as she walked past the gunner team, and then she stepped around the officers' chairs so that she stood in the space behind the three pilot stations where Paula, Nikki, and Zea sat.

"This is Queen Sivaha Vaish," Madalena said as she motioned to the slender silver-haired woman who stood next to her.

Sivaha had changed out of her bloodstained silver dress and into a black one of a tighter cut. It looked less like a gown, and more like what a businesswoman would wear to a cocktail party. It hugged her breasts, waist, and hips like a second skin, and I could see the definition of her abdominal muscles. Sivaha wasn't as muscular as Madalena, but it was apparent she never skipped a workout, and her dress accented her long legs with a slit that started at the top of her toned thigh.

"Hi, I'm Paula," the engineer said as she rose.

"Well met," Sivaha replied with a nod of her head.

"I am honored, Queen," Nikki said as she stood from her seat. "I am Nikki Diksha."

"I have heard of you," Sivaha said as her amber eyes narrowed. "You were once a Valkyrie, no?"

"That is correct." Nikki nodded, "but now I serve the Prime Valkyrie and pilot King Adam's starship."

"Ahh," Sivaha said. "Well met."

"I'm Zea." The hacker stepped forward and held her hand out to shake. I was somewhat surprised by the movement, but Sivaha seemed more surprised and stared at Zea's offered hand for a few seconds before she shook it.

"Well met," the silver-haired woman said.

"Yes. I'm hoping we can be friends." Zea shook her hand vigorously.

"Ahhh. Yes. That would be fine. What duties do you perform on this ship?"

"Oh, I take care of computers and copilot," Zea said.

"Do you also service my new husband?" Sivaha asked as she raised a silver colored eyebrow.

"Ummm. Excuse me?" Zea asked as she stopped shaking the other woman's hand.

"Are you fucking my husband?" Sivaha asked with an exaggerated sigh. "I need to know the lay of the land here, and I noticed him tense when you walked up to me."

“Uhhh. Well, uhh...” Zea turned to look at me, and then glanced back to Sivaha. “Yeah, but that--”

“Another concubine,” Sivaha sighed. “I doubt we will be friends.”

Zea’s face turned red, and she pulled her hand away from Sivaha as if the other woman had bitten her.

“Sivaha,” I said. “These women are all my crew and family. If you offend them, you offend me.”

“And I would hate to offend you, dear husband,” Sivaha shook her head and then turned to Kasta.

“Hi! I’m Kasta!” The blonde woman said with an exuberant smile. “I help with navigation and engineering, especially drone repair. I’m actually an android. I’m not sleeping with your husband, but I really want to. I also think you are a bitch, and we probably aren’t going to get along. But yeah, well met.”

“Not helping, Kasta,” Paula hissed under her breath, but I didn’t think anyone else heard the words.

Sivaha raised both of her eyebrows and actually smiled halfway before she turned to me. “I’ve met all your women now. What do you require of me, husband?”

“We are heading to a space station in Janar - 2884,” I said. “The place is called Wobbegong. Have you heard of it?”

“No, I care little for space stations that are not owned by my people. What is our purpose in this journey?”

“We are looking for someone,” I said. “My sister. We believe she is being held against her will by an organization that is trying to capture me.”

“I will use my abilities to help you,” Sivaha said.

“Thank you,” I said sincerely. Despite the comments to Zea, and Kasta’s rebuttal, this was going better than I had thought it would.

“You are welcome, husband,” Sivaha said with an emotionless nod. I wasn’t able to feel her emotions yet, and I wondered how long it would take before I could judge if her words were truthful. I couldn’t help but think she was humoring me and really wanted to just kill me.

“Do you enjoy the sight of my dress, husband?” Sivaha asked as she ran her hands down from the sides of her breasts to her hips.

“It is fine,” I said.

“I couldn’t decide on a color,” she continued. “White seemed fitting since I was married to you today, but I am hardly a virgin, so perhaps cream would have been a better color. Then again, ivory is the color of bone, so that might be more suitable.”

“I don’t really care about the color of your dress, Sivaha,” I said.

“Will you call me ‘wife?’” she asked with a raised eyebrow.

“No,” I said as I realized where she was going with the conversation.

“Very well,” she let out a short, bitter laugh. “You can see which color I choose. I thought it fitting since I am also a widow today, and now I am Queen of the Crows.”

“You mentioned crows before,” I said. “What does that mean?”

“We are Crows,” Madalena said quickly.

“He does not know?” Sivaha asked the Prime Valkyrie with a bit of disbelief on her face. “Wherever did you find this man, Madalena?”

“At the edge of our territory. He saved my life, and the lives of my crew while he was critically injured.” Madalena’s explanation surprised me somewhat. She was treating Sivaha with more respect than she had shown my women when she first met them.

“And now he is your king?” Sivaha asked as she turned her amber eyes to me.

“He is an avatar of Odin, sent to our people as a blessing so that we might unite the clans,” Madalena said.

“I doubt that, but since he is now my husband, I will do my best to pretend I agree.” Sivaha’s eyes didn’t leave me when she spoke, but her words didn’t drip with any malice. “Since your first wife hasn’t educated you yet, I will. Each of the clans has a totem animal. Vaish are crows since they are clever, emotionless, and scavengers.”

“Ahh,” I said as I met her gaze. “That explains all the feather decorations.”

“You are observant,” Sivaha said. “The Skyad clan’s totem was once the mighty boar, but now we are no more. It is a shame.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “Their king and queen tried to catch a tiger by his tail, and they got mauled.”

“Tiger?” she asked. “Is that what you think you are?”

Zea and Kasta started laughing, and the silver-haired woman turned to them.

“What are the other clans?” I asked Madalena.

“Jotnar are wolves, Idonan are Hart’s, and Waymund are horses.”

“Harts?” Zea asked.

“Deer,” Madalena explained. “The thralls on our--” Madalena halted her words and gave me an apologetic nod. “Hegeia, Uma, and Waiola are from the Idonan Overlord Clan. They border our territory on the opposite side from the Jotnar.”

“You have ignored my question, husband,” Sivaha said.

“You will find out about Adam soon enough, Sivaha,” Madalena said.

“Very well.” Sivaha turned back to me and I saw her eyes dart toward Eve. “Husband, will I be cooking dinner for you tonight, or will one of your concubines be taking my rightful place?”

“I have not decided,” I said.

“You would torture me with indecision?” she asked as she bit her bottom lip. Her face seemed to break, and I immediately wanted to comfort the beautiful woman.

She is manipulating you with her power, but do not say anything. I am interested to see if she’ll expose more of her abilities.

“If you pout, the answer is no.” The words left my mouth easily, and her eyes narrowed a bit as she studied my face.

“I will leave you then. Who will show me to your room?”

“You are staying on the bridge,” I said.

“I cannot,” Sivaha said.

“You can’t?” I asked as Madalena opened her mouth to speak.

“No, the concubine is in my seat.” The queen raised a finger to point at Eve. “She should know her place.”

“Her place is at my side right here,” I said as I laid my hand on Eve’s shoulder and fought against my anger. “Your seat is next to Madalena at the end.”

“You put your concubine before me?” She growled.

“If you call Eve my concubine again, I’ll--”

“Do nothing,” Sivaha interrupted me. “Unless you plan on going back on your word and beating me. Or you can tell me to kill myself, but that might cause problems with the integration of our people. Since that is the only reason you made me submit to you, I believe you will do nothing.”

I am fine with her sitting by your side, my love.

Eve’s words came into my mind as I saw her begin to lean forward in her chair. I raised my hand to stop her and then turned back to Sivaha.

“You can sit in the chair next to Madalena, or you can wait alone in your room.”

“Escort me to your room,” she said as she raised her fingers to run through her hair. I wasn’t much of a poker player, but the movement seemed to emerge from nerves.

“Not my room,” I said. “Your room. Alone.”

Sivaha’s amber eyes narrowed a bit as she stared at me. For half a moment, I debated just sending her to her room so I wouldn’t have to deal with her, but I still felt terrible about making her submit to me, and I wanted her to be able to participate with the rest of the crew.

Sivaha turned to Madalena, then the silver-haired woman shook her head before she stepped up onto the small dais where the officer chairs were. She pivoted on her toes gracefully and then lowered herself into the seat next to Madalena without another word.

Now the seats at the front of the bridge were filled.

Nikki was at the shimmering exit wall of the Odin Geirr, and we passed out into the space of Nordar 13 quickly. She piloted Persephone for half a minute so that we were free of the inflow of traffic, and then I saw the blonde woman move her hand over to where the drive controls were located.

“My lord, I am ready to engage hyperdrive,” Nikki said. “Paula has set the navigation.”

“Your vessel does not have a warpdrive?” Sivaha asked with disgust apparent on her voice.

“It is on cooldown, my queen,” Nikki replied without looking back over her shoulder.

“Why even bother with hyperdrive? Just wait in your fortress until the warpdrive is--”

“We are in a hurry,” I said. “Nikki, engage hyperdrive.”

“Engaging hyperdrive,” Nikki said calmly. Then she pressed the button on her terminal controls, and Persephone’s display stretched for half a moment before it turned black.

“How long will we be in hyperdrive?” I asked.

“Thirty-one hours,” Paula replied. “Then we will be in Warpdrive for about an hour and a half.”

“Madalena, will you give Sivaha a tour of Persephone?”

“Yes.” The Prime Valkyrie nodded.

“Paula and Kasta, do you have drones to work on?”

“Always,” Paula replied as she stood.

“Zea--”

“I actually had a bunch of software stuff I need to work on, and I want to pick Nikki’s brain about piloting,” the blonde hacker interrupted me. “I can stay busy.”

“Great,” I said as I turned to Eve.

You are still exhausted, my love. Can I help you relax so that you may sleep deeper?

I nodded at Eve and then turned back to the other women. “We’ll meet for dinner in seven hours and get to know Sivaha better.”

“We should be spending our first night together with just the two of us,” the amber-eyed queen said. “It is the Nordar tradition.”

“I care not about your tradition,” I said as I stood.

“You should, if you intend to unite all our clans.” Sivaha’s jaw was clenched, and she turned to Madalena. “Did you cook him dinner and consummate your marriage?”

“Yes,” Madalena answered plainly. “But it was not during our first night together. I will speak of it more when I show you the ship.”

“Fine,” Sivaha growled as she shook her head.

Nikki and Zea stayed in their seats, but the rest of us walked back past the gunner’s stations toward the elevator. Eve and I turned the corner hallway which led toward my suite, and I heard Sivaha clear her throat behind us.

“Where are they going?” Sivaha asked loud enough for me to hear.

“To his room,” Kasta said. “They are probably going to have a lot of sex, and I’m sure it will be mind-blowing.”

“You are not amusing,” Sivaha replied.

“Oh, I’m very amusing. I’m amusing myself right now.” Kasta laughed.

I ignored the rest of their conversation and walked into my suite with Eve. As soon as the doors closed, I couldn’t hear the two women bicker anymore, and I turned to face Eve.

“Are you sure I did the right thing?” I asked. “She’s going to be a pain in the ass.”

“Yes,” Eve said. “She will be difficult, but I am learning more as I spend additional time in her presence. She is not evil, just selfish. Perhaps we are fortunate that she is selfish.”

“What do you mean?” I asked as I moved to take off my armor plates. I was still tired from the battle with Madalena’s father and the abuse I’d taken from the sonic limiter, but the time with Zea had helped rejuvenate me a bit. Still, I wanted to sleep.

“She wanted to live, so she took your deal. Perhaps it was the best choice for her people, but she could have just died and allowed the Skyad to exist for another year or so.”

“Did she consider that option?” I asked as Eve reached up to help me remove my armor pieces.

“She did, but as I said, she preferred to live. Now she will attempt to conquer you and become your first wife. She would prefer to be just the queen of the Skyad, but queen of the Vaish when they are twice as large as the Skyad is still appealing. She controlled her last husband with her powers, she is confident she can do the same with you.”

“Hmmm,” I sighed as Eve pulled off the last of my armor. She moved her fingers to the zipper of my flight suit, and I reached out to undo her matching outfit. Half a moment later we were both naked, and she led me to our bed.

“Think no more of her for now,” Eve said. “Lay down on your stomach, and I will massage your tired muscles.”

“I’d rather you massage something else,” I chuckled as we reached my bed.

“I will get there, my love. First your back. I will care for you.”

“I’m a lucky guy,” I said as I flopped on the bed.

A few moments later I felt the smooth skin of Eve’s legs straddling me, and her hands began to push into the muscles of my back. I wasn’t really sore, but her touch was comforting, and my eyelids soon became too heavy to keep open.

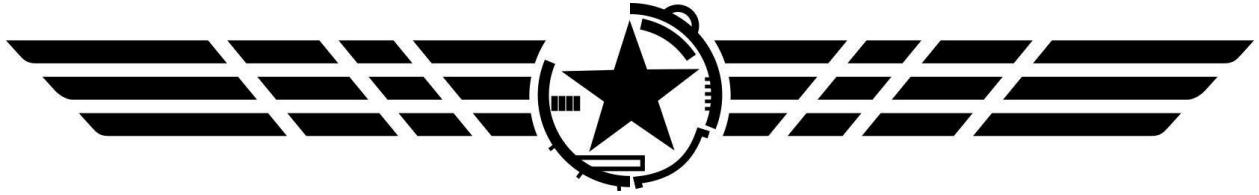
Then my body became warm, and I felt like I was floating in a bath.

I smelled blood, and I opened my eyes.

I was in a glass tube with an oxygen mouthpiece strapped to my jaw. The room I was in looked like the one where I had rescued Eve, but instead of lab coat clad scientists, I only saw the tall blonde man who once experimented on me.

“Welcome home, Adam,” the man said with a dark laugh. Then he smiled.

His teeth were pointed like a vampire’s.



Chapter 6

“What the fuck?” I growled into my mouthpiece, but it came out sounding like “wahhhfuuu,” and I doubted he heard it.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he said as he shook his head. “You’re mad. I get it, but hey, I give zero fucks about your feelings, so you should get over it.”

I punched the glass of my tube, but I was floating in the liquid and had no base for leverage. My fist just bounced off without doing any damage.

“I’ve been watching you,” he said, and I noticed the man’s blue eyes were now glowing red. “You interest me.”

“Fuck you! Let me go! Where is Eve?” I realized I was naked in the tube, but I tried to kick against the glass. It was even less effective than my punch because the movement pushed me away from the wall as if I was trying to swim.

“Your mind is so filllllled with pain, and angerrrr, and sorrow, and lust. It is deliciousssss.” President Yu smiled again, and then he ran a long tongue over his lips. The movement was strangely sensual, and I felt my shoulder muscles tense.

“You keep escaping meeee, but I have figured you out nowww. He helped me.” President Yu tapped on his chest and smiled. His voice sounded strange. It was like I remembered, but his mouth no longer moved in time with his words, and I wondered if the water I was looking through was playing with how quickly I heard his voice.

“I’m going to fucking kill you. Where is my sister?” I tried to push my legs against the opposite side of the tube so I could get some leverage to

punch the glass, but it was wider than I was tall.

“Stay here. I will come to claim you soon.” The man turned away from me, and his form seemed to shimmer as he walked out of the room. I guessed he wasn’t actually here. It was some sort of holographic projection.

“No! Come back, asshole!” I couldn’t even understand my words through the breathing mask, but I pounded on the glass anyway with hopes that the blonde fucker would turn around.

But the door closed behind him, and I was alone. Really fucking alone because the door looked like it was the same kind they had in the room where they held Eve. It was about three meters high and must have weighed five hundred kilograms.

I searched my mind for a clue. What had last happened? How had Yu captured me? Had we made it to Wobbegong? The last thing I remembered was sleeping in my room with Eve. Was she here?

Was this a dream?

I tried to slam my fist into the glass again. I still couldn’t get enough momentum to break the thick container, but my knuckles hurt from the impact.

This didn’t feel like a dream, but how else was I here?

One thing was for sure, I needed to get the fuck out of this tube, then I needed to find Yu, get him to tell me where my sister and friends were, extract the information about my experiments from him, and then beat him until he was just a pool of blood.

I looked up to the air mask tube. It was made of a clear ribbed plastic about five centimeters thick. It looked like it connected to a nipple on the roof of my tube, but I didn’t see any sort of seal or crease in the top corners around the piece. It almost looked like it grew organically out of the ceiling.

I flipped upside down and tried to wedge my bare feet into the corner of the tube. It was easy enough, but I still had the problem of no real anchor to help me put power into my punches and kicks. I contemplated pulling the breathing tube taut so I could have something to keep me stable, but I didn’t want to risk pulling the thing out and drowning.

Then I heard a tapping sound. It actually sounded a bit like a knock,

and I spun around in the water to see what caused the noise. I didn't see anything, but then I realized the sound was originating from up above me.

"Hello?" I asked in my tube, but my words were still muffled, and whatever was causing the noise didn't seem to stop.

Then there was a popping noise, and I couldn't breathe. There was no more air coming from the tube. When I inhaled it felt like I was trying to breathe while under six feet of dirt. I grunted and tried to punch up into the ceiling, but the knocking sound continued without interruption.

"Mmmmm!" I groaned as my heart started to hammer in my chest. Whoever was knocking seemed to hear my voice this time, and the sound grew louder. It almost sounded like hammering, but the water and the sound of my own heart was making it hard to guess what was causing the noise.

I tried to breathe again, but there still wasn't air in the tube, and my brain started to hurt. I tried to swim down to the bottom of the tube, with hopes that I could push off the bottom and slam up into the ceiling and push it off, but the tube from the mask didn't let me swim down far enough.

I had a decision to make. Did I keep the mask on and hope someone turned on the air in the next fifteen seconds, or did I tear it off and try to break the ceiling of the tube off? There was a chance I could still put the mask on again, but water might get in the tube and cause problems with my breathing.

One answer left me at someone else's mercy. The other was me trying to take control of my life.

I tore the mask off my face and dove to the floor of my tube. The lack of air in my lungs allowed me to sink quickly, and I crouched as low as I could before pushing off with my legs. My body shot up through the water like a bullet, and I raised my hands to punch into the ceiling next to where the tube came out. I half expected the lid to not move, but I gasped when the ceiling did actually shift.

The knocking sound stopped, and I saw a black and white splash out of the corner of my eye. I turned in the direction of the movement and saw a beautiful pale-skinned woman with black feathered wings.

It was Persephone.

She opened her mouth to say something, but I couldn't seem to hear

her through the glass. The dark angel seemed to understand that I couldn't hear her, so she pointed up to the top of the tube with frantic gestures. I got the hint and swam back to the bottom of the tube again.

My lungs were screaming, and my vision was spinning. It felt like my legs didn't have any strength, but I forced them to crouch on the floor of the tube while I focused the last of my attention up above. I pushed as hard as I could off the floor and then shot up toward the ceiling of the tube once more.

My timing was on point, and my fists double punched into the corner of the ceiling as soon as I was in range. The lid bumped up from the edge of the glass, and I quickly pushed my hands into the gap. Then I hissed in pain when the weight came back down on my fingers.

Still, it was enough space for me to push my face into, and I managed to cram my nose up to where my wrists were so that I could breathe in some sweet oxygen.

It took half a minute or so of frantic breathing for my head to stop spinning, but I eventually felt as if I had recovered enough to wiggle my fingers until the back of my hands were under the lid. Then I twisted my grip sideways so the edge sat on my vertical fists. This gave me enough space to push my arm through the gap, and I was able to hook my forearm on the other side of the glass. It provided the leverage that I needed, and I was able to pull with my arm, push up with my shoulder, and then lift with my fist. The lid lifted up and then slid away from my skull before it tumbled off the top of the glass tube.

A horrible crashing noise echoed through the room when the metal lid fell, and I winced as I finished my climb out of the water.

So much for escaping with a bit of stealth, but then again, it was possible that sound couldn't get past the bank-vault looking door.

"Eye yahh!" Persephone shouted as her wings flapped. She leaped up to the edge of the tube with a graceful jump-glide and wrapped her hands around my left bicep.

I was still kind of hanging off the edge of the glass, but she was surprisingly strong, and managed to pull me up enough that I could get my feet up on the ledge. It was a good four-meter drop down to the floor, but before I could figure out a safe way down, the winged woman with the

platinum hair pushed on me, and we both fell from the edge.

“Whoa!” I shouted, but her wings unfurled behind us, and we floated down as if carried by a parachute.

“Eye yah,” she whispered as soon as we landed. Her arms had wrapped around the front of my chest so she could carry me down, and she shifted around so that she was standing in front of me. Her hands were still on my chest though, and her glowing red eyes stared into mine.

“Thanks,” I said as I tried to look away from her beautiful face. Looking anywhere else just showed how she was virtually naked. Even her perfect feet were bare.

“Eye yah?” she asked as she stepped closer to me. She wore what could only be described as sexy lingerie. It was a small amount of black lace that barely covered her amazing body. Her skin was an alabaster white, like Eve’s, and the places where the black lace didn’t cover seemed to glow from the reflection of the terminal monitors in the room. Her hair was almost the same color as her skin, but it had streaks of metallic looking gray along with the platinum, and it made her hair seem like an artist’s creation than a natural hair color.

It actually seemed to be the color of rhodium, which was the most valuable metal in the galaxy.

“Eye yah?” she asked again as her thumb traced the shape of my lips.

“Yeah,” I said as my hands wrapped around her hips and cupped her tight butt cheeks. I pulled her to me, and our lips devoured each other passionately while her wings fluttered.

“Ahhhh,” she gasped when our lips finally parted. “Looovvvvaa.”

“I don’t understand.” The words fell out of my mouth as if I was trying to speak while drunk. She was intoxicating, and I wanted to drink from her again.

“Oah. Looovaah. Oah.” Her fingers came up to my mouth again and her red eyes bore into mine.

“Love?” I asked.

“Eye yah,” she whispered as she nodded.

“Me?”

“Yahhhh,” she leaned into me, and our lips met again while I pulled her slender body into me. I was naked, and she was practically naked, but she pulled away from me

“Noooo taaay.” She pulled away from me and frowned.

“I don’t know what you mean, but I’m guessing you think this is a bad time and place to continue enjoying each other.

“Eye yah,” she said with a sad nod.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said as I looked around the room. “We need to get out of here and find my friends.”

“Naaooo livvveeee,” she said as she gestured to the room.

“No life?” I asked.

“Eye yah,” she nodded again.

“I’m getting better at understanding what you say, but I don’t know what you mean. What do you mean by ‘no life?’”

The red-eyed angel ran her palm over my cheek, up past my ear, and then tapped me on the temple. “Eeeerrr. Naooo livvveeee.”

“Okay, I still don’t get it, but I think I need to get some clothes, find a weapon, and then find the rest of my friends. Can you stay behind me? I’ll protect you.”

“Eye yahh.” She nodded, but her lips twisted in a way that made me think she was annoyed.

The lab room I was imprisoned in had some forty terminals set against all four walls. There were also black vacuum looking pipes stretching between the walls, and I reached back to hold Persephone’s hand as we stepped over them.

Even though the door was massive, I was still a bit surprised that no guards had run into the room when we dropped the lid. As soon as we stepped past the dozens of blue-tinted screens and reached the doorway leading out of the lab, I reached up to spin the handle of the vault door. It unlocked just fine, but pulling the massive hunk of metal open required me actually putting one of my legs against the wall so that I could kind of deadlift the thing open. Even then, I could only get it open about half a meter, and we had to squeeze out of the lab.

As soon as we left the room, we stood on a narrow cat-walk that extended for what looked like a kilometer over a gorge. The sight was completely unexpected, so my mouth fell open with surprise.

I could breathe the air, so I guessed the planet we were on had been terraformed, but the canyon below us looked as if it had been cut too acute to be real. The edges and ridges were sharp, jagged, and colored shades of gray and black. I could see no plants or other forms of life clinging to the edges, and I looked up to see that the top ridge of the canyon was some two hundred meters above us.

The drop below us seemed to go on forever.

“We can’t go up, and we sure as hell can’t go down,” I said as I pointed to the cliff face. I was halfway decent at climbing, but the part of the cliff where the door to my room had been drilled was almost as smooth as glass, and I didn’t see any handholds.

The only way out was forward across the bridge.

I began to walk across the metal walkway. There were handrails on each side, but I couldn’t see any sort of support ropes or beams. It was just the walkway and the railing. It made me think the metal was either incredibly strong or that the slightest breeze would cause the whole thing to tumble down into the black jaws of the canyon below us.

I walked a little faster and reached behind me to grab onto Persephone’s hand.

“Looks like there is another door in the distance,” I said as I squinted a bit. My eyes were normally good, but the doorway seemed incredibly far away.

Then it opened, and monsters poured out of it like vomit.

They looked to be humanoid, but their skin was the gray and black color of disease. Their limbs were long and monkey-like, with claws at the end of their fingers. Their faces looked like mutated bats, with long fangs and wide low noses. Eight of them had come through the door, and they sniffed the air before their red eyes fixed on Persephone and me.

They started to sprint across the narrow bridge toward us, and I heard their angry snarls a few moments after they started to move.

“Stand behind me a bit more,” I said as I waved back to Persephone. The appearance of the strange creatures sparked a memory deep inside my mind, and I wondered again if I was dreaming all of this. Persephone was my starship. She wasn’t a beautiful angel with black feathered wings and red eyes. I was asleep in my room, and not here battling naked on a suspended bridge hanging over an endless canyon.

But then I rested my hand on the railing, and it felt as real as anything I ever touched. I didn’t know if this was a dream or not, but there was no way in hell I’d let these ugly fucks touch my woman.

And Persephone was my woman.

These ugly assholes kind of half ran, half crawled toward me like animals. There were moving fast, but I still had about eight hundred meters of empty space between us. I thought back to the room I just passed through, I didn’t recall anything in there I could use as a weapon, but I reasoned that running back there would mean I would be forced to fight these fuckers inside of the open room instead of the bridge. They couldn’t flank me on the bridge, so I preferred to fight them here.

“Stay back,” I reminded Persephone, and then I sprinted toward them when they were some eight meters from me.

As I ran, my body shifted.

The pain wasn’t with me this time, and the change seemed to happen almost instantly. One second I was sprinting toward them, and the next I had grown in size, my legs felt twenty times more powerful, and the orange striped fur covered my body. My transformation seemed to surprise the eight ugly hairless bat-humans, and they slowed their sprint a bit.

Then I was on them.

I slashed the claws of my right hand through the face of the first fucker before he could get his arms up in time to block. The wickedly sharp blades at the end of my finger turned his skull into something that resembled a cut melon, and he screamed as half of his brains leaked out of his face.

I punched my left hand into the chest of the second one in the group, and I felt his ribs crack like a thin layer of ice. Dark red blood exploded out of his mouth when he gasped, but I had already flipped my fingers up, and my claws tore out his throat before he could get his scream out.

I took a step forward and kicked the fucker without a face in the right shoulder. His body tumbled over the guard railing, and he spun into the black chasm. A third fanged man-monster tried to step past the second one and bite me, but I punched his nose before his face got close enough to bite, and his skull imploded like a rotten tomato. Before he could stumble back, I wrapped my left hand around his neck and then heaved him into the second fucker with the slashed throat. As they collided with each other, the force of my throw caused them to teeter over the side of the guardrail.

I flicked my left hand up under their legs, and they spiraled off the side of the bridge.

The next monster jumped at me, but I raised my palm, caught him in the face, and then directed his jump to the side. His face smacked into the guardrail, and then he screamed as his body fell into the abyss. My defensive moves caused the remaining four uglies to slow their attack, and they took a few hissing steps away from me.

I shuffled forward and feinted a jab with my left fist, the one in front raised his clawed hand to block me, but then I came around with a right hook and tore the front part of his skull off. Blood sprayed across the fucker standing behind him when he fell back, but I was already pressing my attack, and my left hand's claws flicked right into his face. He screamed as I felt both of his eyeballs pop against my fingers, but the sound of his agony wasn't as loud as my roar.

I brought my right hand's claws into the eyeless one's neck and tore most of the flesh away with a tidal wave of blood. Then I tossed the twitching corpse into the last two of the ugly assholes. They tried to scurry away from me, but it was too late, and their buddy's dying body tangled up with them.

I tossed the one with half a skull over the guardrail and then pounced on the remaining two. One of them tried to claw at me, and I was a bit too slow to move my arm out of the way. His talons sliced through the fur on my forearm with surprising ease, but my own claws punctured his face as if his bones were made out of flimsy cardboard. He died with a terrified scream, and I turned to face the final asshole

Then I noticed that my arm wasn't healing.

The cut on it wasn't deep, but it throbbed and hurt like it was infected. I didn't have much time to think about it, since the last monster grabbed onto

my right arm and tried to sink his teeth into my bicep. I brought the palm of my left hand down on his nose before he could bite though, and his skull bounced backward on his neck like a child's paddle ball toy. I punched him again when his face came back around, but then I brought my claws across his wrists cutting his hands off his arms. Blood sprayed across both of us, and the monster shrieked with agony, but I kneed him in the stomach causing him to topple over the guardrail.

"That was easier than I expected," I growled as I lifted up the corpse of the one I'd tossed. I chucked him into the abyss and then checked on my arm. It was still bleeding, and a cold realization spread through my stomach.

I couldn't heal from their claw attacks.

I turned to check on Persephone. The dark angel seemed uninjured, but her red eyes were wide open, and she pointed behind me.

I turned around to see some twenty more of the same fuckers I'd just killed pour out of the far door like angry ants.

"Shit, I spoke too soon," I said as the creatures howled and began to run toward me.

"Get back in the room!" I yelled at Persephone as I turned back around to face her. Eight of these ugly bastards hadn't been much of a problem, but I didn't think I could handle twenty more and also protect Persephone. One of them would probably be able to push through me, and I'd risk her getting hurt. The lab room had a door, and I'd be able to close it. Of course, we'd be stuck in there, but I couldn't think of another option right now.

Persephone was running, but she was moving at a normal human's speed, so I scooped her up in my arms and sprinted the rest of the way across the bridge. We hit the entrance to the lab just as the group of creatures was at the halfway point of the bridge, so I figured I had enough time to close the door on them.

Then I remembered that the door was crazy heavy.

"Help me push!" I roared at Persephone as I pushed on the massive hunk of metal. It started to swing closed, but even though it felt like I was pushing as hard as I could, the thing was barely creeping along on its hinges. It didn't make a lot of sense since I was much stronger in this weretiger form than in my human form, but I didn't have time to ponder the reasons why the

door wasn't cooperating. This shit had to get closed, or those monsters were going to tear us to pieces.

"Push!" I yelled again as my bare feet braced and pushed against the metal floor. My feet and legs still looked human, but they were covered in thick tiger-fur, and my nails were now long retractable claws that scratched against the metal as I tried to get as much leverage as I could against the door.

I could hear the ugly creatures getting closer, but even with all of the effort I was putting into closing the door, it still looked like the door was only halfway closed.

"Go, go, go!" I didn't think Persephone's strength mattered much, but I kept pushing against the door with the hope that it would close before the monsters reached us.

It sounded like they were less than fifty meters away. My legs were screaming, my back was made of corded steel, and my arms were trembling, but then the door finally closed, and I spun the circle handle before the fuckers on the other side could push it back open.

I collapsed against the door and let out a growl of relief. I imagined there was a way to get back inside since Yu made it in here, but I hadn't seen any sort of datapad or handle on the door's bridge side.

It looked like we were stuck in here, but at least we were alive. It also looked like my arm had finally healed, and I wondered if they had some sort of poison on their claws.

It would be best for me to avoid getting cut again.

"There might be another way out or in," I said to Persephone as I stepped away from the door and gestured for her to follow me.

The room was about thirty meters wide by twenty-five long, with the tube in the middle and a perimeter of terminal stations lining the wall. I had focused on the door when I first emerged from my watery prison, and I realized that I hadn't even bothered to look on the opposite side of the room.

Persephone didn't speak as she followed me back toward the tube, but I was okay with the silence for now. I needed to listen for the creatures on the other side of the door, or for anything else that might give me a clue about how to escape this room.

I held her hand when we stepped over an array of ribbed vacuum looking-pipes, and then we walked around to the back side of the room. There were more terminals here, but I didn't see anything that looked like it could be a second exit.

Except for the pipes.

"Are these carrying water?" I asked as we moved over to the spot at the foot of the wall where the array of them seemed to come together. Individually, each tube was only about a quarter of a meter in diameter, but there were four of them joining the wall at the same place, and they all connected with a plastic grommet.

"Eye yah," Persephone said, but those words could have meant yes or no. I couldn't really understand her unless she tried to speak my language, but even that was confusing.

"I don't see any other option," I said as I gestured around the room. "I'm thinking that I can yank these pipes out, and then we'll look at the space and see if we can crawl through." The idea sounded stupid as I said it, but I didn't think we had much choice. I needed to find my friends and punch the fuck out of President Yu.

"Maaabaaaaeee," Persephone said as she nodded.

"Maybe?" I asked, and then she nodded vigorously.

"Okay," I said, "I'm getting better at this. Stand back, and I'll pull this one out. Hopefully it isn't filled with something toxic, or we'll have a very short stay in this room."

My furry hands closed around the nearest rigged tube, and I tried to lift it from the ground. It was heavier than I expected, so I guessed that it was filled with water. I moved to the next tube, and it felt significantly lighter. The next tube was heavy again, but the fourth was light.

"I'm going to guess that this is an air and water circulation system," I said. "Air comes in through one tube and then exits back through it. Same with the water." I turned to look at where the pipes went, and I saw the ones I thought were water connected to the ground some two meters from the tube, and the ones I thought were air connected to the far wall. However, from that wall another narrower set of pipes came out and connected to the lid which used to rest on top of my tube.

“I’ll try this one,” I said as I yanked on one of the pipes that I thought was connected to the air system.

I half hoped that the tube would come out easily, but I soon found myself straining against the grommet where the tube connected. My bare feet couldn’t get good traction on the smooth metal floor, and I kept sliding in place as I tried to get some leverage.

I grunted, strained, and tried to dig my toe claws into the metal. Finally, the tube popped away from the wall with an angry hiss, and a blast of cold air slammed into Persephone and me.

“Let’s take a look,” I said as I moved back to the hole in the wall. There was a circular tunnel about as wide as the pipe I had removed, and I guessed from the push of air that it was the fresh import to this room.

In my human form, I could have squeezed my shoulders into the opening and wiggled inside. It would have been a tight fit, and all sorts of claustrophobic, but it could have worked. My tiger-man shape was much too broad, and Persephone’s wings would not be able to fit, even if she folded them close to her body.

After another minute of effort, I pulled out the second air duct. It was the same story with this one. Neither one of us would be able to fit inside.

“Daaar,” Persephone said, and I turned to follow her pointed finger. I hadn’t paid attention to the massive vault door when I was trying to yank out the air ducts, but now I could hear frantic pounding coming from the thick metal.

“I’m hoping they won’t find a way through that,” I said as I looked again at the water pipes. They were actually a bit larger than the air ones, but I wasn’t too encouraged by the difference in size. I was more worried that I would pull one pipe out and then flood the room, but we couldn’t stay in this room forever. Eventually Yu would come back to open the door, and all those fucks would get inside.

I picked one of the two remaining pipes and lifted it off the floor with a savage grunt. Then I yanked on it like I was playing tug of war with a giant and prayed that the massive pipe would yank free of the wall easier than the air ones.

It didn’t, and I had to yank, pull, tug, and roar for a good two minutes

before I began to feel the pipe start to pull free of its housing.

Once I felt the first few snaps of something breaking, it became much easier to pull. The water also started to pour over the ground, but I was able to yank the pipe free before any of it got to my bare feet.

I had yanked out the export pipe, and water was pouring out of the end that I was holding. The screens on the computer terminals all turned off at the same time, and I guessed it was probably some sort of emergency cut off alarm attached to the water valve to prevent people from being electrocuted. I twisted my neck around to see that my prison was draining of water, and I guessed it would empty in the next ten minutes.

I moved across the wet floor and peered into the hole. The pipe past the junction was about a meter and a half in diameter, but it seemed to drop down at a steep angle. I had no idea where the water ended up, but it looked like both Persephone and I would be able to fit in there.

“What do you think?” I asked the red-eyed woman as I gestured to the hole.

“Eye yah,” she answered with a deliberate nod.

“Alright, ummm, can you fold your wings in closer so you can fit?” I spared a glance back at the door and wondered if the pounding sound was getting louder, or if it was just my imagination.

Persephone nodded and pulled her black feathered wings tight against her back. I gestured for her to step toward me, and she gingerly tiptoed through the water on the floor. As she walked toward the tunnel, I glanced back between the hole, water, and the span of her shoulders with her wings tucked in.

“I think we’ll both fit like this,” I said as I lifted my leg to stick in the hole. Sure enough, the sides were slick with water still, and I thought the slope was good enough to let us crawl down without much issue.

Then there was a horrific banging sound from the vault door, and both Persephone and I turned to see a dent form in the metal.

“That’s not good,” I said as another dent formed in the door. It almost sounded like there was something big on the other side, and it carried a massive axe it was slamming into the door.

“Naaaoo,” Persephone shook her head.

“Change of plans,” I said. “We are sliding down, and we are going to hope there isn’t a violent end to this tunnel.”

I pushed out of the hole, ran over to the pipe that was still spraying out water from my draining prison, and then dragged it back over to the place where it used to be connected. As soon as I got it close, I gestured for Persephone to sit in the tunnel by patting the lip of the entrance. She did so, and I got the pipe with the flow of water as close as I could before I joined her.

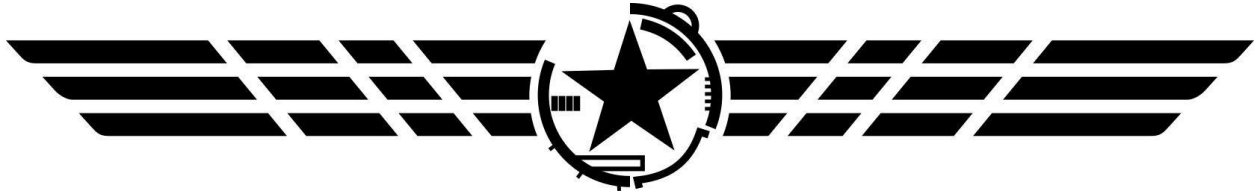
“It will hook on this broken part,” I said as I tried to maneuver the pipe so that it hung on the lip I had just broken. I was able to get it resting there, but about a quarter of the water spilled out onto the floor.

For half a moment, I worried about the water touching some electrical sockets from the terminals and killing us, but I knew we needed the water to assist us in our slip down the tunnel, and I was more worried about the horde of ugly assholes that had somehow managed to dent the massive door.

“Here we go,” I said as I wiggled farther down into the tunnel. It was a tight fight with Persephone, but I didn’t have any other ideas.

I wrapped my arms around her wings, pulled her face into the fur of my chest, and then kicked us free of the ledge.

Then we were swallowed by a wet darkness.



Chapter 7

We didn't slide down quickly at first, but as the water coming from the export pipe got under us, we began to slide downward at an increased speed. My world went pitch black, and I felt my stomach drop when I realized that I wasn't going to be able to see when something was coming below us.

"Yaaaa," Persephone said, but I couldn't tell if her word meant she was terrified of the darkness, our speed, or the fact that we had no idea where we were going. Maybe it was all three.

The pipe turned direction a bit, and the back of my head slammed into the side. A growl escaped my chest, but I wasn't really hurt. I was more concerned about Persephone getting injured, so I moved my massive hands up from around her wings so that I could cover the back part of her skull.

It felt like our speed was increasing, but I had no way of knowing how fast we were really going because it was pitch black.

My shoulders slammed into the side of the pipe painfully, but none of my bones broke. I tried to pull Persephone to me as closely as I could, but my elbow slammed into the wall right in the joint with enough force to cause my arm to go numb.

For half a moment, the winged woman and I bounced between the sides of the tube like a pinball, but my broad shoulders managed to catch all the impacts. The ride smoothed out for a good half a minute, and I almost relaxed, but then we shifted to the right suddenly, and the side of my head whacked against the pipe again. My vision went white, then black, and I wondered if I had fallen unconscious. I still felt Persephone in my arms and

felt her face pressed into my chest, so I knew I was still awake.

Suddenly, there was light around us. We were abruptly weightless, and I didn't feel the pressure of the walls strangling us. I saw the water below us and took a deep breath before Persephone and I plummeted into what looked like another tank of water.

I let go of the winged woman as soon as we hit the water, but I held her hand to make sure that she could swim up to the surface. We both gasped for breath when we kicked back up to the top, and I spun my head around to try to figure out where we were.

We had landed in what looked, and smelled, like a water treatment plant. There were some thirty massive tanks of water with pipes leading into them from either the ceilings or the walls. Thankfully, the pool Persephone and I had landed in was filled with clean looking water. Most of the others reeked of sewage.

Walkways lined the sides of the tub, so I tugged on my friend's hand, and we swam toward the edge. I climbed out of the water first, pulled the alabaster-skinned woman out, and then shook the water off my fur. I had never actually seen myself naked in my tiger-man shape before, and I spared a glance down my torso after I finished my shake. I looked pretty much human in shape, but with orange and white fur striped in black. The fur wasn't that long, and I could still see the definition of my thick muscles and veins under the hair.

"Eye yah," Persephone said as her fingers scratched my arm soothingly. I turned my eyes to meet hers, and she gave me a slight smile as she tugged on my arm.

"Right. We need to get out of here."

I moved away from our landing tub and walked with her to the end of the catwalk. The room we were in seemed impossibly large, and the tanks of liquid seemed to stretch for a kilometer in every direction. Our tank was near the edge of the arrangement, so we only had to pass three of the other pools before we reached the end.

Some of the massive containers smelled as if they were filled with blood.

I ignored the smell and tried to convince myself that this was a dream.

The thing was when I normally had a dream, just thinking it was a dream ended my dream. I was doing a lot of that right now, but I wasn't waking up. The circumstances combined with the sensations I was experiencing made me think this was real.

How was I here though? Where were my friends? Why was I with Persephone?

"Eye yah?" the beautiful angel asked as she turned to me. The expression on her face made me wonder if she could read my mind like Eve, but I decided not to ask her.

We had more important shit to worry about right now.

There wasn't a ladder or set of stairs at the end of the catwalk. The end was a guardrail and a drop some three meters to the metal ground. Below the catwalk was a wide open area of bare tile. There were small clusters of computer terminals grouped together every half dozen tubes. I didn't see anyone around, but I did see a door some two hundred meters to my right.

"I'll jump down," I said as I scooped Persephone up in my arms. She let out a small gasp of surprise when I picked her up, and her fingers pinched my shoulder when I leapt off the catwalk.

My legs took the landing easily, and I set the winged woman down so that we could walk toward the door. I knew we needed to get out of here, and we needed to find my friends, and I needed to punch Yu's face in, but it had been difficult to let Persephone out of my arms. Her touch comforted me, and I felt like a part of me was gone when she wasn't touching me.

We walked past our first cluster of computer terminals, and I turned my head to study their screens. They all showed the same image: two red dots with a trio of smaller white dots perfectly placed between them. The red dots looked like eyes, and they seemed to follow us as we walked.

"It looks familiar," I said to Persephone as I walked past the terminals.

"Yahhhh," she nodded and then pointed to her chest.

"Did you show it to me once?"

"Yaaahhhh," she said with a bit of a smile.

"Is that where these SAVO fuckers live?" I asked as the memories of the holographic map on the bridge returned to me.

“Taaayyy Cooommaa,” she said, but it looked like it was hard for her mouth to form the words she needed to speak to me.

“They come?” I asked.

“Yahh!” She nodded.

“Well, I fucking knew that.” I chuckled. “When they get here. I’m going to tear their throats out with my teeth.”

My answer didn’t seem to please the beautiful platinum haired woman, and she shook her head.

“I tried bullets, but they didn’t seem to work that well. Is there another weapon I can use against them?”

Persephone didn’t reply, but we reached the door before I could press her, and I decided that I’d worry about trying to puzzle out an answer from her after we’d found my other women.

The door before us was normal sized and had a latch handle. It was made of metal, and I pushed my tiger-ear against it so that I could listen. I didn’t hear anything, so I gestured for Persephone to stand aside so that I could open it slowly. Beyond was a hallway, and I leaned my head out to examine the passage.

The corridor was made of a lighter colored white metal somewhat like aluminum only with more of a brushed finish. The lights on the ceiling were strange though, they almost looked like they were old style fire lanterns that might hold oil or candles. They were box shape and the glass on the four sides was fogged over as if they were ancient.

There was a door on the right side of the hallway some ten meters down, another opposite it on the left side, and then a third door at the end of the hallway some thirty meters away. I didn’t see any enemies, so I entered the hallway and gestured for Persephone to close the door behind her.

I moved to the right door that was closest to us and opened it after I listened. The room was dark, but I found a light switch on the inside wall and flicked it on. This looked like office space and was filled with some twenty terminals. None of the screens were on, but that was fine with me. I kind of didn’t want to see another image of the malevolent red planets.

I closed the door and moved to the room on the opposite side of the

hallway. The handle to the door was locked, but I pushed down on the metal lever, growled, and felt the lock snap under my might. Then I pushed the door open and let out a long purr of pleasure.

This looked like an armory.

Suits of sleek black riot armor lined the wall on my right, shields adorned the wall I faced, and various bludgeoning clubs lined the wall on my left. I would have preferred an assortment of firearms, but I'd take what I could get at this point.

I pulled the door closed behind us as we moved to look over the armor. They were arranged in size, so I just picked the largest one hanging on the wall. The suits were a polished black, with light arrays built into the seams. The pieces of the armor were attached to a black mesh suit made out of a durable fabric. The outfit looked like it was still too small for me, but I crammed my legs into the pants anyway and sighed in relief when it didn't tear.

Persephone helped me attach the part on the back of my shoulders, and then she gestured to a cabinet under the shield wall. The drawers there held matching black boots and socks, metal gloves, and helmets. I took the largest pair of boots, socks, and gloves I could find, but I didn't bother with the helmets since I already knew that none of them would fit me.

The socks and boots were a little tight, but it wasn't uncomfortable. The gloves were also too small, but I extended my claws to tear through the finger ends. This gave me a bit more room, and I was able to wiggle my hands into them.

"You probably can't wear any of that armor," I said to Persephone as I gestured to the wall. Her body was still wet from our swim, and my eyes focused on the lines of liquid dripping down the perfect skin of her mostly bare ass. She had an absolutely flawless body, and I felt a surge of desire burn through my body.

"Naoooo," the woman said as she gestured to her wings. She caught me checking out her ass, but I just purred at her instead of apologizing.

The glow in her eyes convinced me she was more than happy that I appreciated her body.

"Alright," I said as I shook my head free of lust and turned to the

weapons wall. It held an array of straight batons, tonfa style batons, and stun batons. I grabbed a pair of the largest straight batons on the wall and then holstered them on my belt before I grabbed a tonfa one for Persephone.

“Hold it like this,” I instructed her as I grabbed on the side handle. “Then punch like this.” I made a jabbing motion with my right hand and then tapped on the end of the baton that extended to the end of my fist. “The idea is that the punch will slam the point of the baton into someone and crush their skull, collar bone, or ribs.” I handed her the weapon, and she held it as I had shown her.

I didn’t know if we’d come against someone with a gun or just more of those ugly fanged humanoids, but I figured a massive riot shield would help in either situation. I grabbed one from the wall, strapped it to my left arm, and then gestured for Persephone to follow me back out of the armory.

I felt a little more confident as I stepped into the hallway. Wearing armor was always better than being naked and having some sort of weapon was always better than being defenseless. Sure, my claws, fists, and feet could murder with ease, but the batons would give my attacks more range, and the shield would help protect Persephone.

We moved toward the end of the hallway and I listened at the metal door. I didn’t hear anything on the other side, so I tried the handle and found it unlocked. I cracked it open to see another long hallway, but this one was dimly lit, and hanging paintings covered the walls. I didn’t see any doors on the sides of the corridor, but the pathway seemed to stretch on forever into darkness.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” I muttered under my breath as I pulled the door all the way open and slid through. Persephone came behind me, and we advanced down the hallway for a few meters before I realized what the paintings depicted.

They were of the SAVO.

One painting showed a group of three vampires tearing apart a beautiful naked woman with their teeth while her mouth opened in a silent scream. Another painting showed an endless field of humans slitting their own throats with knives while a lone SAVO gestured from a hilltop. Another image showed a group of female vampires tearing the skin off a man while he was chained to a table. Each painting we passed was more grisly than the last,

but I found it hard to turn my eyes away from each of them.

“Huh,” I said as my eyes focused on one that seemed to pop out from the carnage. It showed a single SAVO sitting on a throne with twenty of the monkey looking fanged creatures crouched beneath her. The vampire’s eyes were opened wide, and she beckoned at me with a finger as she smiled. She wore a tight black dress, and her face looked a bit familiar to me.

“Daaaah,” Persephone said as she shook her head.

“You know her?” I asked with some confusion, but the winged woman didn’t answer she just touched the armor at my shoulder and pointed in the direction we were heading.

We passed more paintings, and some of them started to show the bipedal tiger-men that I saw in the video from Parnarta. The first scenes showed them fighting the SAVO, but then later scenes showed them wearing collars and slaughtering humans.

Later paintings showed them not wearing collars and kneeling before the vampires as if they were gods.

We finally reached another door, and I paused so that I could listen on the other side. I didn’t hear anything, so I pushed it open slowly. The room beyond looked like a large lobby. There was a wide stairway on the far left, a row of tinted glass exit doors some one-hundred meters ahead, and a long receiving desk of black stone on the right. The place looked empty, but my hackles rose as I tensed, and I tried to twist my head around the doorway so that I could see up the gray marble stairs. I couldn’t quite see the top from my angle, so I knew I’d have to walk out into the open.

At least I had found what looked like an exit. Now I just needed to find my friends and President Yu.

“Let’s go look at the desk,” I said as I slid out of the door. I looked up the stairs as I walked, but the mezzanine there was empty of life, so I focused my attention on the table.

I leapt over the stone desk and looked for some sort of terminal feed that would show the layout of the building. Surprisingly, there wasn’t anything behind the desk. There were no chairs, no terminal controls or screens, and no evidence that anyone had ever used the desk.

“Alright,” I said to Persephone. “Up the stairs, we aren’t going to leave

here until--”

A shriek cut off my sentence, and I glanced around the lobby with surprise. The sound almost didn't sound human because it was so loud and high pitched, but I could have sworn whatever did scream had said “die.”

Persephone moved to stand behind me, and her red eyes were turned toward the long row of doors exiting the building.

“Up the stairs,” I said as I saw shadows begin to form on the glass parts of the doors.

We ran across the marble floor toward the stairs, but the doors burst open before we could start to climb them. An outpouring of those ugly fanged monsters ran into the lobby, and I cursed under my breath as I guessed their number to be over thirty.

“Up! Up! Up!” I shouted to Persephone as we reached the stairs. The angel opened her black wings as soon as her barefoot touched the first step, but it didn't look like she could fly. Instead, she beat her wings frantically as she sprinted up the stairs.

I sprinted up behind her but also risked a glance down behind me. The swarm of monsters was a quarter of the way through the lobby now, and they were moving fast, but I knew that I'd reach the top of the stairs before them. I just prayed there would be a hallway or other doorway I could use to funnel them so I could fight without being surrounded.

As soon as I made it to the top of the stairs, I cursed my luck. I could only see an arrangement of gray couches, large pots filled with fake trees, and black painted coffee tables. At the far side of the level, I saw a change in lighting that made me think there was a hallway, but I didn't think we'd be able to make it there before the assholes chasing us caught up, and if it wasn't a hallway, we'd be trapped.

“I'll hold them here!” I yelled to Persephone as I dropped my riot shield. “Check to see if that light around the far corner is a hallway!”

She took a flying leap into the air and floated away from me without a word, and I sprinted to the closest couch. It was probably two meters long, and I hooked my fingers under it as I squatted.

The couch was a bit heavier than I expected, but I was still able to snatch it up above my head with a quick jerk of my glutes, legs, and arms. As

soon as I had my arms locked, and I was sure it was stable, I turned back around and walked as fast as I could back to the stairs.

“Fuck off!” I shouted as I tossed the large piece of furniture down on top of the swarm of fanged demons.

The monsters were about halfway up the stairs, and the couch caught the front five of them right in the chest. They tumbled backward with the impact, and all but three of the fanged humanoid monsters were pushed back down to the bottom of the stairs in a heap of shiny gray limbs. The three that had escaped the couch continued their run up the stairs, but I had enough time to grab my shield and yank out one of the batons from my belt before they got to me.

I kicked my right foot out to the closest when he was a few steps below. The sole of my big boot caught him right in the face, and his head tilted backward like a tipping tree. He choked out a scream and then tumbled back down the stairs before he landed on top of the couch.

The second and third assholes reached me at the same time. The left one leapt at me like a jumping spider, but I raised my riot shield and caught him as he descended. He wrapped his arms around the shield and tried to angle his face around so that he could bite me, but I had to ignore him for a few moments so that I could deal with the fucker on my right, who tried to swipe at me with his claws.

I slammed down my baton as my attacker pulled back his arm. He screeched as bone broke, but my attack hadn't really stopped him from continuing his assault. The fucker slammed into my armored body like a wet sack of ice, and I had to bring my baton up and push it into his mouth so that he couldn't bite my neck.

Fuck. This wasn't good. If their claws kept me from healing fast, I was sure their teeth would have the same effect.

The fucker on my left dragged the claws of his right hand across my armor, but his talons couldn't cut through the breastplate. His attack moved his right hand to the left side of his body, so I let go of the baton I'd wedged in his maw, grabbed his right wrist, and then pulled on his arm while I stepped behind his hip with my right leg. My movements twisted him off balance, and I shuffled a few steps to the side and hip checked him. He tumbled away from me and rolled down the stairs like an angry marble.

I'd been holding the shield up in my left hand to keep the fucker away from my face, but I dropped it suddenly and then hammerfisted over the edge of it with my right hand. The fleshy part of my fist caught the fucker right on the top of the skull, and he dropped off the shield. My attack had surprised him more than actually hurt him, but I quickly brought my shield up and then slammed the edge of it down into his face. It split open like a rotten watermelon, and dark red blood sprayed across the gray marble floor.

"Eye yah!" I heard Persephone yell from the opposite side of the level. I spared a glance over to her while I pulled out my second baton and saw her gesture toward the light.

"Be there in a second!" I shouted back as I raised my shield to block a swipe from another fanged bat-man monster. I had timed my movement perfectly, and his fist bounced off my shield in a way that spun him around. I kicked out with my boot and caught him in the bare ass. My attack snapped his spine, and he tumbled down into the mass of creatures running up the stairs.

I shuffled backward towards Persephone's location as two more of them came at me. The shield helped me block their first two clawed slashes, but these two were a bit faster than the ones I fought so far, and I had to keep my shield up for a few more moments so that I could block their next four attacks. They screamed when each of their slashes smacked into my shield, but then I made a quick sideways strike with my baton. My hit connected with the jaw of the one on the right, and he gurgled as he choked on his fangs.

The remaining monster hissed as his friend died, but I was now able to pivot around him a bit more. His claws scraped frantically against my shield, but my baton swung out and broke his knee. He screamed as he tumbled to the ground, and my boot flattened his skull with a squishy explosion of brains and teeth.

The rest of the bunch had made it up the stairs, so I swung my head around and looked at where Persephone was. She was gesturing for me to run toward her. So I sprinted across the mezzanine floor as fast as I could.

The lit area was a two-meter wide hallway, but there was no doorway I could close. I saw a door up ahead on the left side some fifty meters, but I didn't think we would make it there before the creatures caught up with us.

I'd have to fight them all here.

"Stand behind me," I ordered Persephone, and she moved to do as I asked.

The first wave of fuckers came around the corner hot, and I managed to destroy the skulls of two of them before I needed to raise my shield and block. For ten or fifteen seconds I lost track of the number of claws scratching at my face, skulls I bludgeoned, and teeth that almost sank into my throat.

Three of the monsters grabbed onto my shield, and I tried to wrestle it away from them while I beat off another monster who was trying to flank me. My baton broke his shoulder before he could work his way around me, but instead of falling back, the asshole threw himself at my feet and tried to tangle my legs. I stomped down and smashed his skull, but then the three fuckers holding onto my shield heaved away from me, and I realized they were going to drag me into the crowd if I didn't let go.

I yanked my arm from the shield and then kicked it into the three monsters. This pushed them into the crowd of assholes and knocked the group away from me. I thought about falling back a bit, but I was starting to thin their numbers, so I pressed the attack and flattened the skulls of two of them before the group could organize itself again.

They surged toward me, and I fought against them with a combination of club strikes and scratches with my left hand's claws. A couple of them almost scratched my face, and one of them landed a solid punch in my jaw, but every time my left hand shot out, a spray of their blood decorated the walls, and every time I swung the baton in my right hand, bones or skulls broke.

They couldn't get around me because the hallway was a bit too narrow, but one actually got lucky and darted to my left side while my baton was tangled up. I worried that he would go for Persephone, but the winged woman punched forward with her baton just as I had instructed her, and she cracked him upside the skull with the point a moment after I let go of my baton so I could try to protect her.

Persephone's attack seemed to break the spirits of our attackers, and I managed to kill the remaining four of them with my claws. The hallway and open space of the mezzanine were covered with ugly bodies, a pool of blood,

and countless brain splatters. My chest was heaving with painful gasps for air as I tried to catch my breath, but the pain faded after a trio of inhales.

I'd let go of my baton so that I could try to defend Persephone, but I didn't really see it on the floor. I guessed it was hiding under a body or submerged in the pool of blood, so I didn't care to look for it. I just grabbed my shield, turned to the platinum-haired woman, and gave her a smile.

"You alright?" I asked, but she answered me by running her fingers across the fur on my cheek and giving me an unmistakable look of adoration.

"Let's see what's behind that door," I said as I gestured away from the carnage.

The hallway continued past the first door another twenty meters before making a sharp left, but I tried the handle on the door first and found it unlocked. Whatever was on the other side of this had already heard the battle in the hallway, so I didn't really care about listening before I opened it. I just yanked it back and stepped inside.

The room was surprisingly large, and it was filled with an uncountable amount of glass tubes that looked similar to the ones I was just imprisoned in.

And there were people inside of these glass tubes.

They floated naked in the water with their eyes closed and their arms crossed over their chests. Unlike me, none of these people had any sort of breathing mask on. They were just floating in the water almost as if they were dead.

"Maybe they are dead," I whispered to Persephone as we entered the room. Each of the glass tubes had a cluster of computer terminals at the base, but my Marine brain couldn't make any sense of the endless stream of red numbers pouring down the screens.

"He looks familiar," I said as I looked up at the man floating in the tube. He was tall, with blonde hair and hawkish features. I searched my memory and stumbled onto his name as I thought about my visit to Uraniel.

"He looks like Captain Renalta, from the Lith Dae Navy," I explained to Persephone. "Captain Renalta tried to backstab us when we were working on the drones." I looked to the tube next to the man and saw the naked form of Commander Tunar-Roz floating there.

“This is weird,” I said as I turned to examine each of them. Hadn’t Eve killed Tunar in the government building? Didn’t we destroy Renalta’s ship? Neither of them should be here.

I had to be dreaming this, but this felt more real than a dream. If this was a dream, I should have woken up by now.

“Naooo eeellll,” Persephone said as she reached up to touch my furry face. “Miiinnneeeeadd.”

“Not real? It’s in my mind?” I asked as her accent suddenly made sense to me.

“Eye yah!” She nodded.

“That’s a dream though. Am I dreaming?”

“Fiiaaagghhttt Miiinnneeeeadd.” Her fingers reached up my face and then tapped in my skull between my eyes.

“They are attacking me? I’m fighting in my mind?”

“Eye yah!” Persephone’s smile warmed my body and almost made me forget about the hundreds of floating bodies next to me.

“So I’m dreaming, but not really. They are attacking me in my sleep, and you are here because... you are protecting me?” I searched her red eyes, and she nodded.

“Looovvvveee oohhh.” Her fingers came down to touch my tiger-nose, and the adoration was clear on her face.

“I love you too,” I replied. “Let’s find the fucker that is attacking me, kill them, and get back to our friends.”

I gestured for the winged woman to follow me, and we walked through the endless rows of tubes with floating bodies. Some of the faces I saw in the tubes were familiar, some were not, but I figured that if this was a strange form of my dream, these were probably all people I had once encountered. Brains were supposed to be amazing super computers, and I wouldn’t have been surprised to know it tracked every face I’d ever seen, even though I couldn’t place a name next to them.

As we walked, I started to remember the other strange dreams I experienced with Persephone. A lot of them had the woman that somewhat looked like Eve along with the large fang-toothed panthers. I hadn’t seen any

of the giant cats yet, and I hoped I would be able to free myself from this strange dream-attack without having to fight anymore.

Thoughts of Eve pulled me from my recollections, and I forced myself to focus on the task at hand. If this was a dream, it meant that my friends weren't really in danger. I needed to focus on getting out of here myself so I could return to my room on the starship. I tried to think about how I had escaped from all the other dreams, but I couldn't recall the exact details.

It probably involved me killing someone.

My feet stopped moving on their own, and I stared up to the tube in front of me. The woman inside had skin the same alabaster white color as Persephone, but her hair was long and floated in the water like a black ink stain. I knew this was a dream, or at least, I wanted to think this was a dream, but the sight of Eve floating motionless in the water with her eyes closed made every cell in my body growl.

"We have to get her out," I said I stepped toward the terminals around the base of her tube. The red numbers on the screens still didn't make any sense, but I didn't care. My woman was trapped inside of this prison, and I was going to break her out.

"Naaaooo reeeeelll," Persephone said, and I turned to face her. She was pointed up at Eve and shaking her head sadly.

"She's not real?" I asked, and then the winged woman nodded.

"So it doesn't matter if I save her?" I asked as I tried to wrap my mind around the circumstances of this dream battle.

"Maaa baaaaeeriee." I couldn't understand her facial expression, but it sounded like she just said "maybe." I didn't know exactly what that meant, but if this was my dream, I wasn't going to let my lover stay a prisoner in a floating tube of water.

I stepped to the side of the tube and knocked on the glass. As soon as my knuckles tapped, I realized the tube next to Eve held Zea's body. She was also naked and had her eyes closed. Her shortcut blonde hair floated a bit above her skull, but I could see that her terminal port was no longer on the side of her head.

Next to Zea's tank was one holding Madalena. Beside hers were Paula and Kasta's. Juliette's long red hair hovered near the top of another, and I

saw the fine strands of Sivaha's hair floating in her own tube on the other side of Eve.

"Damn it!" I shouted as I knocked on Eve's glass again. "Wake up! I need to get you all out of here!"

Eve didn't move when I pounded on her glass, and I looked to see if there was a way I could climb up the sides of the glass tube. The surface looked too slick, so I returned to the area of the floor where the terminals were and grabbed onto the side of it. The terminals were connected to the ground with bolts and wires, but I managed to yank it free with a few seconds of grunting.

Then I lifted it over my head and tossed it at the bottom corner of Eve's tube.

The terminal made a horrific sound when it smashed into the tube, and the side of the glass cracked. Eve's eyes fluttered open, and the glowing red orbs focused on me.

"I'm going to get you--" I started to say as I moved to pick up the terminal, but I stopped speaking when I noticed that all the other floating bodies surrounded us had also opened their eyes.

Their glowing red eyes.

Eve's mouth opened to show her fangs, and Zea mirrored her movement. I turned around to see that Madalena also had red eyes and vampire fangs, it looked like they were all snarling at me.

Fuck, maybe this hadn't been such a good idea.



Chapter 8

Angry-Eve swam down toward the crack I'd made in the glass and started to thrash against it. A bit of the liquid inside of the tank was starting to leak out of the small crack, and an inhale made me realize that the stuff wasn't water. It smelled like decay mixed with fresh coppery blood.

"Uhh, Persephone, I think we should get the fuck out of here," I said as I grabbed the winged woman's hand. Every single person inside of every single tube seemed to be awake right now, and they were thrashing against their glass tubes like piranhas that hadn't eaten in a week.

The sound of breaking glass came from the distance. I couldn't really see which tube had broken open, but I heard liquid spray onto the floor, and I knew one of these angry dead monsters was about to escape.

And while they looked like the people I knew and loved, they were just SAVO assholes.

"Hurry," I said to Persephone, and we ran back toward the way I thought that we had come from.

As we ran, I heard more glass shattering. It sounded like it was coming from up ahead of us, so I pulled on the platinum woman's hand and then we darted to the left. Then I saw a tube shatter some fifty meters ahead of us, and I turned us to the right so that we were running in the original direction I thought led back to the door.

Looks like I didn't need to worry about finding my women anymore. I just needed to escape this dream somehow.

We emerged from the rows of tubes and ran toward the door. The

sound of shattering glass sounded like a constant river roar of noise behind us, and I risked a glance over my shoulder. Most of the tubes were broken, and the creatures inside were trying to climb out. Some were cutting themselves on shards of glass as they tried to exit, and blood mixed in with the toxic smelling liquid.

We made it to the door and exited out into the hallway. The corpses of the creatures I had killed earlier were still there, and I led Persephone over them so that we could run back into the lobby.

We skidded to a stop when we reached the stairs because I saw more shadows on the other side of the exit door. I spun my head around and tried to figure out where to go. I hadn't explored the rest of the hallway past the massive room with the tubes, but going in that direction seemed like suicide. We couldn't really go down the stairs and try to exit, and we couldn't go down the stairs and turn toward the vats of sewage because that was a dead end.

I turned around the mezzanine floor and fixed my eyes on the windows. They were a good three meters high, tinted, and looked to be wide enough for both Persephone and I to fit through. We were probably six meters off the ground, but I could jump down that far without taking any damage. Part of me didn't want to run free of the building for fear it would be easier for us to be surrounded, but it was also pretty damn clear that everything inside of this place wanted to kill us.

The doors beneath us burst open, and another wave of the bat-human monsters ran inside.

"This way," I told Persephone as I ran to a coffee table, grabbed it by the leg, and tossed it across the lobby toward the wall of dark tinted windows. The glass broke with an angry sound, and I used my shield to bat aside some of the sharp fragments before I poked my head outside.

A massive white moon hung in the sky, but what illumination there was seemed to bleed down with a sick pallor. There was grass below us, and the building seemed to be located in a slight valley or rolling hills dotted with pine trees. We were definitely in a wilderness, but in the distance, I could see a starship landing, and I guessed that there must have been an airport some several kilometers away.

There were a few of the fanged creatures looking up at us from below,

but I only counted eight, and at least thirty had come through the door below. If we jumped down here, they would have to run back down and come out again. It would only buy us a few minutes, but the strategy was probably better than staying up here and dealing with them along with the creatures in the tubes that looked like people I once knew.

“We are jumping,” I told Persephone as I chucked my shield down at the grass below us. My throw was good, and my riot shield broke the face of one of the monsters when it landed.

Persephone didn’t protest when I wrapped my big hand around her narrow waist, but she did let out a slight gasp when I stepped out the window and jumped down. Her wings unfolded as we dropped, and I was a bit surprised to find our angle of descent adjust so that we glided down right toward the edge of the fanged fuckers.

I stomped the skull of one with my right boot and then broke the face of another with my left fist as we landed. That movement killed two of the group, and I dashed ahead so I wouldn’t get jumped on by rest of the small mob. As soon as I made it a few dozen meters, I let go of Persephone so that I could turn around and face the others.

One came at me low, so I toe kicked his temple, and his skull broke free of his neck like a spinning football.

Another jumped toward Persephone, but I shuffled to my right and uppercutted him right in the groin as he passed over me. There was a painful sounding crunch when my fist connected. The creature screamed in agony, dropped like a sack of bricks, and a quick stomp from my boot ended his life.

Three of the four came at me at once. The one on my left scratched at my face, but I raised my forearm to block. The one on my right dove at my legs, but I couldn’t backpedal fast enough so I got tangled up in his arms. The third one tried to bite my throat, but I elbowed him in the face to drive him back.

Then I punched the one on the left and knee dropped the fucker on my legs. A few more elbows and kicks eliminated them, and I stood against the last one that seemed to be holding back. This one looked a bit different than the others. His eyes still glowed red, but they had intelligence to go along with the hunger, and his torso looked more muscular.

He didn't give me much time to study him. As soon as our eyes connected, he sprang toward me, and I raised my arms to defend myself from his whirlwind attacks. His talons were sharp, but my forearm armor held against his swipes, and I was able to throw in a quick couple of jabs when he overextended himself. Unlike the other ones that I had crushed with relative ease, this one's face felt like it was made out of granite, and my quick punches didn't seem to do anything else besides pissing him off more.

I wasn't the best martial artist, but my massive size, tiger-strength, and quick reflexes gave me an edge against most opponents. This guy was all sorts of fast though, and I found myself having to keep my left hand up the whole time so I could protect my face and neck from his claws. It was soon obvious that we were fighting to a bit of a standstill, and I wasn't going to be able to take him out without trying something risky that would leave my throat exposed.

And he had all the time in the world to wait for his friends to come around and take me out.

I shifted my eyes around without turning my head and saw my shield on the ground a few meters to my right. I feinted to the left to throw him off and then shuffled around so that my boots were by the edge of the riot shield. This fucker was smart, but he didn't seem to understand what I was doing until I jumped back and brought my foot down on the edge of the protective rectangle.

The shield popped up into the air and smacked the fanged monster in the chin, it probably didn't do much damage, but the motion surprised him enough so that he flailed his arms around instead of attacking me. While he was distracted, I stepped forward and slammed my fist into his face. His skull cracked with the force of my punch, and his head snapped back so that his eyes faced up at the moon behind him.

I grabbed my shield out of mid-air and pushed the edge right into his throat. That caused a series of wet snapping sounds, and the monster collapsed on the grass at my feet while his clawed hands reached up toward his neck.

Then I swung the shield down again and broke open his skull.

"Where did your baton go?" I asked Persephone as I turned to her.

“Eyy.” She pointed up to the building window we had just jumped out of and then pushed her hands to my chest.

“You dropped it when I jumped out of the building with you. Got it. I don’t see anyone else out here, but they will be running out of the building soon. We are going to make a run for the airport, find a spaceship, and get the hell off this planet. Will that end this dream?”

“Eye yahhh.” She shrugged.

“We are going to fucking try it,” I said as I turned toward the nearest group of trees that I recalled were in the direction of the landing ship. “Can you fly?”

She shook her head and then pointed to the moon. I had no idea what the fuck that was supposed to mean so I sighed. “Just let me know if I’m going too fast.”

Then we started running.

Persephone was keeping up with my speed, but we were running over soft grass, and we soon reached the edges of the first pine grove. There looked to be some jagged rocks and sharp needles on the ground, so I dropped my shield and picked her up in my arms again. Her wings made it somewhat difficult to find a comfortable position to hold her while I ran, but I ended up supporting her ass with my left hand as my right cradled her feet.

I ran past the first small grove of trees and then darted across the clearing to the next. As we ran through the clearing, I spared a quick glance back toward the clearing and saw some of the fanged creatures running around the side. I’d covered a lot of ground already, but I didn’t know how much distance was left until we got to the airport, and I was certain that these things could run faster than me.

“You sure you can’t fly?” I asked as I forced my legs to sprint faster across the moon soaked ground. Persephone didn’t say anything, but I took that to mean that she wasn’t going to try and explain it to me.

I heard howls behind me. They sounded like wolves, only with a lizard-like hissing sound that made the howls sound like the word “hush.” The sound made the fur on the back of my neck stand on end and focused on making the large muscles on my legs work harder.

We crested a hill, and I saw a red glow off in the distance beyond the

crest of another hill. I guessed we had maybe four kilometers left to run, but our path would take us down into the slope of a shallow valley, through another half dozen groves of pine trees, and up the face of the far hill.

And I still wasn't sure the airport would be on the other side of this next hill.

I ran and prayed that we'd escape these fucks.

I ran and tried to remind myself that this was just a dream, and nothing bad would happen if a giant group of these fuckers caught Persephone and me. Sure, they might rip us apart, but I would probably wake up.

Probably.

I sprinted down the side of the hill and aimed our path to skirt the first group of trees. I was pretty sure that these fuckers chasing us knew where we were heading, and could probably track by smell, so I didn't want to waste any time by trying to dodge roots and branches.

Persephone's platinum colored hair blew behind us as I ran. One of her hands wrapped around my neck and her other pushed against my chest to help me balance her. Her face didn't seem that concerned about the fuckers chasing her, but her eyes opened a bit wider when we began to run up the slope of the next hill.

"Are they behind us?" I huffed as I pushed my legs to step up the grassy slope.

"Eyeeee," she hissed, and I began to hear the distant growls of the chasing horde.

We made it to the crest of the hill and I saw a massive airport. The four buildings surrounding the launchpads were all black and looked like some sort of ancient Buddhist temple, but red lights strobed from the peak of each one, and I could see a distant light in the sky as if there was a craft coming in for a landing.

There were twelve landing pads arranged between the four buildings, and the two in the farthest spots from us were occupied by two manta ray-like ships.

"Are you landed there?" I asked Persephone, but she turned her red eyes away from the ships and ran her fingers over my whiskers without

saying anything. “Alright, Miss Coy and Mysterious. Let’s steal a ship, and blast off this planet, then maybe I’ll wake up.”

“Eye yahhh,” she said.

“You sound sad about that,” I panted as I turned around to check the horde following us. They were at the base of the small valley, and it looked like thousands of glowing red eyes were behind me. “Is this a mistake? Should we not take one of those ships?” I tried to keep my voice calm as I turned away from the wave of bat-human monsters.

Persephone didn’t answer, so I started running and didn’t stop until I reached the first launchpad. They were made out of concrete and one-hundred meters wide. I didn’t like the idea of running across the open space to reach the pair of ships, but I also didn’t like the idea of getting ripped apart by the mob of angry monsters.

I checked the black temple closest to us but didn’t see any windows or movement. There could have been a sniper up in one of the many nooks, but I figured I would have been dead by now if that was the case.

I sprinted across the concrete landing pads toward the two ships. I half expected to catch a bullet in my skull as I ran, but I started to feel better when I reached the halfway point.

“Which one?” I growled as I ran. They looked about the same size, but one of them had a bit of what looked like a violet tint to her black color, while the other seemed to have a burnt orange hue.

“Naaaaooo aaaattttteeerrr,” she said.

“Doesn’t matter,” I translated as I angled toward the violet one since it was about sixty meters closer to us. The ramp was already down, so I forced my legs to pump for one final sprint, and then took my hand away from where they cradled Persephone’s feet so I could hit the buttons to close the bay door and pull up the ramp.

I heard the horde scream as the ramp raised, but the hatch spun closed before I could see their red eyes.

“We made it,” I gasped as I set the woman down. My breath was escaping my chest in ragged heaves, and I closed my eyes for a few seconds so that the hold lights would stop spinning.

I only let myself relax for half a moment though, we still had to get to the bridge and try to take off.

“I don’t suppose you know how to fly this ship?” I asked Persephone as I forced my cat maw into what I hoped looked like a grin to her.

“Eye yahhh,” she smiled at me and gestured to the far door of the hold empty hold.

“Armory first,” I said as I pointed to the nearest door. I didn’t know for sure if the other door would take us to where I wanted, but I didn’t like the idea of walking up to the bridge without a weapon. The ship may be unoccupied, but it would only take us a few moments to arm ourselves, and then we could shoot the fuck out of anyone trying to stop us from taking this ship.

My boots echoed off the hold as we walked, but Persephone didn’t make even a wing fluttering sound. I thought about asking her, but thinking about the lack of noise made me think about the conversation I had with President Yu when I was in the tank. At first, the voice sounded like my memory of the asshole, but then his words had slurred and become more primitive sounding. I guessed that it was one of the SAVO fucks trying to impersonate him in my memories, but why?

The side door out of the hold wasn’t locked, so I opened it up a crack to check the hallway. I didn’t see anyone waiting to attack us, so we pushed through and made our way to where I thought the armor would be located. The room was actually the galley, but there was still plastic on the fridge, tables, and counters. It looked like the ship had never been taken out on a voyage, but I recalled seeing the thrusters of a landing craft when I first looked out the window. It could have been the other ship, or it could just be a fucking dream where nothing needed to make any sense.

“Haaaa reeee zzoonn,” Persephone whispered to me.

“Has reason?” I asked, and she nodded. “Are you reading my mind?”

“Toooggaaaathhh,” she said as she laced her fingers through mine. I guessed that the word she was trying for was “together,” but I didn’t ask. We needed to find the armory, so I walked to the next room in the hallway and pulled open a door. This was a large room, but the ten sets of bunk beds convinced me it was a barracks.

Four doors later and I hadn't found the armory, but each of the rooms looked as if it had never been used. We were winding around toward the location of the elevators, and I was beginning to wonder if what I was looking for just wasn't on this floor, but then the last door before the lift opened to reveal racks of weapons.

But they were all ancient melee weapons.

Swords, spears, bows, axes, and polearms of various shape and size hung from the wall. I would have preferred a shotgun, but I wouldn't turn my nose up at this bounty.

"Grab a sword, or whatever you are comfortable using," I told Persephone as I grabbed a longsword from the rack. If I were in my man shape, I would have needed to use it with two hands, but my tiger-man body was large and strong enough to use the large sword with one hand.

I sheathed the weapon on my belt and then grabbed a two-headed axe from the rack. The thing was heavier than I expected, but it just meant that I'd kill whatever got in my way with just one swing.

"Find something?" I asked as I turned around to face the black-winged woman. She held a short gladius shaped sword in her hand, but she didn't look very comfortable with it.

"Don't worry," I said. "I'll do the killing, you just need to use that to protect yourself.

"Maaaann," she said as she held her hand out to me.

"Yep," I replied as I held her outstretched fingers with my left hand and licked her palm. I didn't know why I licked her, but I was mostly cat now, and my action made her gasp with pleasure.

"We might not even find anyone up on the bridge," I said as we exited the armory, but as soon as the words left my mouth, the chime on the elevator across the hallway dinged, and the twin doors opened.

Two tiger-men in thick metal armor stepped out, looked at us, and growled as they reached for swords on their hips.

I kicked my right foot forward and into the left hip of the tiger-man closet to me. My boot hit him right on target, and his torso spun around so that his hand missed his sword handle.

The other tiger-man got his sword halfway out of his sheath, but I was already swinging my axe at his torso, and he had to jump back into the elevator to avoid my blade. The top edges of the twin blades still cut across his armor, but I didn't see or smell any blood in the air, so I knew that I hadn't injured him.

I turned back to the first one I kicked, and I shuffled forward to shoulder check him into the wall. He let out a pained roar when I slammed into him, but it wasn't hard enough of a hit to stun him, and his arms circled my shoulders before I could bring my axe around to hit him.

I head-butted him in the nose, and blood exploded across the hallway. This fucker was about the same size as me though, and he squeezed his arms tighter across my shoulders as he tried to lift me from the floor.

I bashed out my legs, pushed my axe haft down toward my knees, and thrust out my ass. It created a bit of space around my torso, and I was able to spin my axe up and punch the top blade part into my attacker's chin. The top horns of the double blades cut into the sides of his jaw, and he had to push me away or risk me twisting the weapon to cut his throat.

I spun around on my right foot and chucked the axe across the hallway. The weapon wasn't built for throwing, but I was only trying to toss it three meters. The second tiger-man had almost pulled his pistol out of his holster, but the axe slammed into the side of his face and sliced his skull open as if it was a slab of deli meat.

I turned around just in time to get punched in the face by the first tiger-man. My nose broke, and my jaw unhinged, but I didn't black out, and I managed to get my arm up in time to parry his next few jabs.

I was completely on the defensive now and had to retreat toward Persephone or risk getting decked again. Too late, I realized I fell for a feinted jab, and his right hand clocked me across the left eye. My vision swam for half a second, but I guessed he was going to step in close and try to clinch me, so I threw a blind uppercut at where I thought his face was going to be.

My knuckles made contact with his face, something in his head broke, and he slumped to the ground. I didn't think he was dead, but a half-moment later I had my long sword out and the tip was spearing through the back of his skull.

“You alright?” I asked Persephone even though I knew neither of the tiger-men had gotten close to her. The beautiful angel nodded, and I sheathed my sword before grabbing the pistol from the tiger-man’s holster.

The weapon was strange. It was in the shape of a pistol, but I didn’t see anywhere for a magazine or any slide. The metal was sleek and dark gray, but no light pulsed from any of the seams as one of Madalena’s pulse pistols did when they were ready to fire.

Whatever, it had a trigger, a barrel, and sights at the top. I’d be able to kill fuckers with it.

We moved into the elevator, and I pulled the gun belt off the tiger-man that my thrown axe killed. Now I had two pistols, a belt, a sword, and an axe. All I needed to do was figure a way out of this dream. I turned to Persephone and half expected her to speak, but she didn’t.

I hit the elevator button for the top floor and readied one of my new pistols on my right hand while I clasped the double-bladed axe in my left. Then the chime dinged, and the door opened.

I stepped out, pivoted, and buried my axe into the face of a tiger-man that I had caught completely off guard. He didn’t get a chance to choke out a warning before he died, but my pivot around the elevator door revealed four more of the massive armored figures standing at the gunner’s stations.

I left my axe in the skull of the man I’d just killed and aimed my pistol at the closest of the tiger-men. I had no idea what to expect when I pulled the trigger, but an orange projectile launched from the barrel and punched through his head like an angry wasp. There was almost no recoil from the trigger pull, so I was quickly able to acquire the next target in my sights and put another needle through his eyeball.

The remaining two tiger-men dove to the ground as they reached for their sidearms, but I was already shooting, and two of my orange needles burnt through their skulls as they tried to move. They screamed out a warning, and I pulled Persephone around the elevator corner as two more of the tiger-men poked their heads up from behind the officer chairs.

I pulled out my other pistol as they fired at the corner where I hid. The needles from their weapons burnt holes in the bulkhead of the ship past my position, and I moved around to the other side of the elevator doors with a

hope that I could spring out from the other side and get a lucky shot at both of them.

I came out low from the other corner, and the two tiger-men behind the officer chairs shifted their pistols to try and shoot me. My plan has worked as I intended though, and one of my needles caught a fucker in the neck, and he choked on his blood as he fell.

I didn't know if these creatures could heal like me, but I assumed that they could, so I figured that I only had a few seconds of reprieve before he was back to shooting at me. The remaining tiger-man shot at the corner where I had just popped out and I rolled around so I was hidden from his shots. Then I sprinted the three meters past Persephone and jumped out sideways from my original position with both of my pistols aimed at the last fucker.

Both of my new weapons kicked lightly in my hand, and I sent half a dozen needles out of each weapon toward the position of my last opponent. One of the shots got lucky and bore a small fiery hole right between his eyes. I hit the ground on my side, rolled to my feet as quick as I could, and then sprinted toward the front of the bridge so that I could ensure the one I'd just shot in the throat was dead. I saw him trying to crawl away from me, so I stepped off one of the gunner's chairs, heaved myself into the air with a running leap, and then aimed down at his head as I flew through the air. My weapons sang again, and all four of my shots bore into the back of his skull.

I had a lot of forward momentum with my leap, so I somersaulted forward on my shoulder and then came up around the officer's chairs with my guns pointed at the seats.

There was just a lone figure sitting in the captain's chair. It was President Yu, but as I turned my guns toward him, his face shimmered, and the evil looking SAVO woman from my other dreams formed.

The needles from my gun tore into her beautiful face, and blood splattered on the seat behind her. The woman's body slumped forward, and an exhale of relief escaped my chest. We still had to fly off this planet, but I was pretty sure that would end my dream and bring me back to my room.

"Can you fly this--" I started to ask Persephone, but then the woman in the captain's chair started to laugh.

Her body leaned back up straight and her malevolent eyes burned into mine.

“Ohhh gawww,” she growled as the wounds on her skull closed.

“Ahh fuck, you are just like the asshole I killed on Uraniel,” I said as I shot another four needles into her head. Her face disappeared with a mess of blood, brain, and her body slumped forward again.

Then my body froze. My muscles tensed as if they were struggling to fight against an unseen force, and my heart struggled to beat in my chest.

The woman had stopped laughing when I shot her the second time, and I watched with a bit of horror as her head rolled back and her injuries began to heal. She moved a bit like a puppet on a string, and her lips curved into a wicked smile as soon as her mouth reformed.

“I takkkkeeee,” she hissed as she stood from her chair and licked the blood from her full lips.

Then she took a small step toward me, and my heart beat in double time.

I experienced this paralysis before on Uraniel, but I had escaped it and then bit the head off the SAVO who was trying to kill us. I tried to recall how I had escaped these bonds, but all I remembered was that I was really worried the SAVO man was going to try and kill my women.

Where was Persephone? I couldn't turn my head around to see if she was behind me, so I hoped she was still taking cover beside the elevator.

“Yooouu,” the SAVO hissed as her fingers reached up to touch my neck. Her nails looked like bird talons, and I tried to pull away from her touch. I might as well have been encased in metal though, and I couldn't move away from her.

Her fingers felt like fire against me, and a growl of agony escaped my throat. My expression of pain seemed to please her, and the woman's smiled widened.

“Yoou. Will. Be. Mineeee. Adam...” Her hands dug through my fur, and I felt a nail dig into my skin. The fire started to burn through my whole body, and I wondered if her fingers were coated with some sort of poison.

“Serve me...” her lips moved toward my maw, and her tongue slid out

of her mouth as if it was sort of pink colored snake creature.

There was a flash of black feathers, and the vampire's eyes opened with surprise. She moved her hands away from my neck and reached up to touch her own. Just as soon as her fingers touched her white skin at her throat, blood poured from a cut there, and the woman's head toppled off her shoulders.

"Eye yahhh!" Persephone shouted as she kicked the dark-haired woman's head away from her body. Then she turned to me and I saw that she had the gladius in her right hand.

I still couldn't move or speak, but Persephone's left hand came up and her lips pressed against my tiger-mouth. My lungs suddenly filled with air, and my muscles tingled as if they had just woken up from sleep. I could move, and I ran my tongue over the winged woman's face before I turned back to the body she had just beheaded.

"Is she dead?" I asked, but even as I did, I could see the SAVO's fingers start to twitch.

"I cannnnn nooooot diiiieeee, Adam," the head spoke from the place where Persephone kicked her, and I walked over to pick it up by the long black hair.

"I killed your friend by biting his head off. I'm pretty sure you can die, and I'm going to be the one to kill you, bitch."

Her mouth opened to laugh at me, but my own jaws opened wider, and I clamped my sharp teeth down on her face. Her skull crunched under the strength of my jaws, and her laughter stopped immediately.

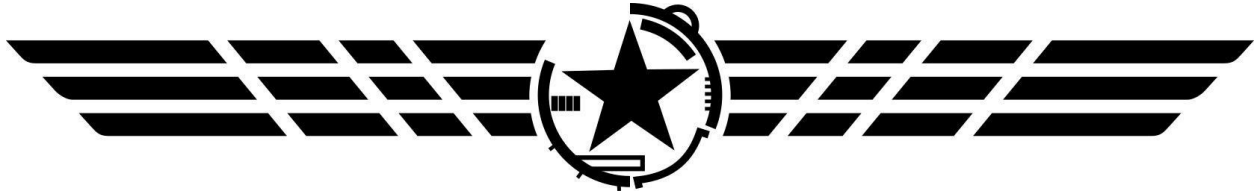
The taste of death, copper, and smoke filled my mouth. It was like I was drinking oil, and I tried to choke the foul liquid out. It wouldn't expel from my throat though, and I felt vomit push up from my stomach. I threw her half-chewed head away from me and tried to bend over to puke, but it wouldn't come out, and it became hard to breathe.

My head spun, and lungs filled with the evil liquid, and my heart started to beat wildly. I felt Persephone pound her fists on my back in an effort to help me push out the blood, but I couldn't get rid of it.

The evil was filling me.

“Adam!” Persephone shouted, but I realized that it was Eve’s voice, and I tried to turn and see her. The sides of my vision were black now, and all I could do was focus on Persephone’s face. She opened her mouth to scream, but all I heard was my name. Then she pounded on my chest, but I felt my heart begin to slow its beat.

Then everything turned into a cold strangling darkness.



Chapter 9

“He’s waking up!” I heard Zea shout, but it sounded like she was yelling from another room. I felt fingers wrapped around mine, but I couldn’t seem to get my eyes open to see who held my hand.

“Wahhh?” I tried to groan out my question, but my tongue felt heavy, and I wasn’t even sure I managed to get my voice to work.

“His fear is gone,” Madalena said. “Eve, can you detect his thoughts?”

“Yes,” the vampire replied, “and now I know why he would not wake up.”

“What the fuck happened?” Zea asked.

“It’s really bright in here,” I managed to say after I tried to open my eyelids again.

“Hey, Adam,” Zea said. “Are you okay? Let me get the light.” The fingers unwrapped from my hand, but another hand immediately grasped my hand.

“I feel like shit,” I said as I ran my swollen tongue across chapped lips. “Am I in my room?”

“No,” Eve replied. “We moved you to the infirmary when you would not wake up.”

The light beyond my eyelids dimmed, and I was able to pry them open. Sure enough, I was laying on one of the hospital beds in Persephone’s medical bay. Zea was walking back to me from where she had dimmed the lights on the wall, Eve held my left hand, and Madalena sat on my right.

“How long have I been unconscious?” I asked as I tried to sit up.

“Several days,” Madalena answered. “We have already docked at Wobbegong.”

“And you couldn’t wake me up?” I asked as I moved my hand up to touch my neck where the SAVO’s finger had dug into my skin. The pain was no longer there, but I could still remember most of my dream.

“No,” Eve replied. “You would not wake, and I was unable to see what you were dreaming.”

“But Madalena could feel that you were afraid,” Zea said. “Are you okay? What the fuck happened?”

“This has happened before,” I said as I looked at Eve. “I’ve dreamed of our enemies, and fought with them, but this time I understood it was a dream. I still couldn’t escape though. I don’t know what any of it means.”

“Tell us what happened,” Madalena asked as she handed me a glass of water. I drank it as if I had not tasted water in two weeks, and she went to fill it again when I started my story.

I told my three lovers about the dream as I sipped the second glass of water. When I got to the part about Persephone, the three women asked for more details about her appearance and her language. I lost track of time while I spoke, but I figured that about an hour passed before I reached the end battle on the bridge and the woman who had looked somewhat like Eve.

“This is not the first time you have dreamed of her,” Eve stated.

“No,” I said. “This feels like they are attacking me, but I don’t understand how that is possible. If Persephone showed me a map of these fucker’s home system, it’s all the way on the other side of the galaxy. How are they using their powers on me from that distance?”

“Do you remember much detail of your earlier dreams?” Madalena asked.

“I don’t, but Persephone is in most of them. So are black panther-like cats, and I think this SAVO woman is also, but she is harder to remember.”

“I believe that you are correct, my love,” Eve said as she began to pace the floor of the infirmary. “Our enemies are attacking you, and Persephone is coming to your aid.”

“Yeah,” I said as I thought through the dream again. I left out a description of the more intimate moments between Persephone and me to avoid upsetting Zea, but I wondered why the winged woman kept coming to my aid.

Do you recall when we first came to Persephone? I knew that she loved you. She called to me for a reason. She knows you can defeat our enemies and save the galaxy. I feel her warmth around us. I cannot speak with her as you can, but I am not surprised that she defends you in this dream state, or that she wishes to express her love physically there.

“They are doing the mind talk thing again,” Zea sighed, but the blonde hacker also had a smile on her face, and I reached up to cup her cheek.

“I was speaking about Persephone,” Eve said. “She is defending Adam, and it must be because she knows he can beat them.”

“I agree with Eve,” Madalena said. “I do not know the magic or power they are using to attack you, but they do it out of fear.”

“Fear?” Zea asked.

“Yes,” the Prime Valkyrie answered with her usual nod. “If they did not fear Adam, they would not bother. What is even more telling, is that this woman seemed to be trying to recruit him.”

“Hmmm,” Eve said she turned to Madalena. “I can only think of one reason that you would want to keep a weapon instead of destroying it.”

“Yes,” Madalena nodded.

“A weapon?” Zea asked. “What are we talking about here?”

“The Draugr seek to feed off the universe,” Madalena said. “It makes little sense for them to not just kill Adam.”

“Unless they think it would be easier to recruit me,” I said, “but I think I see where you two are going with this.”

“Are you both saying that there is something the SAVO is afraid of? So they want Adam to fight that thing?”

“Perhaps,” Eve said with a shrug. “It might be as Adam said, they could think it easier to recruit him than kill him. Or, there might be factions of these SAVOs. Perhaps they fight amongst each other for food, and the woman who continues to appear in Adam’s dreams wishes to use him against

the others.”

“Or there is another threat,” Madalena said. “Something that even the Draugr fear, but they believe Adam can fight.”

“I’m all for thinking out of the box,” I said as I tried to swing my feet clear of the bed. “But I’m just a Marine who can turn into a weretiger. I don’t have any other abilities besides healing, getting really mad, and shooting my shotgun. If we do this Occam Razor’s thing that Paula and Kasta talked about, these SAVO fuckers probably just don’t want to waste time fighting me. Too fucking bad for them since I’m not joining up.”

I pulled aside my sheets and tested my leg muscles by putting some weight on them. My limbs felt fine, so I stood naked and then walked toward the cabinet where the hospital gowns were kept. My three lovers watched me walk, and there was no mistaking the hunger in their eyes.

“How long have we been docked at Wobbegong?” I asked as I threw on the robe.

“Ninety minutes,” Madalena answered.

“How big is it?” I asked.

“It is Town Class,” Madalena replied. “A quarter million in population and about six kilometers in length. Slave, weapon, and drug sales are prohibited, but their bylaws allow us to carry sidearms.”

“Sounds like it might not be that dangerous,” I said.

“Everywhere we go is dangerous,” Zea stated, and I chuckled along with her.

“Alright, I’m going to take a quick shower, then we’ll hit the station. Can you get everyone ready to go?”

“Who will we take?” Madalena asked.

“You three, Paula, and Kasta,” I said after I considered for a moment. “We are just going to be getting a lay of the land, not getting into any fights.”

“What about Sivaha?” Zea asked.

“She can stay onboard,” I replied as I stepped toward the door. “Let’s meet in the armory. See you all in fifteen.”

The four of us exchanged a quick goodbye, and I walked out of the

infirmary. I turned to walk toward the elevator and a door opened up ahead of me. I could sense who it was before she stepped out, and I knew that the bond I shared with her was growing stronger.

“You have awoken, my lord,” Sivaha said as she stepped out of the hallway and into my path.

The Nordar Queen’s hair was a few shades darker than Persephone’s platinum. Sivaha still wore a black dress, but the garment looked somewhat like a flowing summer dress. It draped across her pale shoulders loosely, and I could see that her shoulder and arm muscles were well toned.

“Yes,” I said as I moved to step around her.

“Are you injured? They would not tell me and you are wearing the infirmary gown.”

“No. I’m fine.”

“I am beginning to feel your emotions,” she said as she moved to block me from stepping around her. “Do you feel mine?”

“Not yet,” I said as our eyes met. “I’m in a hurry.”

“They would not let me see you either,” she said flatly.

“Were you interested in seeing me?” I asked.

“Of course, you are my husband, and I am submitted to you. The Prime Valkyrie said you were sleeping and could not be--”

“Look, Sivaha, I need to go. We have to explore this station.” I stepped around her and continued my walk down the hallway.

“They said you could not be woken up,” the queen continued as she fell into step next to me.

“I’m awake now,” I replied as we reached the elevator. I pushed the button to summon it, and the slender woman stepped around me so that I faced her again.

“We have not had our dinner yet.” Her amber eyes were devoid of emotion, but I thought I could feel a bit of trepidation coming from her.

“Later,” I said. “I have work to do.”

“You have not eaten in many days. It is my job to take care of you, my lord.”

“It’s my job to take care of myself, and everyone else on this ship.” The elevator dinged, and I stepped around Sivaha and into the lift.

“Of course,” she said as she also stepped into the elevator. “That is the job of any good ruler. I would like to plan the meal and also discuss what lovemaking positions you enjoy.”

“We aren’t going to have sex, Sivaha,” I said as the door closed and the elevator started to move.

“Am I not your wife?” she asked with a raised eyebrow. “Did you not kill my old husband, wrap your large hand around my throat, and then claim me as your spoil? Did you not force me to my knees so that I could submit my body and soul to you?”

I couldn’t tell if her words were angry or sad because her voice lacked emotion, but her eyes stared into mine intently, and I suddenly did feel the desire to take her.

Right here in the elevator.

“Don’t use your powers on me,” I growled at her.

“Powers?” she asked.

“Whatever you do to seduce men. Do not use it on me, or I’ll throw you out of the airlock.”

“My lord, I am not using any of my powers on you.” Her lips curled into a slight smile, and her eyelashes fluttered slightly. “Do you feel a sudden desire for me? Perhaps you liked some of the words I used. Men sometimes like the idea of choking a woman, or laying claim to one, or forcing one to her knees.”

The elevator door opened, and I walked out without answering her.

“You do not need to answer, my lord,” she said as she caught up to me. “As your wife, it is my job to understand your needs and deliver them to you. If you wish me to be on my knees, or bent over something so you can claim my body, I will--”

“Shut up, Sivaha.” I turned to her as we got to the door of my room. “We aren’t fucking.”

“Such a savage word for us sharing our bodies with each other,” she

said as she smiled sweetly at me. “You have this animal intensity to you. At first, I thought you were just a savage who had somehow blundered into the Prime Valkyrie’s submission, but I am beginning to feel more of your power.”

“You are changing your tactics, but it won’t work. I have to take a shower, you can go now.” I pointed back toward the elevator, but Sivaha didn’t move.

“Do you intend to go into this space station?” she asked.

“I asked you to leave, are you disobeying me?”

“No, of course not, my lord.” The beautiful woman lowered her eyes and bowed her head slightly. “I must apologize. Perhaps I am coming on too strongly. My heart is heavy from the loss of my previous life, and the only bouy in this sea of sorrow is you. I merely wish to be by your side. May I take a shower with you?”

“No,” I said. “And I doubt that you gave two shits about your previous husband.”

“Now you are just being cruel to me, my lord.” Sivaha looked back up to my face and began to blink quickly. “I have no one now. Once I was the most powerful woman in my clan. Now I am on this ship and submitted to a man who will not show me a gram of affection. I have no friends, no love, and no purpose besides pleasing you, yet you turn me away. Will you at least grant me a few precious moments with you? It will make my suffering easier to swallow.”

“You aren’t taking a shower with me,” I said with a heavy sigh. Fuck, was she using her powers on me, or was she just worming her way in through an appeal to my sympathy? “We can do dinner when I return from the station.”

“Alone?” she asked with hope clear on her face.

“Yeah,” I said, but as soon as the words left my mouth, I regretted them. I didn’t even want to take a step down the path of courtship with this woman.

“Thank you, my lord,” she said as she bowed her head. “May I come with you into this station? My heart is heavy from the death of my previous husband, and I wish to leave those memories behind by seeing new people

and places.”

“No, you’ll stay here,” I said as I pressed on the keypad to my room. The door opened, and I walked inside. Before the door could close, Sivaha followed me, and I could feel my anger twist in my stomach.

“Please,” the silver-haired woman whispered as she knelt before me. Her hands came up to hold onto my wrist, but I didn’t shake her free. “I will admit what I intended for you. Yes, we wanted to take the Vaish. Yes, I thought you weak and wanted to conquer you. I intended to seduce you, or challenge you, or turn you away from Madalena. You have punished me by killing Gar and my entourage. I have learned, and now I am yours. Will you continue to punish me? Will this last for the rest of my life? Soon you will know my feelings for you. I will still be angry, but I want to serve you as wife more than my heart will feel this rage. Will you let me love you? Or must I wear the weight of my sins on my shoulders until Valhalla?”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. If Eve were here, she would know exactly what Sivaha was actually thinking, but the vampire wasn’t here, so I just had to go off the queen’s words and my gut.

“I said we could have dinner together,” I whispered finally. “Now you need to leave.”

“May I come with you to the station?” she asked “It is just one more request that would mean so much to my frail heart. I just wish to be by your side as much as possible. I have been stuck in my room for the last two days.”

“Fine,” I growled. “But I do not want you picking any fights with my crew.”

“I will not, my lord,” Sivaha said as she looked up at me. Small tears were actually coming down her cheek, and I wondered if she was being sincere or just acting.

“And if you call Eve a concubine again, I will change my mind about this and the dinner.”

“I will be nothing but pleasant to her, my lord.” Sivaha smiled up at me.

“Alright,” I said.

“Will you help me to my feet, my lord?” she asked as she reached for my other hand.

“Yeah,” I said as I pulled her to her feet. Our faces were close, and her amber colored eyes drifted down to my lips.

“You can leave now,” I said. “We’ll meet in the armory in thirty minutes.”

“Might I stay and help you bathe?” she asked as her fingers rubbed the palms of my hands. “I am eager to please you.”

“No,” I snorted. “I gave you two of the favors you asked. If you don’t leave, I’ll call Lux in here. I’m sure she’d love to take you to your room.”

“Ahhh,” Sivaha sighed. “I have met that one. I will see you in the armory then.” She stepped away from me gracefully, turned with a movement that made her flowing black dress twirl a bit, and then walked out of my door. As she reached the hallway, she slowed her walk and looked back over her shoulder. I didn’t know what she expected to see when she looked at me, but her face flashed with a bit of frustration, and then she continued walking.

“Maybe she thought I’d be staring at her ass,” I said to myself after the door closed. Sivaha did have a really nice ass, but I was more interested in taking a shower and then seeing what we could find about my sister on this station.

I moved to my bathroom and turned on the shower. A moment later I took my robe off and stepped into the water. It hadn’t quite warmed up enough, but the chill helped release some of the tension the conversation with Sivaha gave my shoulders.

I had intended to wash quickly, but my mind was still puzzling through the dream, and I kept trying to think about any clues I might have missed. I stood there for a few moments before I remembered that I needed to wash, and I reached for the soap dispenser.

“Eye yahh,” I heard a whisper behind me after I had lathered up my armpits and chest.

“Persephone?” I asked without turning around. She didn’t answer me, so I figured that I must have imagined her voice.

I hit the dryer after washing myself and then stepped out to brush my

teeth. As soon as I grabbed my toothbrush, I felt her hands lay against my back. I froze my movement and forced my eyes closed.

“Persephone?” I asked.

“Yaahh.” Her arms circled my waist, and I felt her face pressing into my back. The touch brought a shiver of goosebumps down my skin, and we both sighed together.

“They are attacking me through my dreams?” I asked as I struggled not to open my eyes.

“Yaaahhh,” she whispered.

“But you come into my dreams to protect me?” I asked.

“Yaaahh.”

“I’m going to assume that means yes,” I said, and her arms squeezed me tighter.

I reached down with my hands and touched her arms. She felt warm and real, but I again resisted the urge to open my eyes. I only seemed to be able to see her in my dreams. When I tried to see her in real life, she vanished.

“How do they attack me?” I asked.

“Meeeeaaa,” she whispered.

“Me? Wait, you?” I asked as my hands froze on top of her.

“Meeeeeaa and oohhhh,” she leaned her forehead into my back and sighed.

“Me and you?” I really wished she could speak my language. I knew she was trying, but I couldn’t help but feel as if she might have the secret to beating the SAVO.

“Yaahhh. Thhhhoooo meeaa taaoooo oohhh.”

“Through me to you? They know about me through you?” My heart skipped a beat, and I felt anger rise from the beast in my stomach.

“Yaaahhh,” she said, and there was no mistaking her sadness.

I consider my next question as I tried to calm my breathing. It sounded as if Persephone could have been telling the SAVO about me, but that didn’t

make any sense. All of my dreams I could remember had the winged woman trying to protect me. Was there something I was missing? How could they know about me through Persephone?

I thought about the video we recovered from Queen's Hat, where the mining company explored the cavern and found another ship that looked like Persephone. There had been a tiger-man on the ship. He had been long dead, but my other dreams of these ships always seemed to have one of the creatures on them. Most of the ships in my dreams also had the SAVO woman who looked somewhat like Eve so that might not have been the answer.

"Is it something like the bond Madalena and I share?" I asked. "Or is it something like what Eve and I share? Can they know about you and then me?" It was a shot in the dark, but the only scenario I could think of.

"Yahhh!" she rubbed her hands over my stomach and then hugged them to my bare chest. It looked like I had been right with my guess, but her touch also reminded me that I was naked.

"Is it some sort of submission thing? Can I free you from them?" I was afraid to move because she might disappear without answering my question.

"Yahh! Yahh!" She squeezed me tightly and rubbed her face against my back.

"I'll do it," I said. "You just have to tell me what to do."

"Drrreeemmm," she whispered.

"You'll show me in a dream?" I asked.

"Eye yahh," she replied.

"Okay. I'll pay attention next time I sleep. I want to protect you."

She didn't speak again, but her arms squeezed me tightly before relaxing. Then she let out a long sigh and a shiver of pleasure descended my spine.

She was kissing the bottom of my neck. Her lips were warm and her tongue flicked across my skin every third kiss. My stomach flip-flopped with excitement, and a gasp escaped my mouth.

I gently pulled her arms from my chest and turned to face her. I kept my eyes closed, but I expected her to fade from my grasp, anyway. Her arms

stayed in my grasp though, and I felt her fingers trace up my biceps before clasping my chin.

“Eye yahh, Adddyuumm,” she whispered before her lips met mine.

Her kiss surprised me, but I returned it with equal passion. Her lips tasted like oranges, and she let out a moan that felt like a hundred French horns purring softly in my skull.

My hands trailed to her shoulders, and I could feel her feathery wings attached to her upper back. I almost opened my eyes then, but I kept them glued closed, and her kiss somehow became more passionate.

I was having problems thinking coherently.

My mind was spinning with pleasure that I almost couldn't comprehend. Every part of my body was encased with a tingling sensation, and I never wanted it to end. I was supposed to be doing something, but what? Was I looking for something? Someone? I almost couldn't remember my own name. I just knew hers was Persephone. She was mine, and I was hers.

My hands slid down from her wings and I realized her back was bare of the lingerie she normally wore. Her lips broke from mine when my fingers continued to descend her spine, and she let out a gasp of excitement when I reached the top of her butt.

My suspicions were confirmed when my fingers explored her perfect ass. She was naked, and I wasted no time lifting her up from the ground. Persephone knew what I wanted. It was what she wanted, and her fingers steadied my erection as I set her down on me.

Even though my eyes were closed, my head spun when our bodies were joined. She was all-consuming, and I soon forgot everything in life that wasn't Persephone. The act of making love to her was all I ever wanted to do, and our first climax together did little to ease my hunger for her.

“Adam?” A voice came across the transponder system in my room, and I was jolted from my pleasure as if someone had just smacked me in the face with a wet hand.

“Huh?” I didn't feel Persephone anymore, and I opened my eyes to see my shower running, my infirmary gown on the ground, and my toothbrush in my hand.

“Sivaha is here. She has explained that you are allowing her to come with us. I wish to confirm.” It was Madalena’s voice, and I remembered that we were docked at the Wobbegong station and were going to look for my sister.

“Yes,” I said. “Give her a sidearm and armor.”

“We are ready to leave,” the Prime Valkyrie said. “How much more time do you need?”

“Has it been thirty minutes?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “Is everything alright?”

“Does it feel like everything is alright?” I looked down at my body, but there was no evidence that I was just having sex beyond my erection.

“I cannot tell,” she said.

“I just took a long shower,” I explained. “I’ll be there soon.”

“Understood,” Madalena said, and then I heard the transponder beep.

I turned off my shower, looked at my toothbrush suspiciously, and then brushed my teeth. My mouth did taste a bit like oranges, but I couldn’t tell if it was real or my imagination, and the toothpaste cleaned it away.

I threw on my flight suit, socks, and boots. The entire time I expected Persephone to speak to me, or touch me, but nothing happened, and I gave one last look to my room before I left.

The trip to the armory was quick, and I found the six women waiting for me. Zea, Eve, Paula, and Kasta were all wearing their plated armor. Madalena was wearing her uniform, and Sivaha was wearing the black dress I had seen her in earlier.

The silver-haired queen was checking one of our smaller pistols, but she set it down on the work table and turned to face me when I entered.

“You need armor,” I said when our eyes met.

“I have an aegis, my lord,” she replied.

“Ahh.” I turned from her and then walked over to the armor section. Eve and Zea had already picked up some of the plates, and they pushed them into the suit attachments without speaking.

What is wrong, my love?

Eve's words surprised me a bit since I recalled her finding Kasta and me in the infirmary when the android tried to use catnip on me. I would have thought she would have known about Persephone meeting me in my bathroom.

I did not detect your thoughts. If you recall what happened, I can understand better.

I took a long breath, closed my eyes, and remembered what had just happened while my two lovers attached my armor. It only took them ten or fifteen seconds to get it all on, but it was enough time for me to recall the conversation with Persephone and our sexual encounter.

I did not hear your thoughts and had no idea this happened. Nor did Madalena feel your passion. This is strange. Let us speak of it later.

"Everyone armed?" I asked once Zea put on the last shin guard.

"Yeah," the hacker said as she gestured to her pistol.

"Yes," Eve said as she rested her hand on her own weapon.

"Yep!" Paula and Kasta said simultaneously, and I noticed each of the beautiful twins was carrying a suitcase.

"What are those for--"

"Drones," Kasta said. "In case we need surveillance. I figure you and Maddy will do most of the shooting, but Sis and I can give map intel."

"Maddy?" Sivaha asked with a raised eyebrow.

"That's my pet name for Madalena," Kasta said proudly.

"Do you allow this?" Sivaha asked me with disbelief.

"A better question is: why are you here?" Kasta asked.

"Sivaha has committed to being polite," I explained as I turned to look at the silver-haired woman.

"I shall be most polite," Sivaha replied. Her smile looked forced, but she nodded slightly at Kasta.

"Ahh good," the android chuckled. "Cat-Daddy is in charge and delivering spankings to naughty girls."

"What does that mean?" Sivaha asked, but the twins started giggling

and didn't answer her.

I grabbed my gun belt from its hanger, put it on, and then checked my two pistols. They were each loaded, and I had eight magazines of ammo in the pouches on the belt. I would have preferred to bring my revolver also, but I didn't see it on the wall, so I guessed that Lux was still repairing it.

"Let's go," I said to the women as I gestured to the armory exit. They all moved to leave, but I saw that Sivaha didn't have her gun belt on.

"Sivaha, where is your pistol?" I asked.

"It is here, my lord," the woman said as she pulled at her dress. I realized that the flowing skirt of the garment was actually three pieces, and her long leg emerged from the cloth. The pistol was holstered around her upper thigh, but her hands moved up her leg before she tapped it.

"Ahh," I said.

"Is this acceptable to you, my lord?" she asked. "Would you like to examine it closer? Perhaps you should inspect it to see how tight it is?"

"Ha!" Kasta's laughter exploded through the armory. "I changed my mind. Adam, I like your new wife."

"Let's go," I said as I walked out of the door behind Madalena.

Lux, Josefinna, Mikhael, and Calisto were waiting by Persephone's hold door. The four of them carried pulse rifles and came to attention when we stepped closer.

"We will wait here for your return," Lux said as her cold eyes met mine.

"We are just going to snoop around," I said as I nodded at Mikhael. The man pressed the button by the door, and it spiraled open to reveal the station's receiving dock.

"We enjoy violence, my lord," Calisto said. "If your 'snooping around' leads to people you wish to kill, let us know."

"Thanks," I said then I gave them a last nod before I walked out the door and onto the harbor.

"Who has our rhodium?" I asked as we walked toward the security gate.

“I have a small supply in my uniform pocket,” Madalena said.

“I’ve got some also,” Paula said.

We reached the security door, and I pushed on the alert buzzer.

“Greetings... Persephone,” a female voice said, and it seemed like the pause was caused by her searching for the ship name. “You’ve taken a long time to approach the security gate.”

“We had a few minor repairs we wanted to make,” I said.

“Fair enough. What is your purpose for visiting?”

“Trade,” I answered.

“You read our bylaws? You must exchange at least two grams of rhodium at our nearest bank within an hour, or your ship will be jettisoned. The closest location will be in the green sector on the fourth street. Once you exit to the harbor, make a left and follow the signs. It’s only a ten minute walk.”

“Got it,” I said.

“You may defend yourself with your sidearms, but we do not tolerate anyone causing violence or other illegal activities,” the woman continued. “We have surveillance cameras everywhere, so I would advise you stay on your best behavior.”

“Got it,” I repeated.

“Most of our population speaks Japanese or Korean. Are you familiar with those languages?”

“Hai,” I answered her in Japanese.

“Welcome to Wobbegong,” the security clerk said, and then the door opened.

The hallway beyond the door was clean, and the main avenue of the harbor wasn’t quite as busy as I thought it would be. There was still a crowd, but the atmosphere was less bustling than on Queen’s Hat, and the pedestrians were not glaring at each other like in Red Eye - 13.

I could only see two levels to this harbor. We appeared to be docked on the bottom, and the top ramp was some twenty meters above us. The floor there was semi-transparent, and I could see the motion of the people walking

above us. The walkway seemed to have a light effect added to the glass, and each step that someone took created a glow of green light to flow from the impact. The combined footfalls of the hundreds of travelers created a jade wave which spilled across the ramp.

“It’s pretty,” Zea said.

“Yeah,” I agreed as I turned to the women. “We’ll need to go to this bank and exchange some rhodium. Then we’ll have to look for clues that this is the right place.”

“I have an idea,” Zea said, and we all turned to her.

“There is a harbor terminal over there,” she said as she nodded behind us. “It looks like a public information one, but it might have access to the harbor manifest. One of the Black Heart ships was named *Eye For Your Eye*. I’ll look and see if it has docked here in the time frame Kasta figured out.”

“Good idea,” I said. “How long will it take you?”

“Dunno,” she shrugged. “I’ll have to go slow because they really do have cameras all over. If they catch me breaking in, we’ll probably be asked to leave, or maybe get into more trouble.”

I glanced up to where Zea was looking and saw various cameras attached to the sides of the harbor wall. There were also a few floating drones with multiple cameras.

“Will it take you more than half an hour?” I asked as I glanced back to the harbor.

I didn’t see any security guards patrolling, but the shitload of drones and cameras were worrisome. Zea was talking about breaking into their system while standing out in the open at a harbor terminal. I also didn’t want to stand around here if we only had an hour to exchange some rhodium.

“Might only take me five minutes,” she said. “Let me walk over there and take a peek. You all can wait here.”

Zea didn’t wait for us to answer, she just strolled across the avenue, dodged a group of muscular mercenary men who checked her out, and then slid up next to the terminal all casual like. A few seconds later she had her cord plugged in, and she was examining her nails as she leaned against the machine. I saw her scan the crowd a few times, and then she shook her head

at us before she reached up to touch the transponder on her armor collar.

“Yeah, it will take me a bit to get in here. The security isn’t that tough, but they are watching it, so I’m going to have to be like a ninja.”

“I’ll leave Madalena and Kasta with you just in case,” I said as I turned to the two women.

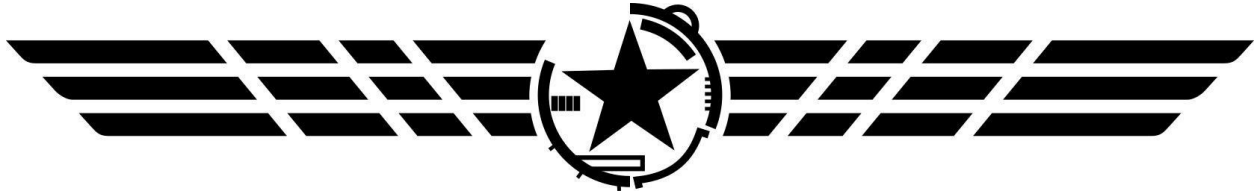
“Yes, my lord,” Madalena said, but Kasta just shrugged at me and then followed the Prime Valkyrie across the avenue.

“We’ll visit the bank,” I said to Eve, Paula, and Sivaha. The three women nodded, and we began our walk toward where the security clerk had told us we could find the exchange.

Wobbegong reminded me a bit of Queen’s Hat. Not in the decor, since the area of Queen’s Hat we visited had an old Victorian era feel, but in the relaxed atmosphere of the travelers. Sure, everyone was armed, but various travelers laughed as they walked by. After a few minutes of walking out of the harbor, I still hadn’t seen any armed security guards, and I found myself focusing more on the security cameras. The devices did look as if they were placed everywhere, and this made me question how they could watch all the displays. They must have some sort of facial recognition software or a way of alerting a live team when there was violence.

Then I realized we had made a mistake coming here. If Yu intended for us to follow the breadcrumbs to this station, he would have ensured that all the facial security recognition was tuned to me.

He knew I was here as soon as I set foot on the dock, and I was sure he had already set in motion a plan to capture me.



Chapter 10

“Shit,” I growled as the pieces of President Yu’s plan began to come together in my mind. “Let’s walk a little quicker.”

“What’s wrong?” Paula asked as the three women hurried after me.

“Look at the cameras,” I said.

“What about them?”

“How could they monitor so many?” I asked. “They must have facial recognition software.”

“I’m sure they do. Will help them track criminals or--”

“President Yu knows exactly what I look like.”

“Oh... shit...” Paula groaned. “I should have thought of that.”

“I thought we were looking for your sister. Who is this President Yu person?” Sivaha asked.

“He is the man who imprisoned and experimented on Adam,” Eve said.

“Experimented on? What does that mean?” Sivaha turned to me.

“I’ll explain later,” I said to her as I reached up to my transponder.

“Madalena, we might have a problem.”

“Go ahead,” she replied.

“If this is the right place, Yu is going to know we are here because of all the security cameras.”

“You think he’s already infiltrated the security software?” Kasta asked

through the transponder.

“Isn’t that what you would do?” I asked.

“Yep,” the android answered. “Fair point.”

“We are split up, so if he was going to try something, it would be now. Keep an eye out.” I reached my fingers back up to the transponder, but Madalena spoke before I could turn it off.

“I will come to you.”

“No,” I said. “Hold position with Zea. We need her to figure out if Wobbegong is the right place, and I also wouldn’t put it past Yu to kidnap her to get to me.”

“Understood,” the Prime Valkyrie said. “Please make haste.”

“Yeah,” I pressed off the transponder and turned my attention back to our walk. Not even thirty seconds ago, I thought the travelers in the harbor were all in a good mood. Now the laughter of the passersby seemed forced, the friendly looks seemed to be sizing me up, and the air was becoming oppressive.

I sense no hostility from the crowd, but there are a lot of minds here. I can not read them all at once. I am paying attention to those that walk past us.

I nodded at Eve and then glanced up at a flashing sign on the side of the metal road. It said we were in the green district now, and the pathways, buildings, and distant ceiling all took on a matching emerald hue.

“We need to find the 4th street,” I said, but Paula was already pointing to a nearby sign display that looked to be a map.

We walked toward the display, and I studied the image for a few seconds.

“Now we really look like tourists,” Paula sighed.

“There is no avoiding it,” Eve said.

“I know,” Paula said. “This place actually seems less seedy than Queen’s Hat. I imagine everyone is terrified of the cameras.”

“Could be,” I muttered as I figured out that we were on the 1st street, and needed to move over three more to our left.

“Husband, there are two men following us.” Sivaha’s voice pulled me away from the map, and we all turned to her.

“Where?” I asked.

“Do not look!” she hissed at Paula as the blonde woman turned her head around frantically.

“Shit, sorry.” Paula turned back to the map and her pretty face turned red.

“One is behind us by the store with the red sign that looks like a bowl,” Sivaha whispered as she pointed to the map at where she thought they were. “The other is ahead of us some thirty meters across the street looking at a data tablet.”

I risked a glance forward and saw the man looking at his datapad, he turned to look in a store window as I glanced in his direction, but the store where he stood had expensive looking dresses in the window display.

“You sure?” I asked as I turned back to the silver-haired women.

“I am observant, my lord.” She bowed her head. “They appeared as we began to walk in this direction. I noticed the man in front because he continued to stare at the screen in his hands, even when walking, and he passed us twice. The one behind us, who you should not look at, has paced us consistently, and now he is paused at the red bowl store.”

“It is a noodle restaurant,” I said as I looked at the map. “Eve? What do you think?”

“The one behind us is a cyborg,” the vampire whispered. “His thoughts are difficult to decipher, but he is trying to listen to us with enhanced hearing. We should whisper and point at the map to confuse him.”

“Can do,” I said as I tapped on the map where it looked like there was a train station.

“The one in front of us by the dress shop is easier to read,” Eve said as she touched my shoulder and gestured to the map. “He was hired by the other man to follow us. He has his datapad connected to a few floating drones above us. His job is not to lose us in the city even if we get on a train to go to a different color district. He thinks there is one more person on their team, but he does not know where, or who he is really working for.”

“How does this woman know of such things?” Sivaha asked as she looked at Eve.

“My name is Eve, Sivaha,” the vampire answered as she twisted her lips in a slight smile.

“Yes, Eve, how do you know what they think?” As Sivaha spoke, realization came to her face, and she turned to me. “Is this how you knew my plans?”

“Yes,” I said. “Eve can read minds. She also has other powers.”

“Such as?” Sivaha’s eyes narrowed.

“It is not important now,” I said. “We have to figure out what to do about these fuckers following us.”

“It is most important,” Sivaha hissed. “Does she know what I think right now?”

“Uhh, Eve is standing right next to you,” Paula whispered. “You can just ask her.”

“I am speaking to my husband,” Sivaha growled at the engineer before she turned back to me.

“She knows if you intend to betray me,” I said. “Is that why you are so worried, Sivaha?”

“No,” the beautiful woman said quickly. “Of course not. I have submitted to you, and I only intend to--”

“I know all of your thoughts, Sivaha,” Eve said. “I tell them to Adam. Should I explain to him why you are so nervous right now? Or will you help us deal with these men who follow us?”

The two women stared at each other for a few moments, and then Sivaha bit her top lip and shook her head. The movement caused her silver hair to wave across her shoulders and back hypnotically.

“You cannot read the mind of a cyborg?” the Nordar queen asked.

“It is more difficult if their brains are connected to the computers. Their thoughts become ones and zeros.”

“We cannot capture and torture him for information because of the security cameras.” Sivaha’s voice dropped in volume so that it was below a

whisper. “My advice is that we hurry and do this rhodium exchange, then we should return to the ship and regroup. They will also have the same security obstacles to overcome if they wish us violence.”

“They will wish to entrap Adam and me,” Eve said.

“Then we have to keep them guessing what we will do,” Sivaha said. “Our advantage is that we know they are following us, and they do not know we know. We can use that to escape any trap they might have set up.”

“It’s a plan,” I said as I nodded to the direction of the bank. “Let’s get going.”

We turned from the map kiosk and turned the first block so that we were moving toward the bank. Even though I knew we were in danger, I actually felt a little better knowing we had two or three men following us. Their presence probably meant that we were barking up the right tree, and now the game just involved me staying one step ahead of President Yu and whoever he hired to capture Eve and me, instead of him catching us off guard.

Although, I was sure he would still catch us off guard.

“Madalena,” I said as I pressed the transponder.

“I am here,” she replied.

“We have reason to believe we are in the correct station. Once Zea confirms, we’ll meet back on Persephone and figure out our next steps. Tell the crew to be prepared.”

“I understand,” she said, and then the transponder beeped closed.

“The bank should be up here,” Paula said as she switched the hand that carried her briefcase and looked at the screen of the watch she wore. The briefcase in her hand was a slim leather device, and it didn’t seem to weigh much.

The streets and buildings were a uniform light gray-green metal. It all would have blended together if not for the hodgepodge of neon signs and open window displays. The lights from the various stores helped contrast some of the green color that filled this district and might have helped a bit with tourist navigation, but even those unique signs were starting to blend in with each other after we had walked for ten minutes. We must have passed

eight noodle restaurants and just as many clothes shops that had similar looking signs. Without the clear street indicators, it would have been easy to get mixed up and lost.

“There it is,” I said as we turned the corner on the 4th street. There was a clear *Wobbegong Bank Green 4* sign up ahead, and we crossed the street so that we could walk toward it.

“Eve, you getting anything?” I asked as we approached the bank.

“No, Adam. The crowd is uninterested in us besides the usual men desiring intercourse.”

“You can tell when a man wants to--”

“Yes,” Eve interrupted Sivaha.

“That is disgusting,” the Nordar woman said with a grimace.

“I have become somewhat oblivious to it. We are attractive, and the knowledge that men wish coitus accompanies the blessing.”

“I understand your explanation, but I would prefer not to know the inner workings of their minds as they leer at me. I can use my imagination.”

“I have learned your thoughts, Sivaha,” Eve said. “You say you do not wish to know, but you would want my powers. Your way is the manipulation of those around you. You are constantly guessing at what others are thinking so that you can control them with your seduction mutation.”

“You know nothing of me,” Sivaha growled as she turned to me. “I promised to be polite, yet this one--”

“Your promise was to be polite,” I said. “My crew made no such promise.”

“You would let her speak to your wife like this?” Sivaha growled.

“You know where the ship is,” I said. “Turn around and go home if you don’t like it.”

“My home is by your side,” the silver-haired queen said quickly.

“We are here,” I said as we reached the door of the bank. “Last time I was at a bank the place got robbed. I defended Zea and Eve, and then we got thrown in jail. Let’s hope this encounter goes a bit better.”

“Wait a moment,” Eve said, and we all turned to look at her. She stood

still for a few moments and then shook her head. “We must leave.”

“Got it,” I growled as I grabbed her arm and pulled her from the door. The other women followed me, and we broke into a run a few moments after Eve started to.

We almost made it to the corner, but then I heard glass shatter behind us.

“Ahhh shit. Run!” I risked a glance over my shoulder and saw a figure in power armor land on the road outside of the bank window. The armor was thick, and an elongated helmet-visor made the skull look like some sort of pterodactyl. The figure held a light machine gun in its right hand, and it turned the weapon toward us as the crowd on the street screamed.

My twin pistols were in my hands and I squeezed the triggers as I simultaneously tried to throw my body around the corner. My shots went off before my attacker could aim his rifle, and his helmet snapped back when the two bullets caught him in the face. He pulled the trigger of his rifle as he stumbled back, and bullets tore into the street, buildings, and a group of pedestrians that hadn’t been able to get out of the way.

I was pretty sure that my bullets hadn’t broken through his helmet.

We were in serious trouble.

Eve, Paula, and Sivaha were running, and I was a bit surprised to see the silver-haired Nordar woman already some fifty meters ahead of the other two. I caught up to them in about ten seconds and turned back around to check on the fucker in the power armor. I didn’t see him, but I imagined he’d turn the corner any second.

“In here!” I shouted to Eve and Paula as I pointed to a restaurant on our left. They took my cue, and the three of us dove through the front door of the place.

I heard the machine gun rattle as soon as we had made it three meters past the door, and I threw myself on top of the two women. Bullets tore through the glass windows, the walls, and the customers dining at the tables. Screams, dust, glass, and blood filled the room, but I couldn’t move until the gun stopped shooting.

The bullets seemed to last forever, but as soon as they stopped, I silently motioned for Paula and Eve to crawl toward the back side of the

restaurant. It looked like this was a sushi place, but pretty much every patron, waiter, or chef we crawled past had caught a bullet, and they were either dead or choking on their blood as they twitched on the floor next to us.

Fucking shit. I was going to kill Yu. I just needed to get out of here first.

We made it to the rear hallway of the restaurant, and I saw what looked like the back exit door. I also heard loud metal clunking noises from the street in front of the restaurant, and I guessed that the fucker in the power armor was moving in our direction.

“Paula, drop the fucking suitcase,” I urged when I realized that she was having problems crawling and holding onto the case.

“If we can just get outside,” she whispered, and the terror was plain in her blue eyes.

We got to the door, and I sprung to my feet so that I could open it. There was an alley at the rear, and I saw Sivaha standing there with her arms crossed over her breasts. She opened her mouth to speak, but I turned back down to Eve, yanked her to her feet, and almost tossed her out into the alleyway before I grabbed Paula. The engineer let out a gasp of surprise when I grabbed her, and she waved her hands when I moved to run down the alley away from the fucker trying to kill us.

“Let me unleash my drones,” Paula said as she held her suitcase out horizontally. Before I could argue, legs popped out of it and smacked into the ground. Paula ran her fingers over the front release of the case and the top sprung open. Six small disc-shaped drones ejected from the interior and floated over our heads a good six meters. “They will let us know what is--” she started to say as she looked at her watch.

“What is it?” I asked as I stared down at her wrist.

“There are two more of them,” she replied.

“Keep running,” I ordered the three women as I pointed down the alley and toward the main street that would take us back to the harbor. I had no doubt I could take these three fuckers out with my shotgun’s slugs, or with one of Madalena’s pulse weapons, but my big pistols didn’t have enough power to punch through with normal ammo.

It was time to call for backup.

“Madalena, we have a problem,” I said into my transponder as we ran down the alley. Sivaha was once again in the lead and I was a bit surprised at how fast she could run in her dress and heeled shoes.

“Ffffffffppttt.” The reply came through like static, and I felt my heart leap into my throat.

This wasn’t good.

“Lux and Calisto, do you copy?” I asked.

“Yes, Adam?” Lux’s voice came through the transponder, and I felt a bit of relief pour through my pumping legs and tense back.

“Did you hear that?” I asked. “Madalena’s transponder isn’t working. She was right out front of our dock at one of the harbor service terminals. We are under attack by three warriors in advanced power armor.”

“Calisto and I will investigate Madalena and then move to your position,” Lux said without emotion.

“Thank you,” I replied, and then her transponder beeped.

“They are running down to the main avenue,” Paula shouted as she glanced at her watch. “We should cut through more stores to get away.”

“Good idea. I don’t suppose you could hack any of them open?” I asked as I looked at the doors we ran past. They all had security datapad locks, and we were without Zea.

“No,” Paula panted, and I looked up ahead to see that Sivaha had already reached the end of the alley, the main road was past her.

“We are going to cut one street over and then move up off the main avenue,” I said as soon as we reached the silver-haired woman.

“They are coming down the next street over,” Paula said as she looked at her watch, but I heard the screams from the citizens of the station, and could already guess where our hunters were.

“Move,” I said as gestured for them to run ahead of me. Sivaha dashed away like an antelope, and I took the rear position behind Eve and Paula as they tried their best to follow the Nordar queen.

“Adam?” I heard Madalena ask when my transponder beeped.

“Yeah, are you okay?” I asked.

“We were attacked. They led with an EMP mine that disabled our transponders. The rest of their attack was clumsy, and I have killed all but one. Lux has brought us new transponders, and we are heading in your direction.”

“We are being chased by three fuckers in power armor,” I explained. “They are carrying heavy machine guns and don’t seem to mind killing anyone that gets in their way.”

“Zea has said that the station’s security team is heading toward you,” Madalena said after I heard the blonde hacker scream something in the background.

“Is that good or bad?” I asked Madalena as I saw Sivaha make a sharp left on the street where I told her to go.

“It’s fucking bad, Adam!” I heard Zea shout. “You need to get back here!”

“I’m trying!” I shouted back as I thought through our return path. This was the last street we could take cover in before we hit the harbor, and then it was one long open road with nothing we could hide behind other than the docking tunnels. If Madalena, Lux, and Calisto were heading toward us, they were going to get shot up by the three fuckers in power armor.

“Madalena, are you carrying your pulse rifles?” I asked.

“Yes,” she replied, and I felt a little more relief. I was confident that the weapons could pierce the power armor of our attackers, but we were still going to need to survive until the three Valkyries got here.

I spent a few precious seconds considering my next course of action. Trying to make a straight line back to the harbor would probably get Sivaha, Eve, Paula, and I killed. Hell, it might even get Madalena, Lux, and Calisto killed if they were caught on the open harbor road. We could dart around between the shops and streets in the green district and hope we could hide, but all it would take is a stray bullet, and we’d be dead.

I just needed a heavier weapon, and these assholes would be turned into scrap metal.

An insane plan popped into my head. At first, I dismissed it, but then the monster in my soul let out a roar of joy, and I realized it was probably our best bet. Our three attackers must have known that we only had sidearms, and

they must have figured that we couldn't fight back against them.

"Sivaha!" I called out over the sound of the screaming crowds running around us. The citizens of the station didn't seem to know exactly what to do or where to go, but the Nordar woman didn't have any sort of problem darting through their confused ranks like a hummingbird.

She turned at my shout and waited for us to catch up to her. We were in front of a dry cleaner, and I gestured for the three women to duck inside.

"Stay low and wait here," I said.

"Where are you going to go?" Sivaha asked as her eyes narrowed.

"I'm going to take out the fuckers with the power armor," I said.

"Uhhh, what?" Paula asked.

"Just stay here," I said.

"I will come with you--" Sivaha began, but I cut her off.

"Do what I say," I growled, and her jaw tensed. I exchanged a quick look at Eve, and the vampire nodded before I pushed them inside. Then I closed the door before running into the next alley.

I knew I wasn't supposed to be shifting anymore, but I couldn't think of another way out of this. These three fuckers would get to us way before Madalena could, and I had the feeling they wouldn't feel bad about killing everyone at the station to get to us.

I let the monster in my stomach free, and my brain screamed as it started to change my body. My spine cracked and re-formed, my skin sprouted fur, my muscles tore and grew massive, my vision became yellowish-red before sharp details formed on the metal walls.

My teeth came in last. They pushed my human ones out violently and I spat a mouthful of blood and dentine as I sprinted toward the fire escape on the side of the building where I had stashed my women. The ladder was a good four meters up, but my running speed was enough for me to wall walk and then grab the rungs. A moment later I was dashing up the steps and soon on the roof of the building.

The security cameras at the station would see me, but I didn't care. The creature in my soul wanted to protect my women. It wanted to punish these fuckers for trying to kill us. It wanted to hunt down Yu and inflict the years

of agony he had given me.

My sensitive ears heard the steps of the power armor on the main street, and I raced across the rooftops toward them. The widest alleys here were six meters, and I was able to leap across them without any real effort. The real problem would come when I needed to get down from the buildings, but that was part of my risky plan.

There were three more buildings to go before I reached the main avenue. I saw a flash of power armor movement on the street, so I adjusted my pace a bit so I would come to the edge of the last building right as I thought my prey would be beneath me.

Ends up that I was a bit off with my calculation.

I reached the edge of the last building with the intent of dropping down on top of one of the power armor fuckers. The impact would probably surprise or stun him, and then I'd wrestle away his machine gun. As soon as I had the weapon, I'd punch some bullets through the three assholes, go back to the dry cleaner to get my women, and then head back to Persephone.

Unfortunately, the closest warrior in the power armor was all the way on the other side of the street. He was also waiting for me, and his machine gun raised up through the air as I flew toward him like an orange and black cannonball.

Time seemed to slow down, and I realized that this plan was definitely not the best one I'd ever come up with.

He must have been thirty meters away, but I had leapt from the roof of the building a good twenty meters up. The physics behind my trajectory were too complicated for me to calculate, but my instincts had been correct and I dropped my elbow right into the forehead of his helmet.

There was a cracking sound that I thought was my arm breaking, but I realized it was his armor as soon as we both tumbled onto the ground. My first instinct was to try to reach under his helmet and tear his throat out with my claws, but that was the animal talking, the human part of my mind knew I needed the light machine gun, and I managed to yank it out of his armored fingers before he recovered from my flying elbow.

I swung the gun around toward the harbor and aimed at the closest fucker in armor. He had realized what I did to his friend, but his movement to

face me was too slow, and I sent a dozen bullets into his back before he could face me. The first few rounds didn't penetrate the armor, but the third through twelfth did, and an explosion of blood and sparks flew out the other side of the man.

There were no pedestrians around, so I held down the trigger and walked the bullets over to the second set of power armor. This one was significantly more skilled than the other two fucknuts, and he engaged the front thrusters on his suit right before my shots reached him. He bounced backward through my spray of bullets, and I had to adjust my aim up as he lifted into the air like a rocket.

As he leapt off the ground, he twisted his machine gun down to shoot at me. I figured I would be a harder target to hit if I was moving, so I ran toward the building as quickly as I could while I tried to hit him with one of my many spraying bullets.

His shots bounced off the metal street like a hailstorm, but my run put me ahead of his lead shot, and I was able to spend a half a moment so that I could focus on aiming.

My machine gun coughed up the last of its bullets just as I hit the fucker in the chest. His chest thruster exploded with the shot, and he flipped over backward three times before his back thruster pile drove him head first into the street.

I threw down my empty machine gun and ran to the fucker I'd shot first. I pulled his weapon out of his dead hands easily, and then I shot ten rounds into the fucker who had face planted to ensure that he was all sorts of dead.

I returned to the man in the armor I elbow smashed. He wasn't moving, so I reached to his chin. It took me a few moments to find the release for his helmet, but as soon as I did, I ripped it off.

"Ahh shit," I groaned when I saw the dent in the middle of the man's forehead and his open eyes. He was dead, of course, but I recalled that Madalena said she had captured someone we could interrogate.

"Adam, I see two security teams coming from the north side streets," Paula said through my transponder. "They are going to pass us before they get to you. Do you want us to run out and join you?"

“Yes,” I said. “Hurry. We’ll head back to Persephone and regroup.”

“We are running,” Paula said, and I walked back to the street corner so that I could watch them approach.

All of the crowds had disappeared from the side and main streets, but I saw faces peering out of the building windows. I was sure they were confused by the walking tiger-man with a machine gun, but there wasn’t anything I could do about that. We were alive, for now, and I had to ensure we stayed that way by returning to Persephone.

“My lord, why do you look like this?” Sivaha reached me first, and her amber eyes studied my face with obvious concern.

“I’ll explain when we get back to the ship,” I growled.

“Very well,” she said with a nod that surprised me.

I saw Eve and Paula near us, and I began to run in the direction of the harbor. I figured that it would take us about two minutes to meet up with Madalena, and I would feel a lot safer with the extra firepower.

I wouldn’t feel a hundred percent safe until we were all back on Persephone.

“They are moving toward the three bodies in the power armor!” Paula panted after we had run for a few dozen seconds. She tried to hold her wrist out so that I could see her video display, but I just waved her away. I was almost tempted to just pick Paula and Eve up so I could just sprint faster, but then I’d have to drop the machine gun, and I felt as if I might have to use the weapon again.

Madalena, Lux, and Calisto were in their armor, and they landed near us with a graceful jump and burst from their back thrusters.

“I’m happy to see you,” I said to Madalena. She didn’t respond, but I could feel her relief when she saw me.

We continued our run down through the harbor. The crowd here had dispersed into the various dock tunnels and alcoves. Most of the faces stared at me in horror, but no one took a shot at us since it was obvious that we were running from something.

“What’s the news?” A voice shouted from one of the alcoves we ran past, and I turned to see an armored team of guards surrounding a woman in a

dress made of spun gold.

“Men in armor tried to rob the bank and killed a bunch of people in the Green District!” Paula replied as if she had practiced saying the words.

We slowed our run a bit when we reached our dock. I saw some bodies on the floor around the information terminal that Zea tried to access, but there was no one else near our location. I gave one last look over my shoulder toward the Green District and another look in the opposite direction leading deeper into the harbor. Part of me was a bit surprised we hadn’t been attacked again or confronted by the authorities, but the security cameras had seen everything that happened here, so there was no doubt the law of the station would be coming to speak with us soon.

I’d have to head that off.

“Get back on board,” I told the women as soon as we made it past the security door for our dock. As soon as it closed, I pressed the call button on the datapad.

“Hey, we were attacked in the Green District,” I growled as soon as the speakers beeped.

“We know,” the woman said.

“I want to make sure you know,” I said. “Why were we attacked?”

“We are looking into it,” she said. “Please remain on your ship. Do not attempt to leave.”

“Don’t leave?” I growled. I actually hadn’t intended to leave, but her words didn’t sit well with me. “Are we under arrest?”

“That is not my place to say,” the woman replied. “But if you try to leave, we will assume you attacked us and use our cannons appropriately.”

My crew had stopped walking halfway up the ramp, and I saw them turn out of the corner of my eye.

“You saw the videos,” I growled. “We were attacked. We just defended ourselves.”

“That may be,” she replied, “but we have concerns and will need to investigate.”

“What the fuck do you need to investigate? They attacked us!” I

slammed my fist into the door, and the metal actually bent a bit.

My outburst caused silence on the speaker, and I glared up at the camera mounted at the top of the door. The beast wanted me to rip the camera off the wall and stomp it into liquid, but I managed to push down its rage.

“The cyborgs you destroyed were the personal bodyguards of Emperor Kuroda,” the woman finally said. “They are programmed to attack obvious threats to the emperor and our station.”

“Is Kuroda the ruler of Wobbegong?” I asked. “I don’t know who he is.”

“Yes, he is the lord of this system and the next three others. He is visiting us to survey his territory, and now three of his guards are dead.”

“Your cyborgs are broken,” I said. “We were just heading to the bank to exchange rhodium as you asked us. As I indicated, I don’t know your emperor, and I wish him no harm.”

“We will see,” the woman replied. “Stay in your ship. A representative will contact you. If you do not reply to their requests, we will consider it an act of war.”

The speaker beeped, and I turned back to my crew. “I told you to get on board,” I growled, and even the three Valkyrie’s eyes opened with a bit of surprise before they all moved up the ramp. Everyone was gathered in the hold carrying weapons, and I hit the button to close the hatch.

“What the fuck is going on?” Zea asked. The fear was apparent in her eyes, and it softened my anger a bit.

“We were attacked right at the rhodium exchange bank,” I said. “Apparently they were cyborgs inside of powersuits. My pistol bullets were ineffective, so I grabbed one of their guns and killed them.”

I flipped the safety on the machine gun on and then held the weapon out to Mikhael, he grabbed it from my hands and then rested it over his shoulder.

“The cyborgs were guards of this system’s Emperor,” I continued.

“Ahh shit,” Zea said as she pushed her palm up to her face.

“They asked us not to leaaavvvvee,” I growled. “Yu may have his hands in this. What did you discover in their system?”

“I’m confident this is the place,” the hacker said as she moved her hand from her face and ran her fingers through her short blonde hair. “Manifest says that the Black Heart ships docked here when we thought.”

“We need to stay anyways and find clues for my sister,” I said, “but they asked us not to leave or they will fire on us.”

“My lord, we can just engage our hyperdrives and be gone before they hit us,” Nikki said. “Persephone is fast to engage her drives.”

“That’s good to knooooow,” I growled. “We’ll wait and see what their representative says. I want to know about my sister and President Yu, but we’ll leave if it gets apparent that the trap is closing in on us.”

The crew nodded at my words, and I turned to the twins. “Get our heavy drones ready. I do not believe they will try to attack us, but I want to be sure we are ready to go.”

“Got it,” Kasta said, and I noticed her eyelids twitch.

“Are you okay?”

“The EMP grenade did some minor damage,” the android admitted.

“I will look at you,” Paula said as she laid her hand on her sister’s shoulder.

“No, I’m fine. We have to be ready.” Kasta shook her head.

“Let your sister look at you, Kasta,” I said, and then the android nodded. “I need to shift back and then sleep before they come around to ask us questions. Madalena, you have command.”

“Yes, Husband,” she said, and I walked out of the hold and into the hallway that would take me to the elevator. A few steps later I was inside of the lift, and the door was closing.

“Wait,” Sivaha said as she pushed her arm in before the door could close.

“I need to sleep,” I said as she stepped inside.

“You have not explained this to me,” she said as she gestured to my body.

“I was experimented on by the man we are looking for. I can change into this shape when I need to, but only for about a half an hour, and I am

exhausted when I shift back to my human form.”

“Will you have that ability for the rest of your life?” she asked as she hit the button for the top floor.

“That is wwwwwhy we are looking for the man who experimented on me. He has answwerrrrs to my questions.” My voice growling more when I talked, and I realized I didn’t know exactly how long I had been in this form. It had to have been less than twenty minutes, but I was nervous about Eve’s prediction that the monster in me was taking control.

“You can change back into a human?” she asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

“What of your sperm?” the silver-haired queen asked.

“My sperm?”

“Yes, your sperm,” she answered.

“Why do you give a shit about my--”

“When you fill my womb with your seed, will I bear you human children, children like you, or a litter of tiger kittens?”

“You’ve got to be fuuuckkkkkiiiiinnnnn kidding me,” I growled as the door opened. I stepped past her and walked down the hall toward my suite, but she followed on my heels.

“It is an important question,” she asked.

“We aren’t going to fuck, so the answwwwerrrr doesn’t matter.”

“So you do not know,” she said. “It is important that we find this Yu person then. May I see you change back into your human shape? It interests me greatly since you are my husband.”

“No. Go to your room, or go ask Madalena if you can help anywhere.”

“When will we--”

“Sivahhhhha,” I growled as I turned to her. “I can feel our connection growing stronger. Do you feel it?”

“Yes, Husband,” she whispered as her eyes stared up into mine.

“Gooood. Do you feel how angryyyyy I am?”

“Yes,” she said after a brief pause. “I like your anger.”

“I don’t,” I said. “Leave me.”

The beautiful woman stared at me for another few moments, then she bowed her head slightly, turned away with a spin of her black dress, and walked back down the hall.

I entered my room, untied my gun belt, and then threw it on the chair. My transformation to my human shape was painful, but it didn’t feel harder than most of the other times I changed back. Thinking about the ocean and breeze across the waves lulled me back into my natural state, but exhaustion was quick to follow.

The last thing I wanted to do right now was sleep, but I didn’t have much of a choice. I needed to be prepared for whoever the station sent to speak with me. I knew that Yu was setting some sort of trap, and I knew that I was circling around it, but some of the setup didn’t make sense. Why would he get this emperor person involved? Why would he have them try to kill instead of capture us? Where was my sister?

I could only puzzle out the possibilities for a few more minutes. Then I flopped on my bed in my armor and sleep took me.

I would have my answers soon enough.



Chapter 11

“Adam?” A hand shook me violently, and I startled awake. The voice belonged to Zea, and she gasped when I grabbed her arm.

“Ahhh, hey,” I said as my heart stopped racing.

“Sorry,” she apologized. “You wouldn’t wake up, so I figured I’d shake you before I freaked the fuck out and got Eve. I was worried you were under attack from the SAVO again.”

“No, I don’t even think I dreamed at all,” I said as I rolled over on the bed. I still hadn’t let go of her arm, and I tugged a bit so she sat on the bed next to me. “What’s going on? Did the Wobbegong security team show up to talk to us?”

“They just sent a communication saying that they want to speak to us. Madalena said they can come in half an hour, and then they said they will be here in fifteen. She asked if I could wake you.”

“Madalena asked you to wake me up?” I asked with a bit of surprise.

“Yeah, fucking crazy, I know.” Zea chuckled and then ran the fingers of her left hand through my hair. “I was helping Paula and Kasta with the drones, and Madalena, Eve, and gray-haired bitch were talking. I think they asked me so that they wouldn’t be interrupted.”

“Gray-haired bitch?” I asked with a chuckle.

“Alright, so she doesn’t have gray hair. I’m just being catty. Her hair is gorgeous, as is her face, and her body, and her voice. She’s hotter than Madalena, and Eve. I didn’t even think that is possible.”

“You are being ridiculous,” I said. “How long have I been asleep?”

“Seven hours, and I’m not being ridiculous.” She frowned and let out a long breath. “Imagine if I had three lovers, and you were one of them, and then I got a new one who was better looking, more muscular, smarter, and had a bigger dick. Wouldn’t that make you upset? Wouldn’t you--”

“How many times should I tell you that I love you?” I asked as I pulled her to me. Our lips met and our tongues played with each other for half a minute before I let her pull away from me.

“Uhh, will you kiss me like that every time you say it? If so, then like a hundred million times. Please.”

“I love you,” I said as I kissed her again. I knew we had to leave soon, but I also knew that Zea needed more alone time with me.

“Ahhh,” she sighed after we parted and she laid her head against the armor on my chest. “Just so you know. I’m pretty sure there isn’t anyone better looking than you, or more muscular, or smarter.”

“You left out the dick part.” I chuckled.

“Yeah, well, you’re about as big as I can handle. So I’d have to pass on anyone like that.”

We both laughed, and then she slid to the edge of the bed, stood up, and then grabbed my gun belt.

“Let’s get going. It took me five minutes to wake you up, and then we just spent the next five making out. I’m pretty sure Madalena’s going to get worried I’m trying to get a quickie in. Which I’m actually considering, but it seems like a bad idea considering we’re docked at a somewhat hostile space station that is sending a security team to come determine if we are a threat.”

“As soon as we figure this out, we’ll have more time together.” I grabbed the gun belt from her and buckled it across my waist.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Zea said as she gave me a faint smile. “I know the deal. It is what I signed up for, but it doesn’t mean I can’t complain about bitches that try to steal my man.”

“She definitely did not try to steal me,” I said as we walked to the door of my suite. “I’m the one who made her submit to me.”

“Yeah, I’m mad at you too,” she replied when we entered the elevator.

“But that doesn’t do me any good. Fuck, complaining doesn’t do any good, but I still want to. I’ve just got you and Eve.”

“You can’t talk to Paula and Kasta?” I asked as I hit the elevator button.

“You kidding?” Zea laughed. “If I complain to Kasta, she’s just going to say ‘At least you are fucking him. I’d be happy to be fifth in line.’ And Paula just shrugs at me and then goes back to daydreaming about you.”

“Daydreaming about me? Come on.”

“Or she’s thinking about circuit boards, or drone upgrades, or Persephone’s engines. She seems like kind of a ditz sometimes, but when I try to help them with any sort of mechanical repair, I get lost super quick.” Zea shrugged. “I couldn’t really help her with Kasta. I just held her drill while she replaced a few parts. Unless there is a computer around, I feel pretty useless.”

“There is a computer everywhere we go.” I smiled at her, and we walked out of the elevator when it opened on the bottom floor.

“Yeah, that’s why you keep me around.” She snickered.

“I also enjoy making love to you.” I smirked at the hacker, and her face turned red.

“Ahhh, yeah. I like it too.” She bit her lip and then sighed.

We made it to the hold, and I saw Eve, Madalena, and Sivaha speaking together beside the bay door. Paula and Kasta were moving one of our knight drones to the side of a door so it would have a flanking position on anyone who might try to enter, and the rest of the crew was positioning our storage crates so we would have cover. The latter activity made me think that Madalena believed we might need to fight inside of Persephone, but I could not sense any emotions from her besides pleasure when she saw me.

“What’s the news?” I asked as Zea and I stepped into their circle of conversation.

“They asked to speak with you,” Madalena said. “If they show up on time, they will be here in five minutes.”

“Did they ask for me by name?”

“No,” she replied. “They asked for the captain.”

“I am surprised they did not ask for the walking tiger,” Sivaha said.

“What is your plan?” Madalena asked me.

“I’ll talk to them on the ramp,” I explained. “You all stand on the top so that you can cover me and jump back if you need to.”

“You intend to speak to them alone?” Sivaha asked, and I noticed she had changed into a pair of tight black pants and a black V neck blouse that wrapped tightly around her waist. It had the effect of pushing her already perfect breasts up more so that it was hard to focus on her face.

“I’ll be in the middle of the ramp, you all will be behind,” I said as I tried to ignore her cleavage and the flawlessness of her skin. “I won’t be alone. If they draw, I have confidence in you all to fire first and protect me.”

“May I accompany you down the ramp so that I may join you in the conversation?” Sivaha asked.

“No,” I replied to her before I looked to Madalena. “What am I missing, Prime Valkyrie?”

“Lux can be elevated on a containment unit in the back of the hold. It will allow her a few shots with a sniper rifle.” My wife motioned behind her as she spoke, and I turned to see the top of the crate she referred to.

“Good idea. Make it happen.”

Pleasure poured from her, and she barked an order in Nordar to Lux.

“I’ll need you,” I said to Eve, and the vampire nodded.

“She is allowed to join you, and I am not?” Sivaha asked, and I realized I was feeling a bit of anger trickle from her.

“Eve will be up at the top of the ramp, next to you,” I said to Sivaha. “I don’t want any of you to get hurt, so I will be in the front.”

“I am Nordar, my lord,” Sivaha said as she tossed back her mane of silver-spun hair. “I have been in countless battles. I have no fear of death or war. I only fear for you.”

Zea rolled her eyes but didn’t say anything. Fortunately, Sivaha didn’t catch the movement, and she continued. “You know of my abilities. Let me use them to further your goals. I need to be within a few meters of someone for them to feel the effects, so I should join you on the ramp.

My love, perhaps you should reconsider. Her powers might be useful to you when you speak to their representatives.

Eve's words gave me pause, and Sivaha's amber eyes seemed to twinkle when she realized I was debating her offer.

"Fine, you are down with me. Everyone else. Get to your places and let's hope this doesn't get violent."

The crew nodded, and I walked with Sivaha down Persephone's ramp.

"You have made a wise decision, Husband," she whispered in my ear as she wrapped her fingers around my armored bicep. "I aim only to pleasure and serve you."

"I doubt that, but I'm interested to see what you can do. Let's hope they send men."

"Women are just as easy for me to arouse," she whispered. "And sometimes they are more foolish than men."

I shrugged and stopped walking when we were halfway down. I checked to see that my guns were loose in my belt.

"Where is your gun?" I asked her as I realized she didn't have a weapon on her waist.

"I am dangerous without a pistol, my lord," she whispered as she gave me a half smile.

Then the security door opened, and I held my reply to her so that I could study the representatives from the station.

Six figures moved through the doorway. The first two were large men in green and white armor. They carried shotguns with drum magazines, and the top halves of their heads were helmeted. The guards took position on each side of the security door, but they didn't raise their weapons toward us.

Two more guards stepped in afterward. These were women, and their armor looked more decorative than the men. Golden trim hung on the sides of their shoulder plates, and their helmets were scaled like a dragon's hide. Instead of green and white, the color scheme was green, black, and gold. Both of the women carried carbines, and they stepped toward us with military precision.

Behind the two women guards, a pair of men dressed in long green and

purple robes walked. The men both wore long beards that fell almost to their bellybuttons. The man on the left's hair was white, and the one on the right was black and speckled with gray. They wore tasseled caps on their heads, and they both walked toward us with slow paces.

"We are representatives of the magnificent Emperor Kuroda the Seventh," the man on the right said.

"I am Baccor," the man on the left said.

"I am Reeyal," the man on the right said.

"I'm Adam. This is Sivaha." I returned their bow, and then I elbowed Sivaha when she didn't follow my example. She still didn't bow, but it didn't look like the two men noticed, or if they did, they didn't seem to care.

"We have come on behalf of the emperor to offer his apologies," Reeyal said.

"His apologies?" I asked with surprise that I couldn't hide.

"Yes," said Baccor. "Today our emperor was visiting this station. He was relaxing in his favorite brothel in the Green District when three of his eight guards suddenly dashed from their patrol routes and attacked you."

"So he didn't intend for that to happen?" I asked as my mind spun. This wasn't at all what I expected to happen, and I felt the tension in my back begin to relax.

"Heavens no!" Reeyal said as he bowed again to Sivaha and I. "We have performed an extensive analysis on their programming and found the guards' alert systems were tampered with."

"Someone told them to attack me?" I asked, even though I knew the answer to the question.

"It appears so," Baccor said as he smiled at Sivaha, I noticed that both men were looking at her now, but I cleared my throat and they turned their eyes toward me.

"Do you know who did this?" I asked.

"Not yet," Reeyal replied. "We will find out though, and then the emperor will extract his vengeance."

"Fair enough," I said with a shrug. "Does that mean we are free to

travel the station now?”

“Yes,” Reeyal replied with a bow. “We apologize again.”

“We have watched the security footage,” Baccor said. “We found it interesting. The emperor himself then watched it, and he would love to speak with you.”

“What do you mean by ‘he would love to speak with me?’” I asked as I felt the tiger in my stomach growl.

“He visits this station once every three Earth months,” Reeyal said proudly. “During his stay he throws a celebration for the officials and business owners that live on Wobbegong. It is a grand affair that you will surely enjoy.” The man pulled what looked like a scroll of paper from the sleeve of his robe, and he handed it to one of his female guards, who then handed it to Sivaha.

“Will you accept his invitation?” Baccor asked as Sivaha unrolled the scroll. It was written in both English and Japanese, and I turned to read it quickly.

“I didn’t intend for my stay to be long,” I said after I finished reading the fancy scroll.

“The party is tonight,” Reeyal said as he nodded and smiled at Sivaha. His eyes flickered down to her chest, but she probably didn’t need her powers to get that reaction, so I didn’t know for sure if she was trying to manipulate the men.

“I have business here that I--”

“Emperor Kurola is a powerful man,” Baccor said with a friendly smile. “Although we come here as his mouth, he feels terrible about the violence his guards inflicted upon you. He would like to ask for your reasons for visiting his station and then assist you how he may. If you have business on Wobbegong, there is no better ally than the emperor. With a snap of his fingers, he can give you what you need.”

These men are sincere, my love. They have memory of the emperor making this request and seeming to be distraught. They also wish to ask you about your transformation into a tiger. In their culture, the dragon and tiger are powerful defenders of the universe. The emperor fashions himself as the dragon and is intrigued by what he saw on the security feed of you taking out

his guards.

“You mentioned that he can give me what I need?” I asked. “Do your security cameras use some sort of facial recognition technology? I am looking for someone who might be on this station.”

“If you are looking for someone, Emperor Kuroda will help you find him.”

“Tell the emperor we will attend his party,” Sivaha said, and I clenched my jaw as the two men turned to her.

“I haven’t decide--” I started to say.

“Husband,” she interrupted me. “The emperor is being very kind to us. Our search could take us many weeks, but it might only take a few hours with his help. Then we can continue with other business that waits for us.”

“Your wife is very wise, and beautiful,” Baccor said as he nodded. The movement made his white beard sway a bit. “We will let the emperor know that you both will be coming.”

“The invitation did not say how many people I could bring to the party,” I said. I could actually feel a bit of mirth coming from Sivaha, and it was making my jaw relax even though I was pissed off at her.

“We would prefer our attendees only bring their spouses,” Baccor said.

“Yeah, but his guards just tried to kill me. I’m going to have a hard time relaxing without my entourage.”

“We can understand that, but we also have to worry about the emperor’s safety, as well as the safety of his wives and family.” Reeyal frowned and then bowed deeply. “We have addressed the problem with his cyborg guards, but as a precaution, only his royal regiment will be in attendance. They are of the flesh and cannot be corrupted by a computer mishap.”

I was about to point out the irony of him calling the death of a bunch of their citizens a ‘computer mishap,’ but then I smiled and tried a different approach.

“Just as the emperor, I also have multiple wives. Sivaha is just one of them, I have three more inside of my ship. I would like to bring them all so that they might meet the emperor.” I gestured behind me to Eve, Zea, and

Madalena, and the two men glanced up at them.

“Ahhh, they are appropriate guests then.” Baccor bobbed his head. “Yes, the emperor will be pleased to meet you, Adam. He also has four wives, so this meeting will be most fortunate. Please bring all four.”

“Great,” I said. “Please send my regards and tell him that I look forward to seeing him this evening.”

“We will,” the men both said as they bowed. Then they turned back to the dock exit and walked through the doorway that led to the harbor.

“What is your game, Sivaha?” I growled at her as soon as they had closed the dock’s security door behind them.

“What do you mean, Husband?” she asked as she fluttered her silver lashes at me.

“You agreed to go to the party without asking me.”

“You were going to agree.” She shrugged. “Did I make you angry? I can feel it inside of you. I apologize.”

She is hoping you hit her. Then she will use that as leverage since you promised you would not hit her.

“Lux! Calisto!” I growled, and the two Valkyries jumped down the ramp to land at my side.

“Yes, my lord?” Calisto asked.

“Put Sivaha in her room,” I ordered.

“What?” The beautiful woman asked with surprise. “No! You cannot.”

Lux moved quicker than Calisto, and she grabbed Sivaha by the wrist. The queen tried to yank her hand away, but the black-haired woman was much faster, and she stepped around so that they were still connected.

“Unhand me, Valkyrie! I am your queen!” Sivaha tried to pull her hand away again, but Calisto grabbed her other one. Sivaha seemed to realize she wasn’t going to get away without actually attacking the other women, and I could almost see her puzzle out the repercussions. I guess from Sivaha’s athletic body that she could fight, but both Lux and Calisto were Valkyries, and they had spent nearly every minute of their lives since they were born studying combat.

“You will let these women handle your wife like this?” she screeched at me.

“My wife is having problems following my orders,” I said. “She’s going to spend the next few days alone in her room until she is tamed.”

“No! No!” She twisted, but the two women had picked her up by her shoulders and were carrying her away. “I will listen. I just wanted to expedite the process. Please, Adam, I do not wish to be alone in my room. I need to be beside you.”

“And I need you to be in your room for two days.” I was walking behind them, and I gestured for Eve, Madalena, and Zea to come to me so we could talk.

“He said four wives! I am one of your wives! If you do not bring me, it might upset the emperor!” Sivaha yelled over Lux’s shoulder.

“Kasta, would you like to pretend to be one of my wives?” I called out across the hold to where the twins stood with their drone controlling gear on.

“Fuck yeah!” the android shouted back. “But do I have to pretend?”

“Damn you!” Sivaha growled at the android. “Husband, no. Please. I am sorry! I’m--” Lux and Calisto had taken her past the hallway door and it slid shut. The Nordar queen’s cries were silenced, and I turned back to Eve, Zea, and Madalena.

“Well, that was fucking embarrassing,” Zea snickered.

“She did make a good point about her participation,” Eve said. “The two men were enamored with her. They might find it odd that she is not at this party.”

“I’ll just tell them she displeased me if they even ask.” I beckoned to Kasta, and she walked across the hold with Paula. “The important goal is making nice with the emperor so that he gives us access to the security cameras.”

“What are we doing?” Kasta asked as she walked up. “I’m your wife now?”

“Yeah, for the party,” I said. “But I need you and Zea to pull the video sample of my sister from the eye and have it in a format we can give to the emperor once I make nice with him. I also need you to grab a sample of

President Yu from the video we got from Queen's Hat of Parnarta. He might not have ever set foot on this station, but if he has, I want to be able to find out what he did, where he went, and the name of the ship that brought him here."

"Got it," Kasta said as she nodded at Zea.

"Won't take us long to do," the hacker replied.

"We should take a few moments to consider the strategy," Madalena said, and we all turned to her. The warrior beauty nodded to me, and I guessed she was waiting for me to give her permission to speak.

"Go ahead," I said. "You don't have to worry about displeasing me like Sivaha. I know you love me and want what is best."

"Thank you, Husband," she said, and her pleasure flowed around me like a warm bath. "My thoughts orbit around this President Yu. We feel confident that he has left us breadcrumbs to come here. We feel there is some sort of trap with Adam's sister as bait. Where does his trap fit in with this emperor? Is Yu behind the programming of the cyborg guards? What is his purpose in doing that?"

"Why did the guards try to kill us?" Paula asked. "I thought Yu wanted to capture you, not try to kill you."

"What if he thought Adam would get away or kill the cyborgs?" Zea shrugged.

"It doesn't make sense," Paula replied. "If we think Yu is behind this, he paid a bunch of rhodium to hire this mercenary group to capture them alive. Then he laid this trap to bring us here. Why would he risk killing Adam? There must be something else going on that we don't understand."

"Zea, what can you find out about this emperor?" I asked.

"I can go dig through their systems again," she said. "Might take me a bit. How long until we have to be at this party?"

"Four hours," I said as I recalled the scroll.

"Do ahhh, we need to dress up?" Zea asked. "I already have the dress I bought on Queen's Hat. I just didn't know if you want me-- errr us, to dress nice."

"Yeah," I said as I looked down at my armor. I didn't remember seeing

my tuxedo suit in my closet, but it had been full of holes from when Byron and I fought to save the station. “I’m going to guess we have to wear something nice. I’ll need a new suit.”

“I have plenty of nice outfits to wear,” Kasta said with an excited smile.

“I only have our flight suits,” Eve said as she gestured to her outfit, “but I would--”

“Oh, just go buy a dress,” Zea urged her. “You’ll look super sexy in one.”

“I will wear my uniform,” Madalena said, and we all looked to her.

“Just go buy a dress,” Zea said with a bemused expression on her face. “You can go shopping with Adam and Eve. Ugh. I want to go. Can I go?”

“Can you find out everything we need on Emperor Kuroda and also come with us?” I asked.

“Ugh,” she groaned. “Probably not. That’s okay. I’m the only one who can do the digging. I like having this job. You three go shopping.”

“My uniform will be appropriate for--” Madalena started.

“No,” I interrupted the Prime Valkyrie. “We’ll go get some new clothes. We have plenty of rhodium and could use a bit of a break. Also, I want to see you in a dress.”

“You do?” she asked with a raised eyebrow, and I could feel a hint of pride come from her.

“Yeah,” I said. “Let’s go shopping. Just bring your sidearms in case this is another part of Yu’s plan, and we have to fight our way back to Persephone again.”



Chapter 12

The trip to the bank was uneventful. The glass at the front of the building had been repaired, and we were able to get inside, exchange our rhodium for currency, and then get out in only five minutes. I asked Eve and Madalena if they wanted to go for dresses first, but they both decided that they wanted me to try on suits first. We found an off the rack men's clothes shop after asking a few pedestrians, and I was soon in the changing room trying on various expensive outfits.

Madalena didn't seem to have much of an opinion on any of the clothes I tried on for them. Whenever I exited the changing room wearing a new suit, she only asked if I was able to fight, run, or shift in them.

Eve, on the other hand, was surprisingly picky about what suit I should wear. After my fifth trip out of the dressing room, she settled on one that was pinstriped and cut a bit wide in the shoulders.

"That is the one," she said two seconds after I stepped out of the dressing room.

"It looks as the other ones did," Madalena said.

"It has stripes," Eve said with a broad smile. "I like stripes."

"I know you do," I said with a laugh. "Let's pay and then buy dresses for you both."

Ten minutes later we were in a woman's shop across the street, and both Eve and Madalena were taking turns trying on dresses. I had often heard men complain about going clothes shopping with their girlfriends, but both of the women's outfits kept me very interested.

“I really like that one,” I said as Madalena came out the fifth time wearing a white dress that crossed over her breasts and then spread so both of her toned legs could be seen through the side slits.

“It is not very dignified,” she said as she cupped her chest, and then tugged on the back of her neck to tighten the cloth around her breasts. “I would prefer to wear my uniform.”

“It is very sexy,” I said, and then she looked away from her dress to stare at me.

“You like it?” she said as her eyes narrowed a bit. “You said you liked the others. Do you prefer this one more?”

“Yeah, I liked the others, but I kind of love this one,” I said. “I love it so much I kind of want to tear it off of you and then fuck you in the dressing room.” The store was empty except for the three of us and a pair of employees at the distant checkout register, but I doubted that they heard me.

“I will wear it then,” Madalena said quickly, and I felt her hot desire tumble toward me like lava. “I did not know you liked dresses.”

“I like you,” I said, and she smiled.

“This is the first time I have worn a dress,” she said as she touched the garment again. It was plain cloth, but had a bit of a sheen to it, as if it was made partially of satin or silk.

“Really?” I asked with a bit of surprise.

“I trained to serve Odin in battle,” she said. “A few times when I was a girl, I dreamed of owning fine dresses, but then I pushed those thoughts away so I could study martial arts.”

“We have money,” I said. “Maybe you could buy a few more. It doesn’t look like it needs to be tailored to fit you.”

“My breasts are very exposed,” she commented as she reached her fingers up again to where the cloth of the dress almost didn’t cover them.

“It’s supposed to be that way,” I confirmed, and she glanced at me again as she dropped her hands to her side. The white cloth offered a nice backdrop to her long brown hair, and I knew she saw my eyes devouring her.

I heard one of the clerks walking toward us, and Madalena turned her steel-gray eyes to her.

“It looks wonderful, but so did the others,” the clerk said. “Do you exercise a lot? You are in great shape.”

“I will take this one,” Madalena ignored the woman’s question and then pointed to a dark blue one on the rack I had also liked. “That one as well.”

Tell her she needs matching shoes. Eve promoted. She was still in her changing room, but the vampire woman had orchestrated all the outfits for both of them to try on.

“She needs shoes,” I said to the clerk as I pointed at Madalena’s bare feet.

“Of course,” the woman said as she gestured for the Prime Valkyrie to follow her. “They will be this way.”

Eve stepped out of the dressing room, and I turned my eyes away from Madalena’s ass so that I could gaze at the vampire.

“Wow,” I whispered as I blinked. “Were you saving the best for last?”

“Of course,” Eve said as she ran her pale fingers down the sides of her hips. Her dress was mostly red and hugged her body like a second skin. Her left shoulder strap was gray fabric, and it dropped down to cover her left breast in the matching color before it wrapped around her waist like a sash. The red color matched her eyes, and the pale skin of her arms, legs, and cleavage was a nice contrast to the gray and dark crimson.

“That’s the one,” I said. “Red is your color.”

“I am glad you like it,” she smiled at me. “Now for shoes. I think I see the optimal pair over beside Madalena. Will you join us over on that side of the store?”

“Yeah,” I said as I took her hand and walked over with her.

Madalena was trying on a pair of golden laced gladiator sandals the clerk had given her. I thought they looked great, but she frowned as she walked in them.

“I will not be able to run quickly in them, nor will I be able to fight very well in them. Do you have boots?”

“We do,” the clerk said as she pointed to brown leather boots with heels that looked to be almost ten centimeters high. “These just came in, but

you have such beautiful feet and legs. Do you really want to cover them? This dress is a perfect match for those sandals.”

“What about more practical footwear?” Madalena asked as she scanned the shelves of shoes. The sandals she currently wore actually looked to be the most comfortable of the display.

“Just wear them,” I said. “They look great on you.”

“I am concerned about our defense. Especially considering that we will not be allowed firearms.” Madalena brushed her long brown hair back and looked down at her shoes again.

“When I searched the minds of the emperor’s representatives, I found no hint of malicious intent.”

“You three are going to Emperor Kuroda’s party tonight?” the sales clerk gasped.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Wow,” she sighed. “That is amazing. These dresses will fit right in.”

“You have been to one of these events?” Madalena asked her.

“No,” the clerk admitted, “but our dresses are often present at such events.”

“Madalena, what will your aegis do when you are wearing these sandals?” I asked.

“They will be covered, and I will have improved traction.” She shrugged her shoulders. “Perhaps my concerns are unjustified. We are expecting a trap, so I wish to be prepared.”

“He’s expecting me, Eve, and Zea,” I said. “So we’ll catch him there.”

“I believe I will wear these,” Eve said as she stood in a pair of red heels. They weren’t that tall, but they provided enough lift to cause her legs to elongate nicely.

“I like them,” I said. Then I turned to the clerk and let her know we would take the three dresses and the two pairs of shoes.

Eve and Madalena went back to the changing room to put on their suits, and I paid the sales clerk while the other woman boxed the dresses and shoes. Eve and Madalena came to the front a few minutes later, and I

grappled with all the various boxes of clothes.

“Ahh fuck,” I said as we exited the store and then began to walk toward the harbor.

“What is wro--” Madalena began to ask, but I cut her off.

“We are being followed by the fuckers that were tailing Eve, Sivaha, Paula, and I earlier. I saw the cyborg behind us on the street corner.”

“I will kill him,” Madalena growled as her head spun around.

“Wait!” I hissed before she could glare down the street. “Killing him will land us in hot water. We need to try and capture him.”

“Yes,” Madalena agreed. “Then Eve can use her power on him.”

“Cyborgs with brain implants are difficult,” Eve admitted, “but I will be able to gain some information if I have enough time. However, I do not know how you will be able to capture him with the security cameras around. Perhaps we should just return to Persephone quickly?”

“Hmm,” I sighed as I looked down at the packages in my hands. I hated to let this guy spy on us, but Eve was right. If I was able to speak with the emperor tonight, I might be able to get his help finding my sister. If I turned around and tried to capture this cyborg dick-bag, things could go wrong, and we might have to fly away from the station in a hurry.

“Let’s just go back,” I said, and we continued our walk.

But we only made it five steps before I saw President Yu.

He was sitting outside in the fenced front patio of what looked like a cafe. He was wearing a light gray suit and the same white fucking lab coat that I always saw him in. He was sipping coffee from a small white cup while his pinky raised in the air.

The world seemed to slow to a crawl.

The edges of my vision turned to dark red.

My heart hammered in my chest like a boxer.

I heard both Eve and Madalena gasp as they each knew my mind and emotions, but I couldn’t do much of anything besides trying to keep the beast from tearing out of my soul.

The cafe was a good sixty meters from us and across the street. It was

the direction we were going to be traveling, but my mind struggled with my next course of action. Did I rush the man? Did I try to get away? He seemed to be crowd watching as he sipped his coffee, and his head wasn't even turned in my direction.

"Hold these boxes," I hissed as I passed the dresses to Madalena.

"Adam, let us wait a moment," Eve cautioned. "I am apprehensive of this situation."

"I am apprehensive about getting gore all over your new clothes," I growled as I stepped down the street.

"Please, my love," she urged. "Just wait one moment. Let me get closer so I can attempt to read his thoughts."

"I agree with Eve," Madalena said. "This seems like the trap we have been worried about. We should proceed with caut--"

As Madalena spoke, President Yu set his cup down, stood and turned toward us. His eyes met mine across the distance, and I felt my rage threaten to bubble over.

"Adam! Adam! Adam!" I heard Eve's voice, but it felt like it was a kilometer away. I was right on the edge of shifting, and my entire skeleton was vibrating.

The blond haired man beckoned me over with a fucking wave. As if he was meeting an old friend.

"We should fall back," I heard Madalena say as she lifted her head up so she could stare at the rooftops.

"I am going to talk to him," I said, and before my two lovers could object, I was already stomping down the street toward the man who had once tortured me.

The beast was screaming in my ears, and my eyes were darting around the street looking for any sort of ambush. I saw no guards, or snipers, or anything that looked out of the ordinary on the street. Just the usual pedestrians from countless star systems walking down a space station avenue. If Yu wanted to meet me on neutral ground, this might have been the perfect place to do it.

"Ahh, Subject Two!" he said once I was in earshot. The sound of his

voice made my nose hairs stand on end, and my head started to ache with the effort of holding back the monster in my soul.

“I’m going to fucking kill you,” I said my right hand fell down to my pistol.

“Ahh, ahh, ahhh. Manners.” He swung his finger in the air as if he was chastising me, but I was at the edge of the knee-high gate and I stepped over it as I pulled my massive pistol out of its holster and pointed it at his head.

It was one of the weapons he had issued me.

There were some ten customers sitting around us, and I heard the click of safety buttons release as they all pointed their pistols at me.

It didn’t fucking matter if they killed me, as long as I got to kill him first.

“I’ve been waiting a long time to see you again, Subject Two.” His mouth spit into that perfect fucking smile with the too perfect teeth.

“I’ve been waitingggggg a long time to put a bullet through your brain.” My tongue was feeling heavy, and my vision was starting to rotate around the sight of my pistol

“Don’t be silly, old friend. You followed my clues! I’m so proud of you. Let’s sit down and have an adult conversation. Ahhh. Is this the Live Sample I asked you to retrieve?” He nodded to my left.

“Don’t fucking call her that,” I growled again, and my pointer finger started to tremble on my finger. Fuck. I wanted to kill him so much. I almost imagined the taste of his blood as it would spatter on my face.

But then I wouldn’t know how to fight the beast in my soul. Nor would I get my sister.

“Ahh, Eve then.” He nodded toward her, and I shifted my eyes over to see that Madalena had dropped the dress boxes and held her pistol out. So did Eve, and I could tell they would go to war as soon as I pulled the trigger of my own handgun.

He knows I can read minds. He has training against it. All he is thinking about is how your sister is waiting in a cell for you to rescue her.

“Where is my sister?” I growled as I pushed the barrel of my pistol into his forehead.

“Ahh. So headstrong.” He shook his head and his skin brushed against the tip of my pistol. “Let us put away the weapons and sit down. We can have an enlightened conversation.”

“Or I could just fucking kill you,” I said.

“If you wanted that, you would have done so, Subject Two.” He let out a laugh. “Besides, I have something you want, and you have something I want. I came here to make a deal.”

“You aren’t getting Eve,” I snarled. “Fuck you.”

“Ahh,” he sighed as he looked at the vampire. “I’m no longer interested in her. There is an old saying; ‘bigger fish to fry’ I think is the term. Will you sit? You will want to hear what I have to say.”

“No.”

“Really?” he asked as he rolled his eyes. “I spent a shitload of rhodium to get you and your ship here. I’m just asking for a few minutes of your time in exchange for your sister. I don’t know how to be more civ--”

I flicked my pistol forward with a snap. The metal of the barrel smashed into his nose and I heard it pop. He tumbled backward away from the table where he stood, but I was already spinning around to point my weapon at the ten fuckers sitting around us.

Eve and Madalena were already shooting.

But so were the ten fuckers with their handguns already pointed at us.

Blood exploded from the chest of one man, and I felt a bullet hit me in the armor over my stomach. I sent a slug through the skull of a woman sitting near the middle, and her second shot went wild and smashed into the glass of the cafe window behind me. Another bullet hit me in the shoulder, but I ignored it as I yanked my gun sideways and kept pulling the trigger.

Two of the men on the side twisted their guns toward each other and each of their pistols blew holes in their surprised faces. Eve had manipulated them. I continued my arm movement and sent a hunk of metal through the nose of the last woman sitting on my side.

I turned my head around as I whipped my pistol back to the other side of the patio, but Madalena and Eve had already killed the others, so I turned back to where Yu had stumbled back.

My ears were still thumping from my anger, but I could hear screams coming from the crowd on the streets. The station's security team took a long time to show up when there were three power armored fuckers killing people, we'd definitely be able to make it back to Persephone without them catching us.

Then I'd extract every bit of information I needed from this fucker.

"Well, that was incredibly fucking rude," Yu said as he moved his hand over his bloody nose as he tried to stand up.

"How about this?" I said as I punched with my left hand. I'd pulled the blow so that I only hit him with about a quarter of my strength, but it was enough to knock him unconscious.

"Get the dresses," I said to Madalena as I patted Yu's lab coat and suit down. He had a small pistol holstered in his belt, and I passed it to Eve before I picked the man up and threw him over my right shoulder like a sack of manure. I almost couldn't stand to touch the man, but I needed to get him back to Persephone.

"Adam!" Eve shouted as the door the cafe opened. Two men with pistols were stepping through the door, but before I could turn my gun toward them, Eve used her power to slam the door back into their faces, and then twist their pistols up so that they shot each other full of bullets.

"Damn, good job," I said to her as we leapt over the cafe gate and started to run down the street with Madalena.

"I should drop these boxes," the Prime Valkyrie said. "I might need to use my pistol again, and it is doubtful we will be allowed to attend this gathering with Emperor Kuroda."

"Drop them if we get attacked," I said. "But I would prefer that you keep them. I think we might be able to get out of this okay."

"Husband," the Prime Valkyrie said as she shook her head. "Do you not remember that you are the king of the Vaish Overlord Clan, and I am your queen? If you wish me to have a dress, I will snap my fingers, and we will have thousands delivered to us."

"Yeah," I said as I glanced behind us to make sure none of Yu's lackeys were following us. "But I like those particular dresses. So let's try to keep them."

She didn't speak, but I heard a distant siren sound far behind us. The pedestrians we ran through looked at us with concern, but they all laid their hands on their weapons.

We made it to the harbor section, and I hit my transponder. "Crew, we have secured Yu. We might have some of his guards chasing us. We are coming from the Green District and need an escort."

"Understood, my lord," Lux said. "Four of us will enter the harbor and meet you."

"Ensure someone is guarding the hold," I said. "Paula and Kasta, get the drones ready."

"On it!" Paula said.

"And Nikki?" I asked.

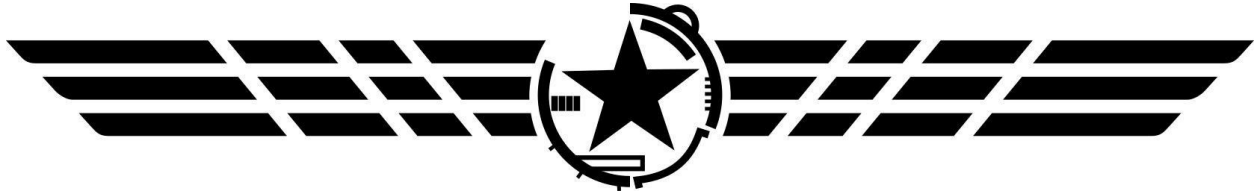
"Yes, my lord?" the pilot replied.

"Get ready to blast out of here. Course is Nordar 13. I'm not sure if we are going to leave, but I need you to be ready."

"My lord," Madalena said. "Behind us."

I turned my head as I ran and saw a group of armored figures chasing after us. They were still a good eight hundred meters behind us, but these were big men, with mean expressions on their faces and massive pistols in their hands.

And they wore large metal collars around their necks.



Chapter 13

“Shit!” I shouted. “Run faster!”

“What are they?” Madalena asked, and her voice actually sounded afraid.

It must have been because she was sensing my terror.

“They are like me,” I said as I hit my transponder again. “Crew, we are in trouble. Approximately eight hundred meters behind us are more men who can shift into weretigers. They will catch up with us soon.”

“We will deal with them, my lord,” Lux hissed through the transponder,

“Madalena,” I said. “Drop those dresses, turn on your aegis, grab Eve, and let’s move quicker.” I suddenly felt like an idiot for trying to hold onto the garments. It had been fun shopping with Eve and Madalena, and for a few moments, it felt like there was a bit of normalcy to our lives.

I should have known better.

Madalena tossed the boxes to the side and liquid metal began to drip and flow down her body. Before her armor even finished covering her boots, the Prime Valkyrie had wrapped her arms around Eve’s torso. Her back thrusters turned on with a purple burst of power, and the two women lifted off the ground and zipped ahead of me.

I had been sandbagging my run a bit so I paced with Eve, but now that they were moving, I pushed my legs to their full sprint. I’d always been a fast runner, but I worried that my pursuers were a few seconds away from

shifting, so I glanced over my shoulder to check their progress.

I was just in time to see the fur erupt across their skin.

“Fuck!” I growled as I turned back around. I could catch up to Madalena and Eve if I shifted, and I would be able to at least pace the tiger-men chasing me, but then I’d have to change back once we made it into Persephone and sleep.

I saw four armored figures with purple flame emerge from our dock some two kilometers ahead. There was a chance that I’d be able to make it to my Vaish defenders before the tiger-men chasing me, but if I failed, my pursuers would kill me and take Yu back. I recalled Eve’s warning about the beast in my soul. He was winning, and every time I shifted it brought him closer to taking control of me.

The risk wasn’t worth it. I had Yu unconscious over my shoulder right now. He would be the only one who could help me, so it didn’t matter that I used one extra shift.

I let the beast come to the surface and powered my running body with a never-ending flow of lava-like rage. I could feel the beast try to kill the man I held over my shoulder, but I stopped my own claws from coming up to tear at his throat. It was the first time my arms had moved through the monster’s will, and a cold fear replaced some of the anger in my stomach.

Instead of killing Yu, or turning to battle the group of armored weretigers running after me, I focused on the end goal of getting back to the ship with Yu alive so that we could question him.

I needed a cure for my condition. I needed to find my sister. I needed to escape my pursuers.

I pushed my running legs harder, and the gap between Persephone and I grew smaller.

Blue pulse rifle shots filled the air as my Aegis wearing crew shot their weapons at the pushing tiger-men. The crowd of pedestrians screamed with panic, and I heard the retort of gunfire behind me. Bullets whizzed by my head, but I guessed they weren’t aiming at me for fear that they would kill their boss.

Eve and Madalena turned into Persephone’s dock corridor, and I shouted for the armored Vaish to follow us. Lux shouted to call a retreat, and

they hit their thrusters so that they fell in a tight formation around me.

“EMP grenade,” Mikhael commented casually as I heard a metal object bounce near us. I twisted my head around and saw the man kick it away. Then we all dove deeper into the hallway, and Lux closed the security door right as the thing exploded.

“They will try to get through the door,” I growled as I raced up Persephone’s ramp between the two knight-drones Kasta and Paula had placed as sentries.

As soon as my boot touched down in Persephone’s hold, I felt relief pour through my body. I hadn’t expected this outcome when I planned on buying clothes for the emperor’s party, but now I was safe at home with the fucker who once experimented on me, tortured me, and forced me to be his slave. The party tonight didn’t matter, nor did the other tiger-men outside the security door. It didn’t even matter that the station security was probably going to get mad at us for attacking first.

I’d won this victory, and there was no way this fucker was going to escape my claws.

“Are you--?” Madalena asked when she and Eve came over to me.

“No,” I said as I lowered Yu’s unconscious body down on the ground. I could feel her concern and guessed she was about to ask me if I was injured. “Deal with the fuckers out front.”

“Yes, my lord,” Madalena answered, and she shouted some orders in Nordar that the rest of the Aegis wearing crew promptly obeyed.

“So that’s him huh?” Zea asked as she rested her hand on my large shoulder and looked down.

“Yeahhh,” I growled.

Please be calm, my love. Do not let the beast have his way or we will not be able to find the cure.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. My anger swirled in my stomach and mind, but I did my best to push it away. Zea was talking, but I couldn’t hear what she was saying. I heard pulse rifle fire behind me, but it seemed like it was hundreds of kilometers away. I heard Kasta say something, then Paula. Eve spoke and updated them on what had just

happened in the cafe's patio, but the world didn't seem to matter anymore. The creature I shared my body with wanted to take control and kill the unconscious man before me, and I was doing everything I could to calm its desires.

Then the man moaned, and my anger returned a thousand fold.

Madalena has led your warriors to victory against the weretigers. Please return to your human form. The creature you battle in your soul wants to kill Yu, and too much of you agrees.

I thought of the ocean waves and the palm trees. I thought of the breeze and the smell of salty air. I thought about Zea's hand on my shoulder, and heat of Eve's breath on my ear. Agony began to tear through my muscles, and it felt like my body was trying to shrink and expand at the same time.

I am with you, my love. Imagine we lay together on the beach with Zea and Madalena. The breeze tickles our skin, and the sun kisses our souls. The ocean sings its song to us, and there is nowhere else to be but in each other's company. We love you and want you to return to us. Do you feel the warmth on your skin? Let it fill your muscles and your bones until every part of you is relaxed.

Eve's gentle words helped my transformation, and I groaned as my skeleton settled into its human shape. My vision was a bit blurry, but my eyes came into focus when I looked into the red eyes of the beautiful woman who had once freed me from years of slavery.

"Thank you," I whispered, but Eve only smiled and brushed her fingers across my cheek.

"Zea," I asked as I turned to her. She still had her arm on my shoulder, and the unconcerned look on her face made me think she didn't know how close I had just come to losing my soul to the beast. "I need you to communicate with the security team and try to smooth things over. Tell them that this fucker and his men attacked us."

"You got it," she said as she touched her transponder and asked for Nikki to connect her.

Yu groaned again, and I crouched down so that my face was close to his. The man's nose was broken, but blood wasn't dribbling out of his nostrils as quickly as I would have thought.

“Wake up, asshole,” I growled.

“Uhhh,” he said as his fingers came up to his face. “Where am I?”

“You are on my ship,” I said as a smile spread across my lips. I almost couldn’t believe my luck.

“Well,” he said as his blue eyes blinked open. “That was not according to my plan.”

“It was my plan,” I said as I grabbed his suit coat at the chest and stood up. The man came up with me, and he let out a gasp as I shook him lightly. “I hope you understand how fucked you are right now.”

“Hmmm,” he sighed as he shook his head. “You have really thrown a wrench in my plans, Subject Two. I’m going to have to do a lot of--”

“Don’t call me Subject Two,” I growled as I let go of his suit and shoved my fingers into his throat. The strike wasn’t enough to break his neck, but it bruised his esophagus, and the blonde man bent over with a pained gasp.

Then I cuffed him on the side of the head and sent him sprawling onto the metal floor of Persephone’s hold.

“Fuck!” He gasped as he grabbed his throat and wiggled on the ground. “Why did you hit me?”

“Remember what you told me when I first started to serve you? Pain dictates obedience. Go ahead and call me Subject Two again and see what happens.”

“You’d prefer Adam then?” Yu wheezed as he rubbed his throat.

“Yeah,” I replied as I walked over, grabbed him by the back collar of his lab coat, and yanked him back up to his feet.

“That’s funny,” Yu chuckled. “Since I gave you that name as well.”

I slammed my left fist into his stomach and the man bent over double as the air exploded from his lungs. I let go of his coat and he fell back on the floor. I knew I shouldn’t feel as good as I was beating on him, but fuck this guy and all the shit he put me through. I took a deep breath and then stepped away from him. The exhaustion from my shift back into human form was starting to bleed into my bones and muscles. I wouldn’t be able to stay awake for much longer,

“You are angry with me,” Yu gasped, “but you should be happy. Look at all that I’ve done for you, Adam.”

“Fuck you!” I growled as my muscles fought back their lethargy. I was at his side in an instant and my left hand was closed around his throat.

“So much anger.” He laughed. “What did you do with all that anger in prison? How many years did the Yakuza leave you to rot in there? Thirty? Forty? It doesn’t matter. What matters is that I took you from that place and gave you a new life. I gave you godhood. I just can’t understand why you are so mad at me? You should be mad at yourself for not realizing how special you are.”

No! Eve’s voice slammed into my brain as I pulled my arm back. My fist suddenly couldn’t move, and I realized I was about to kill the man.

I took a deep breath, gained control over myself again, and then lowered my fist.

“You are trying to make me angry, Yu,” I said. “It won’t work.”

“Ahh,” he said as he clapped his hands together with a mocking smile “Two points for Adam. He’s a big boy now, and he’s learned one of my names. How did you figure it out?”

“One of your names?” Eve asked as Madalena came to stand on the other side of Yu. The rest of the crew in the hold was now standing around us, but the Vaish kept their helmets on.

“I have many, but Yu will work.” He turned away from Eve and then stared at me. “You did almost all of your job, Adam, but now I need you to finish this assignment.”

“Where is my sister?” I asked.

“She’s fine,” he said as a smug smile came to his lips. “I’ll be happy to give her to you, once you complete the mission.”

“Or I can just torture you, and then you’ll tell me.” I shrugged and tried to fight against the beast’s anger. Fortunately, my exhaustion was pushing away most of my rage. Unfortunately, I knew I was going to have to pass out in ten minutes.

“Now, now, now,” he said. “Is that any way to treat your father?”

“Fuck you,” I growled as the room started to spin again.

“I created you. I gave you everything you have. You were just a simple grunt, then you were a prisoner. Now, look at you.” He gestured around Persephone’s hold “You’ve got a nice ship and crew. You gallivant around the galaxy doing whatever you feel like. It seems like a nice life.”

“It is,” I growled, “and you had nothing to do with that.”

“Without me, there would be no you.” He gestured at me and then smiled at Eve. “There would be no her either. She’d still be stuck in Elaka Nota’s tubes, just like the rest of the vampires they are playing with.”

“What do you know of that?” I asked as I controlled my anger.

“Listen, Adam,” he said as he wiped his nose, “you never were much of a thinker, more of a ‘doer.’ Now you are going to work for me again. You’ll be doing something you are good at. I promise.”

His thoughts are very guarded. I get a hint of something every now and again, but it makes no sense. He knows about my sisters that Elaka Nota has experimented on, but he doesn’t seem to care.

“I’m not going to work with you,” I said as I shook my head.

“You will if you ever want to see your sister alive,” Yu said as his lips turned into a crooked smile.

I believe she is on the station, but I cannot get a location. Try to keep him talking.

“Is she here?” I asked the blonde man.

“Who?” he asked as he raised an eyebrow.

“My sister, you fucking piece of shit. Is she here?”

“Ahhh. Maybe.” He shrugged. “I don’t handle such things. I gave it to one of my men who performed the task of secreting her. See, I have a fleet one system over. I just didn’t want to scare the emperor here. She’s probably on one of those ships. Or maybe she is here. Or maybe not. I won’t know until you do what I need you to do.” Yu winked at Eve. “Not knowing keeps the curious minds at bay.”

The red-eyed woman frowned and shook her head.

“What is this job you think I would agree to do?” I asked.

“I thought that would be obvious,” he sighed.

“No,” I said, “it isn’t obvious.”

“I need you to kill Emperor Kuroda and his four wives,” Yu said as he rolled his eyes. “Come on.”

“Why him?” I asked as the beast growled in my stomach.

“Because I fucking said so.” Yu frowned. “Do you need another reason?”

“Yes,” I growled.

“Then the reason is you get your sister back, Adam.” He chuckled. “I am surprised you kept the name, but then again. It fits you.” Yu turned to Eve and smiled “When will you betray him to your masters?”

Eve shook her head, but I felt shock cascade down my spine. Yu must have noticed my surprise, and he turned his blue eyes to me.

“It’s just like the bible, isn’t it? Eve has her own agenda and Adam is left with the consequences.”

“You are trying to drive a wedge between us,” Eve said calmly. “It will not work. There is nothing I have kept from him.”

“Hmmm.” The man shrugged and then wiped his nose again. “The issue, Adam, is that you were supposed to meet me at the cafe and engage in a heated, but peaceful dialogue. During this pleasant conversation, I was going to tell you to kill Kuroda and his wives tonight at his party. Alas, now you’ve caused violence and pandemonium on the streets of Wobbegong, and I expect that he will cancel the invitation. You’ll need to find another way to kill him and his women tonight.”

“I’m not your assassin,” I hissed.

“No?” He raised an eyebrow and then shook his head. “Do you know why I picked you? There were thousands of prisoners in that hell hole prison, but you were the only one I was interested in.”

“I don’t fucking care,” I said. “If you want to live, you’ll give me my sister and then answer my questions.”

“I picked you because the monster I was looking to put into you was already there.” He pointed at my chest and his lips spread into a smile that showed his perfect teeth. “There was almost no work required.”

I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye, and I turned a bit to see Zea motion for me to come speak with her. Yu caught the motion also, and he glanced around the hold as if he was just noticing that people were standing around him.

“You have surrounded yourself with beautiful women. Just like the king of the jungle should. I’m so proud of you, Son.”

“Fuck you,” I growled. Then I turned to Lux. “Don’t let him move.” The Valkyrie nodded, and I walked over to where Zea stood. Eve, Madalena, Paula, and Kasta came with me, but Zea shrugged when we got close.

“Weirdness,” she whispered as we all huddled together. “I spoke to the security clerk, who forwarded me to her manager, who forwarded me to someone else, who forwarded me to... guess who?”

“Reeyal,” Eve said.

“Damn it!” Zea sighed. “Fucking mind reader.”

“I don’t have time for jokes, Zea,” I grunted as I wiped the sleep from my eyes.

“Right, sorry. Anyways, they said they reviewed the security footage and said that our ‘assailants’ did pull their guns on us first.

“That is incorrect,” Madalena said. “Adam had his weapon out before Yu’s guards did.”

“I wasn’t there,” Zea said, “so I dunno, but they still want us to come to the party. They said the emperor wishes to meet the tiger who is loved by four women.”

“Actually seven women,” Kasta whispered with a sagely nod.

“Kasta...” Paula moaned.

“Wait, who is number seven?” Zea asked with concern obvious in her voice.

“Enough,” I growled at the same time as Kasta whispered, “Juliette.”

“They must have seen us take Yu on our ship, and our attackers turn into tiger-men,” I said. “Then Madalena and her team killed them in the harbor. Did the emperor’s representatives say anything about that?”

“Nope,” Zea said with a shrug of her slender shoulders. “Just that

Emperor Kuroda was delighted you were coming with your wives.”

“Eve, did you get anything else from him?” I asked as I gestured back to Yu.

“No,” she said as she shook her head.

“What did he mean when he spoke of your masters?” Madalena asked.

“I do not know, but I do not need to read his mind to understand his intentions.”

“Does he speak of the Draugr?” Madalena asked.

“I said I do not know,” Eve’s eyes narrowed.

“It is convenient that you do not know.”

“I am disappointed that you do not believe me.” Eve sighed heavily.

“I believe you,” the Prime Valkyrie said quickly. “Search my mind. I apologize for considering his words. I know you would not betray Adam.”

“Yes. You are forgiven. Let us move past this.” Eve turned back to me. “Your sister is important, but a cure for your condition is more critical for our mission.”

“I’m not going to let my sister stay his prisoner,” I said.

“I agree with Eve,” Madalena said. “He is a liar, but we might find some truth in his words when you speak to him of your loss of control.”

“So are we going to this party or no?” Kasta asked, and everyone turned to her.

“Sis...” Paula moaned.

“What?” Kasta winced. “Seems like we should still follow the plan.”

“Why would we follow the fucking plan when they--” Zea started to say, but the android cut her off.

“So hear me out. Yu wants us to kill this emperor guy, and he’s holding Adam’s sister as collateral. Why not just do what we intended all along? Go to this party, sweet talk Emperor Fancy Pants, and then see if we can get access to the surveillance systems? We can even use Yu as leverage. I’m sure the emperor wants to know about the guy who went through all this trouble to kill him. We might even get an insight into what Yu’s endgame is.”

“Hmmm,” Zea said as she scratched behind her ear.

“Or we could not go, and Zea could just hack into the system,” Paula said.

“It’s going to take me a while,” the hacker said. “Especially if I don’t want to get caught. Probably ten hours.”

“So we go to the party!” Kasta whispered enthusiastically while she clapped her hands. “I’ve got my dress all ready.”

“I do not think we should go,” Madalena said. “The emperor’s minions must know that we pulled our weapons on Yu first, yet they still wish for us to attend. It seems suspicious.”

“But you still want to go, don’t you?” Kasta asked.

“I am the Prime Valkyrie, and the queen of the Vaish Overlord Clan. I do not care about a party thrown by some distant emperor that controls a few solar systems. Adam is lord and master over three hundred and eighty-five sectors of original Vaish territory and another two hundred and twenty Skyad sectors.”

“Uhh huhh.” Kasta smirked as she pointed toward Persephone’s bay door. “Is that why you went back to get those boxes?” We turned to look and saw the dress boxes.

“My husband liked them,” Madalena said with her usual emotionless voice.

“Sure.” The android stared at the Prime Valkyrie.

“Fine. I would not mind attending, but I am cautious that the emperor might suspect we now work for Yu since they have no doubt seen us carry the man back to our ship.”

“But he might not know who Yu is,” Kasta countered. “And we did kill the men following.”

“Or he might know exactly who Yu is,” Zea added. “And he’ll want to thank us for capturing him.”

“I want to go back and speak with that fucker,” I said as I turned back around, but I felt Eve’s hand on my chest.

“You are exhausted,” she said.

“I’m fine.”

“No,” Madalena said. “You should rest until this meeting with Emperor Kuroda.”

“It’s called a party,” Kasta hissed, but everyone ignored her.

“I need to ask him about my sister and my--”

“I will ask the questions while you rest,” Eve said.

“And I will join you,” Madalena said as she looked at the vampire.

“Of course,” Eve agreed. “Zea should be present as well.”

“I think I need to be there,” I said.

“You fight with your anger when you are around him, my love,” Eve said.

“There is not enough time for you to rest, but we do not know what to expect at this party. Please let the three of us handle Yu while you try to sleep.”

“Alright,” I said after I considered. “You are right. I can’t think straight when I talk to him. I just want to kill him.”

“I want to kill him as well,” Eve said, and her eyes pulsed with a red glow. “But first we must accomplish our goals. Then we will have our revenge.”

“Then we’ll go to this party,” I said as I stifled a yawn. “But you five have to worry about something else.”

“What?” Zea asked.

“Yu is going to have more soldiers on this station. They aren’t going to let us freely walk to the emperor’s party. You need to figure out a way to get us there and back to Persephone safely.”

“I’ve got just the idea,” Paula said with a pretty smile, “and it is only a little dangerous.”



Chapter 14

“Adam,” a voice beckoned to me. I moaned for it to go away, but then I remembered that I was supposed to go to this emperor’s party and try to find news of my sister.

I rolled over and forced my eyes open. Fortunately, the room was dim, so it didn’t take long for my eyes to adjust. Then they focused on Eve, and my breath left my body.

She was wearing the dress we bought at the store, but her hair was curled down her back, her cheeks were blushed with makeup, and her eyes were lined with dark purple eyeshadow. Her lips were already red, but a deep burgundy tint had been added to them. She wore her usual choker around her pale neck, and it didn’t quite match her tight fitting red and gray dress, but it still drove me wild.

“How long have I been asleep?” I asked.

“Three hours,” she replied. “You need to take a shower and change so that we will be only slightly late to the party.”

“I’m on it,” I said as I stood and peeled my armor off. I felt like I’d been living and sleeping in the suit for two days, but it had only been about twenty hours. “Talk to me about Yu when I am in the shower.”

“Of course,” she smiled at me, and my heart fluttered in my chest. It was too bad she was already dressed, or I would have asked for her to join me in the shower.

“And I would have agreed,” she answered my thoughts, “but we are in a hurry, and I am sure you wish to hear about our prisoner.”

“Yeah,” I said as she followed me into the bathroom. A moment later I was in the shower, and the beautiful vampire was telling me what she learned from President Yu.

“I am confident your sister is on the station,” she began.

“Why?”

“I asked Yu about her location many times. He continued to say he did not know, but then I asked him about the man who was ordered to take care of her. Yu’s mind is like a fortress, but the questions the three of us asked eventually wore him down, and bits of information began to slip out. I will spare you all the details, but there is actually a group of warriors guarding her, and it is doubtful that they left the station because both of Yu’s ships are still docked at Wobbegong.”

“Both ships? I thought he said he had a fleet?”

“He does,” she replied. “It is over a hundred vessels, and they are in the next system. However, he only brought two into the station. I was unable to get a reason as to why beyond he did not want the Emperor to know.”

“How do you know that they are still docked?” I asked.

“Zea called up the security clerk and asked.” Eve laughed. “Madalena and I were slightly surprised the strategy worked, but I recalled when Zea made that phone call when we were on Trappist - 1e and got us permission to launch.”

“Yeah, I remember that,” I said with a chuckle.

“Your sister may not be on the station,” Eve said, “but if she is, we should be able to find her with access.”

“If the emperor will give it to us,” I asked.

“Even if he does not, Zea can break into their system. This is just the quickest and easiest method.”

“Unless this Emperor Kuroda has something insidious planned for us,” I said as I finished rinsing the soap off my body. As soon as I was clean, I hit the dryer and then stepped out. I realized I had forgotten to shave, but my beard was only a little more than stubble and didn’t look half bad.

“I will be able to tell quickly,” Eve said. “If we are in danger, we can leave.”

“You mean ‘fight our way out?’” I snickered, but I also thought about the aegis amulet that Madalena and the rest of the Vaish crew wore. The armor we had from Persephone’s equipment stores was very well made, and could stop a lot of damage, but it was obvious. Having everyone on my crew equipped with the aegis armor would mean we could wear normal clothes all the time and still have access to armor.

To wear the armor, we all needed to be Nordar.

To be Nordar, we had to pass the rite.

“If there is a trap the emperor is intending to spring, I will know of it before it is sprung,” Eve continued. “I feel less worried now that we have Yu.”

“I’m slightly less worried, but still worried.”

“I spoke to him of your condition,” she said as I grabbed my toothbrush.

“Okay,” I sighed as I put the device in my mouth and turned to look at her.

Her eyes met mine, and she did not speak for a few moments.

“You are the oldest living experiment he knows of. The others all died after a year. None of them suffered as you have as they were all killed in combat.”

I closed my eyes and focused on brushing my teeth for a few seconds. I spit, then brushed more, and then spit again. Finally, I rinsed my mouth out with water and put my toothbrush away.

It was all I could do to keep from screaming.

“We will find another way,” she whispered.

“Yeah,” I said. “It doesn’t matter. I should have died a long time ago.”

“No,” she hissed as she grabbed my arm. “You matter to me, my love. I will not give up so easily.”

“I know you won’t,” I said as I smiled at her. “But we have a job to do, and I’m going to do it with the time I have left. As you said, we owe the universe.”

“We still have time. We can--”

“Did he say anything else of interest?” I interrupted her as I walked out of the bathroom and walked to my closet. I remembered that we had bought a suit for me, and I turned to find it laying on the couch in my sitting room.

“We asked him about the video of Parnarta, but his replies became odd.”

“Odd?” I asked as I put on my underwear and then slid into my dress pants.

“Our questions caught him off guard. He did not guess we saw the video.”

“Did he explain his lack of aging? Or what he did with the corpse of the tiger-man?” I asked as I grabbed the shirt.

“He did not remember,” she said.

“Huh?” I asked as my fingers froze over my shirt buttons.

“As I said, it is odd. He knew he was there, but he did not have memories of the place and time. He guarded his thoughts, of course, but there were no leaks, even when we asked him repeatedly.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“I do not know,” she admitted. “We will have plenty of time to figure it out. Once we have found your sister, we can leave this place, and Yu will rot in a Vaish cell for the rest of his life.”

“I still have a bit of disbelief that we actually caught him,” I said. “It seemed too easy.”

“This is a topic Zea has brought up that you might wish to consider before we leave.” Eve moved toward me and raised her fingers to help me button the top part of my shirt since my neck was almost too thick to close the collar around.

“What?”

“It will be safer to skip the party and let Zea break into their systems. Then we can just find your sister and be done with this place. Going to the party risks us being attacked by Yu’s soldiers, or we are at risk from what this emperor might have in store for us.”

“You said you detected no negative thoughts from Baccor and Reeyal

when you searched their minds,” I said.

“Yes, but I will not know the emperor’s mind until I am there. I still believe we should go. I believe it will be the most effective use of our time, but Zea will ask you to consider this option before we leave.”

“I’m surprised she doesn’t want to go to the party,” I said as I knotted my tie around my neck.

“She does. Very much so. She is just worried about our safety and wants to use her skills to protect us.”

“I get it,” I said as I put my socks and shoes on. As soon as I finished with them, I put on my coat and then turned to Eve. “You liked this in the shop. How do I look now?”

“Hmmm,” she sighed as her red eyes roamed my face, shoulders, and chest. “I am sad we do not have more time.”

“Yeah,” I said, “me too.”

“I did not mean with your condition, my love. I meant before the party. Your other ‘wives’ are waiting for us, but I would like you to take me now.”

“After the party,” I said as I smiled at her and gestured toward the door. She walked out before me, and I found my eyes lingering on my bed.

I didn’t know how to shield my thoughts from Eve, but I knew there were only so many more times I would make love to her, and Zea, and Madalena. My life and sanity were starting to slip through my fingers, and the fight with the SAVO seemed like the last activity I would be able to complete.

“Yu say anything else?” I asked as we walked toward the elevator.

“Yes,” she said with a frown. “He said he would be willing to ‘take you under his wing’ again and attempt to find a cure for the beast. He claimed to have a few ideas, but the leaks in his mind make me think his ideas involved pumping you full of a more experimental gene therapy.”

“Fuck that,” I said as we entered the elevator. “Did you ask him why he sent me to take you from Elaka Nota?”

“Yes,” she said, “but it was much like the explanation of the Parnarta video. He knew he had done so, but he carried no memories of the incident. You told me of the dropship where he gave you the order to jump, and I

hinted around that scenario. He still did not seem to recall it.”

“He has trained against your powers,” I said. “He knows what you can do and might just have a better defense around those thoughts.”

“It might be,” she said. “But the more time I spent with the man, the more strange I found him. He is very intelligent and has an incredible willpower, but it is almost as if parts of his memories are gone.”

“Hmm,” I said as I thought through her words. “It doesn’t matter right now. We have him, and we’ll extract every drop of knowledge about my genetic experiments. If we can get his process, we might be able to find another doctor that can help me.”

“Yes,” Eve said with a wide smile. “That is the Adam I love. We can beat this together. We will find a way to restore you.”

“What if the solution was taking the tiger out of me?” I asked. “What if I couldn’t shift anymore?”

“I love the man, not the beast,” she said.

“Just making sure.”

We walked out of the hallway and into the hold. My eyes were immediately drawn to the three other women. They looked absolutely amazing, and my mouth actually began to water.

Zea was wearing the dress I bought her at Queen’s Hat. The bottom part of the dress was cut high and tight in the front to display her long legs, but the back part fell in a wave of dark lace fabric. The top part fit tight across her torso, but a deep V-neck showcased her small pert breasts. The black paisley pattern was cross stitched with red thread that contrasted with her deep blue eyes, and her face turned bright red when she saw me devour her with my eyes.

“Zea, you look incredible,” I whispered, but her only answer was her cheeks turning an even brighter shade of red.

Kasta was wearing a blue dress that almost looked like more of a web than an actual garment. Her left shoulder was covered with the sheer fabric, but her right had a light cloth webbing. The pattern of contrasting blue satin and silk webbing crisscrossed each other like a checkerboard down her body, with peeks of her perfect skin showing. Where the dress reached her hips, the

left side became the solid fabric and fell down to her knee like a half skirt. Her right side was uncovered, and I could almost see the bottom of her butt cheek there. It looked as if she wasn't wearing any underwear, and I guessed that I'd be able to see her womanhood if she bent over to her left side too much. Her shoes were the same shade of blue, and the heels were unbelievably high.

"You like it?" the android asked as she turned around so I could see all of her body. I recalled the catnip incident in the infirmary and wondered what would have happened if Eve had not interrupted us. I knew that I found both of the twins very alluring, but I had kept my distance from them.

"Sis, you look like a slut," Paula growled and crossed her arms.

"Someone has to." Kasta laughed. "Besides, Adam likes it."

The women all turned to me, and I nodded at the android. "It suits you, and I do like it."

"Yay!" Kasta clapped her hands, but Paula rolled her eyes.

I turned to Madalena and let my eyes wander over her body and white dress. She really was pulling off the Greek goddess look, and I felt her pleasure twist and pulse into me. Her outfit was showing almost as much skin as Kasta's, and it was apparent that Madalena's body was toned to perfection.

"My lord?" she finally asked, and I shook my head as if I was in a daze.

"You look amazing. All four of you do. I'm the luckiest man in the universe."

"Awww," Kasta said. "We love you too."

"What is the plan for getting to the party?" I asked them.

"It is taken care of," Madalena said, and I gave her a puzzled look.

"The party is actually in the Red district," Zea said. "We asked for permission to exchange docks. Yu's lackeys might have been staking out our dock, but they are going to have to get to the whole other side of the station now."

"We moved when I was sleeping?" I asked.

"No," Madalena said, and as if on cue, Madalena's transponder beeped.

“We will dock in thirty seconds, Prime Valkyrie,” Nikki said.

“Great,” I said. “What about the way home?”

“Our dock is about six-hundred meters from the emperor’s private estate on the station,” Zea continued. “Yu’s team might be waiting for us at the perimeter, but Lux, Milda, and Calisto will escort us there and back. Paula will also have drones in the air, and the rest of the crew will be covering Persephone.”

“Good,” I said. “I’m glad you all figured it out.”

Persephone vibrated a tiny bit, and Nikki’s voice came over our transponders. “We are docked.”

“Thank you, Nikki,” Madalena said, and the five of us walked toward the exit door of the hold after we said goodbye to Paula.

My love, you have much on your mind, but Paula is sad that she was not invited. Perhaps you can spend some time with her tomorrow? She does not need her affection returned, but I believe you can strengthen the relationship with her if you let her know how much you appreciate her.

I nodded to Eve as we walked, and I made a mental note to have lunch or dinner with the genius engineer after we found my sister and left the station.

Lux, Calisto, and Milda met us at Persephone’s hatch door. Their Aegis armor was on and covering their face, but I was getting used to telling them apart by the differences of the screaming skull faces on their helmets. The three of them carried pulse pistols, but I doubted that they would have a problem using the smaller weapons to murder anyone who tried to attack us.

Josefinna and Mikhael were also standing by the door with their armor on, but they each carried their rifles. Hegeia, Uma, and Waiola were off to the side, but the three women were wearing the plated armor that Zea, Eve, Paula, Kasta, and I normally wore. The three Idonan women also carried pulse rifles, and they smiled at me when I walked past.

“Let’s get going,” I said to Lux, and the Valkyrie hit the button to open the hatch door.

My four “wives” and I followed the armored Vaish women down the ramp and out through the security door. A trio of floating drones also moved

above our heads as we walked and then poured out into the harbor. We waited a few moments while we looked at Kasta, and then she gave us the signal to move forward.

This harbor looked a bit smaller than the green one we were previously docked at. It was only one level, and a quick count made me think that there were only about a quarter of the pedestrians. The combination of the four beautiful women wearing dresses and the three armor covered Vaish warriors gave the people in the harbor pause, and most moved to the other side of the road so that they would avoid walking too close to us.

It only took us a few minutes to reach the emperor's estate. It looked like one of the older Japanese castles, only the materials were made out of polished copper colored metal. There was a wall around the property, and a line of ten couples were waiting to get in.

There were also a shitload of guards.

I didn't see any of the power armored cyborgs, but the guards around the castle were equipped with drum magazine rifles and shotguns. On top of every corner of the wall was a platform where a machine gunner sat. The guards' green and white armor was bulky, and I had no doubt that it would stop everything but a shotgun slug or a pulse rifle bullet. The guards near us set their eyes on Lux, Milda, and Calisto, but the three armored women ignored them and kept their attention on the area surrounding us.

"Everything looks clear from the air," Kasta whispered to us as the line moved forward. "They have a guard outpost every block for the next kilometer deeper into the Red District. Lots of the emperor's guards are out patrolling. It would take a tank to break through. I'm also seeing a lot of drones in the air, but they are ignoring mine."

"Why are they ignoring yours?" Madalena asked.

"No guns," Kasta replied. "All the ones up here are armed and are painted green and white. Mine are obviously civilian mod--" she gasped and then there was a spark up in the air. We turned our heads upward and saw a small burning object float down to the ground some three hundred meters from us.

"Well, shit," Kasta hissed. "They got mad. I'm trying to get the other two out of there."

“Do they know it is you?” Zea asked with concern.

“Maybe, but I think it’s just more that I’m in restricted airspace. Let me concentrate a few moments.”

The line moved up a bit, and we stepped forward. There were only two groups in front of us now, and I started to feel my nerves fray a bit.

The guards are bored. They are not on the lookout for us.

“I got away,” Kasta said. “Yep, I think they were just trying to keep me out of the airspace. I’ve parked one in the red district so I can kind of see the lay of the land, and I’ve got the other in the harbor so I can see our escape route.”

“Good,” I said, and then the line moved forward.

A few moments later the couple in front of us was allowed inside, and I stepped up the guards.

“I’m Adam,” I said in Japanese.

“Adam?” The guard was almost as big as me, and his nose looked like it had been broken four or five times.

“Captain of Persephone,” I clarified, and the man nodded his head as he glanced at his data tablet.

“You’ve got a plus four down here for you. Are you armed?”

“No,” I said as I glanced at the four women in dresses.

“Your personal guards are not allowed inside,” he said as he looked to the armored women.

“They will wait out here,” I replied.

“You may enter. Enjoy.” He gestured with his hand and we walked inside.

“That was easy,” Kasta said as we entered the hallway beyond the wall.

“Let’s hope getting out will be just as easy,” I replied.

We stepped out of the hallway and entered a grand garden courtyard. Maple and cherry trees dotted along a hillside of neatly manicured grass. A babbling stream twisted between boulders, redwood walkways, and stone sculptures of dragons. Paper lanterns hung across rope lines between the trees

and white pagodas. There were probably about two hundred people mingling through the walkways of the courtyard, and I could hear the distant sound of harp music coming from the far side of the garden.

“It’s beautiful,” Zea said after she let out a soft whistle.

“I agree,” Eve whispered as she stretched her fingers out to touch the bark of a tree we walked past. “It is real.”

“You have seen such trees on *Odin Geirr*,” Madalena said, “but I also agree. The designer who crafted this place was skilled. Husband, if this courtyard pleases you, I will have one built for you on your battle fortress.”

“You can do that?” I asked as we slowed our walk down the paved path.

“Of course. Anything to please you.” The Prime Valkyrie gave me a ghost of a smile, and I could feel her pride.

“Sure, if it is no big deal. I don’t want to waste resources on something when we have a war to fight.”

“It will not be a waste of resources if it brings you pleasure.”

“Alright,” I said, but I noticed Zea frown and turn away from us.

We continued our walk through the path and came to a central pagoda. There was an open space here, and most of the crowd was gathered between the appetizer tables. A large wood dance floor was laid out on the side of the open space, and I saw a few couples dancing to the song the harpist played.

“Everyone is dressed so fancy,” Zea said as she gestured out to the mingling crowd.

“None shine as bright as you four,” I said as my eyes passed over the crowd. It was mostly older businessmen accompanied by beautiful women that were probably a third their age. A few of the men wore military uniforms, but most seemed to be civilians. There were mild discussions among the crowd, but it looked as if cliques had not formed yet, so it might be a good time for us to get involved in a conversation.

Or we could just go straight to the emperor.

“I’m guessing Kuroda is in his castle.” I nodded to the far side of the open floor. The front doors of the decorative metal building were open, and there were a trickling of party-goers moving in and out.

“Do we have time to dance?” Kasta asked as she rested her hand on my arm and pointed at the harp player.

“Kasta, we have work to do,” I said.

“Yeah, but you don’t want to make it too obvious we are looking for the emperor. Gotta play it out organically. Then you don’t seem as needy. Let’s dance, eat, drink, and wander until we run into him.”

I looked at Eve, Zea, and Madalena.

“The food does look pretty damn good,” Zea said, “and I wouldn’t mind dancing with you.”

“I can find the emperor easily,” Eve said as she touched her temple and smiled at me.

“I disagree,” Madalena said. “We should accomplish our mission and return to Persephone as soon as possible. If you wish to dance and eat. We can do so on *Odin Geirr*.”

“Awwww,” Kasta sighed. “Maddy is such a stick in the mud sometimes. Come on girl, I’ll dance with you first.”

“Dance with me?” Madalena raised an eyebrow with confusion.

“Sure! See?” Kasta turned and pointed at the dance floor where two women were dancing together. The pair were dressed with dresses that looked to have come from the same designer. One was red with gold dragon designs, and the other was gold with red dragon designs. The women were holding hands while they danced, and their faces were lit with smiles.

“I do not dance,” Madalena said.

“I do!” Kasta grabbed the Prime Valkyrie’s hand and then gave a light tug.

I would have expected the warrior woman to decline, or even yank her hand away from the android, but Madalena surprised me by stepping behind the blonde woman.

“Can you dance in those shoes?” Madalena asked as she walked away from me.

“Yep!” Kasta replied, and then they had threaded through the crowd.

“You and I have next dance,” I said to Zea.

“Uhh, you sure?” she asked as she tried to hide her surprise.

“Yeah, but let’s grab some food and drink first.”

Eve, Zea, and I moved to one of the tables, grabbed plates, and then picked out appetizers from the assortment of delicacies on display. The spread was mostly finger foods, cut sushi rolls, and potstickers. Almost as soon as we turned from the table with our food, servants handed us large glasses of wine, and we toasted each other before turning to watch Kasta and Madalena dance.

The blonde woman smiled as she twirled around in her blue dress, but the Prime Valkyrie’s movements were much more deliberate. They both had good rhythm, but while Kasta’s face was plastered with a happy smile, Madalena looked as if she was lining up a sniper shot. Her brow was knit with concentration, and her jaw looked tense. Between the two of them, there was a lot of skin showing, and I noticed that most of the men standing in the central open floor turned their heads to watch my wife and friend.

“They look pretty hot up there,” Zea said around a mouthful of potsticker.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Okay, you don’t have to agree with that much enthusiasm,” Zea joked, and Eve let out a light laugh.

With Kasta, Madalena, and the other pair of women dancing, the crowd seemed inspired, and six other women moved to the wood floor. The harpist seemed excited by the sudden surge in audience participation, and she began to play with a more upbeat tempo. A drummer joined her so that there was more of a beat, and I saw Madalena loosen up a little in the shoulders. She even tried to copy a few of Kasta’s movements.

“She’s pretty cool,” Zea said.

“Madalena?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Zea said. “Kasta too of course, but I’m liking the Ice Queen a lot more now. She’s an angel compared to Sivaha.”

“Hmm,” I said as I looked down at my plate.

“Doesn’t mean you can start sleeping with the twins,” Zea warned me.

“I didn’t even go there,” I said with a laugh.

“Just making sure,” Zea said as she scrunched her face at me.

“Will you dance with me?” I asked her as I set down my food and wine.

“Uhh, now?” she asked as she looked at Eve.

“Please go,” the red-eye woman said. “I will watch you from here.”

“We can all go together,” Zea said. “It’s okay--”

“You two go,” Eve urged. “I am happy to let you both have some alone time. Later the three of us can be together.”

“Ohhh, yeah,” Zea said as she winked at the other woman. Then she set down her plate, and I walked her to the dance floor.

I wasn’t much of a dancer, but I was a fighter, and the footwork came naturally to me. I only really knew a few moves, that involved spinning, dipping, or passing my partner around my body, but Zea picked up on them easily enough, and we were soon having a good time. My presence on the dance floor seemed to inspire other men to join on the floor. I also noticed a ring of guards move closer to the dance floor, but it seemed as if they were just worried about the crowd being more compact.

I have scanned the crowd, no one intends us harm.

I relaxed a bit more after Eve’s words, but Zea and I only did one more dance before Madalena asked if she could dance with me. Zea nodded at her, and then she moved to dance with Eve and Kasta.

“This is enjoyable,” Madalena said as she wrapped her arms around my neck.

“It is.” I wrapped my hands around the back of her waist and swayed in time to the music.

“I am not used to such activities.” I could feel her pleasure and her arousal, and it made my own emotions mirror her excitement.

“I liked watching you dance,” I said.

“As much as you enjoy dancing with me?” she asked.

“Madalena, I would enjoy anything you do while you are wearing that dress.”

“I am glad,” she said. “I live to serve you, Husband. I know I am not

the warmest of your lovers, but I--”

“I love all of you, and I am beyond lucky to have you all in my life.”

“I visited Sivaha while you were sleeping to bring her meal.”

“Ugh,” I sighed.

“You were correct to discipline her. You are our lord and husband. She must obey you.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“I know you are still remorseful, but you needed her to submit to you.”

“I’m not remorseful anymore,” I said. “I just don’t have time for bullshit. She needs to do what I say before I--”

I stopped talking when the pair of women I had seen dancing together earlier stepped beside Madalena.

“May we dance with your man?” the one in the red dress asked.

“No,” Madalena replied, and I almost snorted with laughter.

“Please?” the one in the gold asked.

They are wives of the emperor. They wish to speak with you privately.

“It’s okay,” I said to Madalena as I released my hands from her lower back. “It will just be for a song.”

“Or two, since there are two of us,” the woman in red said.

Madalena looked at her, but she must have sensed my emotions, and she nodded before stepping away from me.

“Hello, Handsome,” the woman in gold said as she wrapped her left fingers around the back of my neck.

“Or should we call you Adam?” the one in red said as she wrapped her right fingers around my neck and then joined the other woman’s. They then pressed the sides of their bodies together and began to sway in time with the music. They smelled like night jasmine, and my memories tried to return to Ganymede.

“Adam is fine,” I said as I brought my hands down to each of their waists. “As long as you tell me your names.”

“I am Ria,” the woman in gold said.

“I am Yui,” the woman in red said.

“Pleased to meet you. Now can I ask how you know my name?” I didn’t want to tip my hand and let them know I knew they were the emperor’s wives.

“We have been studying you since your ship docked,” Yui said. “It is of interesting design.”

“Yeah,” I said, as I fought against the growling beast in my stomach.

“Where did you acquire such a vessel?” Ria asked.

“Trappist - 1e,” I said with a shrug.

“I have not heard of that system,” Ria said as she frowned. Both women were beautiful, but their short onyx hair was styled the same way, and they wore the same color eyeshadow. Yui was a bit taller than Ria, but it wasn’t that apparent while they were dancing with me.

“It’s far away,” I said.

“Everything in the galaxy is far away, and our galaxy is small when compared to the universe.” Yui smiled.

“True,” I said with a shrug and spared a glance through the crowd. Eve was dancing with Zea, but the vampire was staring at the backs of the women dancing with me.

They know about Yu and the experiments. They know Persephone is a Shadow Eagle, but they have a different name for it. They know about the SAVO, but they--

Eve’s voice in my head cut off, and I saw the vampire turn her head toward the castle. I followed her gaze and saw a man in a magnificent green and gold robe walk out of the castle. He was flanked by two women that looked like Ria and Yui, only with long hair. The music stopped instantly, and the crowd grew silent as they turned to face the man.

Then they all bowed in a movement that seemed perfectly rehearsed.

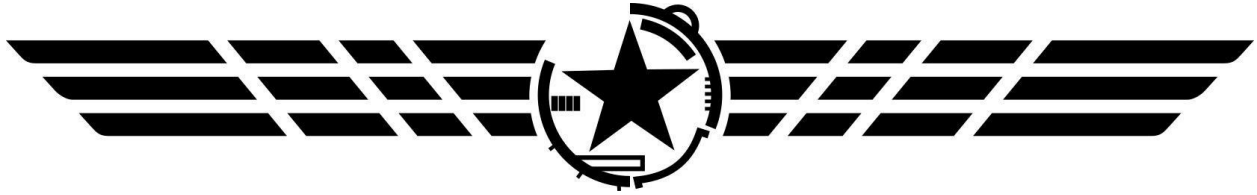
My friends and I were caught off guard by the crowd bowing, but the emperor’s eyes were already on me. Age was hard to tell in space, but he looked to be around mine, but I couldn’t tell the shape of his body because of

the robe that seemed to consume his frame.

“The Emperor of Dragons meets the King of Tigers.” The man’s voice was strong and boomed across the courtyard. “They are mortal enemies, so which one will survive the encounter?”

The hackles on my back raised, and I felt the beast in my stomach scream at the man’s words. He hadn’t made any sort of aggressive movement, and I turned my head slightly so I could see more of the courtyard. The guards had not drawn their weapons.

Then I heard an explosion outside of the castle walls, and the guards did all draw their weapons.



Chapter 15

The crowd gasped as soon as the first explosion sounded, and I spun around so that I could protect my women. I half expected the guards to point their rifles at us, but they were running to the exits of the courtyards instead, and I heard the soldiers posted on the wall begin to fire their machine guns.

“Someone shot a rocket at the wall!” Kasta yelled as a second explosion sounded.

“How many are attacking?” I shouted over the screaming crowd. There was a bit of confusion as people tried to run across the courtyard to the exits, some tried to hide under the tables, and others tried to flee into the castle.

“I see four men,” Kasta said. “Uhh. They have collars on.”

“Shit,” I growled as I hit my transponder to the open channel. “Crew, we are under attack in the emperor’s courtyard. I believe they are Yu’s men. What is your position?”

“My team is still at the side entrance,” Lux said. “The emperor’s guards are pushing toward the sound of the explosions, but we see no activity here. If you make your way toward us, we can escort you back.”

“I have drones out in the harbor in front of our dock,” Paula said. “I don’t see anyone out there.”

“Are they not coming after their boss?” Zea asked.

“Perhaps they wish to capture one or all of us and then exchange for Yu,” Madalena said. “It is what I would do. Attacking Persephone would be difficult.”

“More difficult than attacking a castle filled with fucking guards?” Kasta asked as another explosion sounded. The wall around the courtyard actually shook with that blast, and the crowd grew more frantic.

“Adam!” I heard a shout behind me, and we turned to see the emperor’s two wives in the gold and red dresses. They each gestured for us to follow them, and then they turned to walk toward the castle.

“Well?” Zea said.

“Let’s go with them,” I said.

“What if it is a trap?” the hacker asked. “He didn’t seem like he liked you.”

I looked at Eve, but she shook her head. “I could get nothing from him in that moment. I will know better when we see him inside.”

“If it’s a trap, he’ll learn what it is like to catch a tiger by his tail,” I growled as I motioned for them to follow Rin and Yui.

I couldn’t see the emperor anywhere in the crowd, but the tranquil courtyard was now a place of chaotic terror, and the guards didn’t seem interested in maintaining order here when there was an obvious threat outside.

The two women threaded through the chaos as if they had done this a thousand times, but I almost felt like I was swimming through the passing party goers. For half a moment, it felt like the riots Zea and I once fought through on Queen’s Hat, but then the crowd cleared by the door to the castle, and two guards ushered us in through a metal side door.

The inside of the fortress was decorated with gold and silver plating, jade statues of dragons, and tapestries of ancient Earthscapes. A few dozen of the party goers had made it inside, but Rin and Yui led us past them, down a grand entrance hall, through an arched side passage, and into what was obviously a throne room.

Emperor Kuroda sat on a chair made of small twisting gold dragons. The throne was a work of art beyond anything I had ever seen. As I walked closer, I saw that each of the dragons had a slightly different etching color between the scales, and their eyes glowed with the placement of coin-sized gemstones.

Pillows were placed at the foot of the throne, and the two long-haired beauties who walked out into the courtyard with the emperor sat on them at his feet. Rin and Yui moved to sit on the pillows beside his other wives, and then they all turned to me.

“The tiger has come with his harem,” Emperor Kuroda said as his lips spread into a large smile. He was a handsome man, and now that I was standing closer to him, I could see that his neck was thick and muscular.

“Yeah,” I said. “You seem pretty calm for someone who’s fortress is under attack.” As I spoke, Baccor and Reeyal walked into the room from a back hallway, and they whispered in the sitting man’s ear.

“You did not bring your fourth wife?” The emperor asked as he gestured to Kasta.

“No,” I said. “She disobeyed me and had to remain on our ship.”

“Then who is this one?” the four women and three men all focused on Kasta now.

“I’m Kasta, I would gladly be Adam’s wife, or concubine, or fuck toy, whatever.” She shrugged.

“There is something strange about her.” The emperor’s eyes narrowed.

“I am not exactly normal either, but you know that already,” I said. “I keep company with extraordinary women. I asked you before why you are so calm when your castle is under attack.”

“Extraordinary women...” the man muttered as he turned his bright eyes to Madalena, then Eve, then Zea. “I wanted your wife with the silver-hair, but I will take these four.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I growled as my vision started to spin. “You aren’t taking my women. I’ll fucking kill you.”

The scent of smoky incense burned from the corners of the room, and the tension in the room seemed hot enough to cause the pillows on the floor to burst into flames. The two groups stared at each other for a few more moments before the emperor spoke.

“The tiger and dragon have fought each other since the beginning of time, we are always at war, and we always win. Unless it is against each other.”

Adam, I get nothing from this man. He is thoughtless and emotionless. It is like staring into nothing. He is empty. His women do have thoughts, they worship him as a god, and believe that he will defeat you and then take your women.

“I get the feeling you want to fight,” I growled. “Is that your game? You kill me and then take my wives?” I felt my back muscles start to twitch as the tiger tried to claw out of my skin.

“The tiger is strength, and rage. He attacks head on and smashes his way through all that stands between him and what he wants. Unintelligent, but unstoppable.”

“Perhaps I should be insulted,” I said. The man had made no aggressive movements, and I saw no guards around us, so I was doing my best to hold the beast at bay.

“No,” he replied. “It is your nature. You could be no other way. The dragon is wise, thoughtful, and strategic. Some say the dragon represents the mind and soul while the tiger represents the body and lust. Each side always fighting for dominance.”

“I didn’t come here to fight you,” I said in the calmest voice I could manage. “I wanted to ask for information.”

“You have the scientist. Have you asked him?”

“You know Yu?” I asked. “I figured you did.”

“Yes,” the emperor said with a slow nod, “he represents the line between us. Or perhaps he is the interpreter between us.”

“He’s an asshole that experimented on me for years, enslaved me, and then kidnapped my sister,” I said. “I don’t want to fight you, I just want help to find my sister. Then I will leave.”

“Our fight has been coming for a millennium,” he said as he stood from his throne. “The swarm is approaching. They want to feast. Only one of us can command the life against the death and the light against the darkness.” The man reached up to the front of his robe and opened it to expose a muscular chest that was covered in spiraling dragon tattoos.

“Look,” I said as I reached out my arms and pushed the women at my sides behind me. “It doesn’t have to be like this.”

“It is in our nature,” he said as the robe fell away from his shoulders. He was about as tall as me, but his body was leaner. “The mind and will versus the body and desires. The winner will get the spoils of victories and inherit the power of a nation.”

“You mentioned the swarm?” I asked as I fought against the beast. I was a hair away from shifting, but I wanted to make one last attempt to reason with the man. “We call them Draugr or SAVO. We can work together to fight them.”

“Tell your women to stand aside, Tiger,” the emperor said as he held out his arms in a fighting stance. “This is between us, and our powers. If they interfere my guards will kill them.”

His skin started to ripple, bend, and flex. Green and black scales appeared on his skin, and his eyes twisted so that they looked like a reptile's. Claws came out of his fingers, and his human teeth dropped out of his mouth as a long serpent tail emerged from his back.

He was turning into a dragon-man.

I had been holding the monster back by just a hair, and he came to me with a flood of rage, screams, and twisting bone. My nice suit tore at the shoulders, back waist, and legs, and my toes ripped through the leather shoes as if they were made of a thin layer of cotton. My own human teeth fell out of my mouth, and sharp fangs sprung in their place a moment later. My vision grew yellow, red, and blurry, but then I focused on him as the last of his scales fell into place.

I could smell his hot breath and the scent of the surrounding women. I could taste the fear in the air, but the beast who was threatening to claim my body and soul loved this. He wanted to tear into the dragon-man that challenged us. He wanted to kill him, to devour him, and to take his women as spoils.

He knew that this battle was inevitable.

Kuroda jumped toward me half a moment after I did. We collided in mid-air, and our claws tore into each other's arms. I felt my blood pour out of my body, but I didn't really register any pain. All I felt was the desire to kill my enemy, chew on his body, and then mate with the four women that had once been his.

He snapped his jaws at my throat once we landed, but I headbutted his snout when he tried to bring his teeth to bear. Our arms were locked onto each other's biceps while blood from each of our wounds continued to spray across the floor.

I kicked up with my right foot and slammed my foot into his groin. He was wearing pants, but the claws on my feet tore through them, and into what I guessed was his scrotum. The man shrieked with agony, and I stepped into him so that I could toss his scaly bulk over my shoulder.

He flipped in the air before he hit the ground, reversing my grip on his shoulder so that he yanked me to the side and off balance. An instant later I was on the ground, and he was raising a clawed fist to tear into me while his other pinned me to the ground.

I bucked up with my hips and wrapped my legs around the arm he used to hold me down. The claws on my toes tore into his eyes, and he screamed as his fist came down. I managed to wiggle out of the way a bit so that his blow didn't remove my throat, but his talons still ripped into my shoulder, and a large piece of fur-covered flesh tore off.

I still didn't feel the pain. His attack just made me angrier.

I bucked up again with my hips, yanked hard on his arm, and pushed with my feet. His arm broke like a fresh stalk of celery and he screeched again.

I rolled away from his broken arm and then spun on the ground to trip him. I expected him to be incapacitated, but he surprised me by elbow smashing me in the face with his other arm. It felt like my skull broke from his hit, but it healed a moment later, and we tore our claws into each other's chest as we rolled on the ground.

Cuts that I slashed across his scaled hide healed instantly, and chunks of flesh he tore out of my shoulders with his teeth regrew in moments. We were soon covered with each other's blood as we slipped across the stone floor and tried to gain leverage.

I found an opening when he tried to throw one of his legs over my chest. His supporting leg slipped on our blood and his body lost balance for half a moment. Before he could regain his composure, I threw an elbow into his face and then threaded my leg up through his so I could kick him in the

chest. He flew from me like the launch of a surface-to-air missile, and his body cracked the stone wall when he hit it.

I flipped to my feet and then sprinted toward him. He looked as if he was a bit stunned from the impact with the wall, but he ducked my first punch and my fist tore a chunk of the marble wall where his head had been a half second before.

He'd tricked me, and I felt his claws tear my entire stomach out.

I brought my fists down on his skull and the impact drove him to the ground. Then I kicked him in the face and heard his skull crack. He spun away from me and slid across the blood-soaked floor, but I actually felt the agony of his attack in my stomach, and I looked down to see most of my guts hanging down below my knees.

I heard screaming, and I figured it was from Eve, Zea, Madalena, and Kasta. My heart was also screaming though, and it was far louder than they were.

My vision started to spin, and I fell on all fours.

I glanced up and saw that Kuroda was still on the ground, he wasn't moving, and the sight gave me a bit of comfort. My last kick must have killed him, and I just had to push through this last bit of pain before my healing powers kicked in and repaired my stomach.

The room spun again, and I felt my whiskers press against the bloody ground of the throne room. My eyes felt heavy, but I forced them up as I fought against the agony spreading through my body. The pain was intense, but I'd felt worse, the real issue was all the blood I'd lost combined with my organs falling free of my stomach.

I just felt so tired. The agony was intense, but it couldn't seem to push aside the exhaustion I felt spreading through my body.

I turned my eyes to the left a bit, and I saw Eve, Zea, Madalena, and Kasta. Madalena was frozen in place on her tippy toes while Zea and Kasta screamed at Eve. My brain was too tired to figure out what was going on, but I knew I wasn't going to live through this if I didn't try to stand.

I reached my hand out and pushed against the tile. My paw slipped and my face smacked into the blood covered floor again. My eyes really wanted to close, but I heard someone muttering in the back of my mind. Was it Eve?

It was hard to hear anything besides the beating of my heart.

And that beating was getting slower.

I pushed up from the floor again and reached toward my intestines. I thought that if I could push them back into my stomach, it might be able to heal faster, but it was too hard to support my weight with one arm, and I face planted into the bloody floor again.

There was more screaming, but it was so distant. I realized that my eyes were closed, and I opened them so that I could look up toward the women I loved.

Then I saw Emperor Kuroda get to his feet.

The dragon-man's mouth was grinning wide, and his rows of razor sharp teeth flexed against the air. Zea screamed something to him I couldn't hear over my own heartbeat, and he turned to stare at her. The woman's face turned white, and she stepped away as he slowly moved toward the group.

I was going to die, and this fucker was going to rape the women I loved.

It was like a tsunami of lava descended from the roof and poured over me. My fur burned, my blood boiled, and my mind roasted. Everything hurt, and I knew I was going to die, but there was no way in hell I was going to lose to this fucker and let him have the women I cared so much about. I'd take us both to fucking hell and then laugh at him while we spent all eternity there.

Fuck this guy for trying to attack me.

Fuck this guy for not helping me.

Fuck this guy for trying to take my women.

He was going to pay.

I was on his back. The claws on my feet tore into his hamstrings, and the claws at my hands tore at his shoulders and throat. He roared like a ship's thrusters and flung himself to the side, but I rode him even after he slammed me into the wall.

He brought his hands up to protect the front of his neck, but I raked my claws across his face. Then he tried to crush me into the wall again, but I flipped my legs up, pushed off the stone, and then drove his chest to the

ground. I rode him on the way down, and my claws finally opened his back.

I punched into the back of his ribs once, twice, and then a third time before the bones and his spine shattered.

Then my massive hand closed around his heart. It beat in my hands and I could feel his life coursing through me.

We both froze, and silence descended on the throne room.

“Tiger wiiiiinnnnnnssss,” I growled, and it sounded like a hundred great cats roared from inside my lungs.

But I still didn’t crush his heart.

“Tiger wins,” the dragon-man wheezed. “Do it, claim my women and my empire. Kill our enemies.” He coughed, and I felt his lungs rub against my hand. “You have proven we need the Tiger to defend humanity. End me and then take my strength.”

“Noooooo,” I growled as I let go of his heart and ripped my hand out of his back. “Youuuu arrrreeee miiinne nowwww.” I flipped him over and then bent down so that our eyes were only a dozen centimeters apart.

“You have won. Kill me...”

“I havve wooon. Now you serve me. Yourrrr life is minnee dragon. As are your women. As is your empirreeee. Killing yooouuu reeeeleases youuu frommm my service. I am not donnnne wittthhhh yooouuu yetttt.”

Blood and saliva dropped from my teeth when I spoke and fell onto his face.

“I serve you, Tiger.” The man hissed, and our eyes stared into each other for what felt like an eternity.

I pushed off his chest and stood on my feet. My stomach had healed somehow, and my guts no longer hung down to the floor. I couldn’t recall when that happened, but I almost didn’t care. I’d won, as I should have, and now the man would serve me against the SAVO.

I turned to Zea, Eve, Madalena, and Kasta. Eve did not look surprised, but the other three women had their eyes wide open. I wanted to tell them that I loved them. I wanted to tell them that I could only win to protect them. I wanted to tell them that I’d do anything to keep them safe, but something inside me was different now, and I knew I was losing more of myself to the

monster.

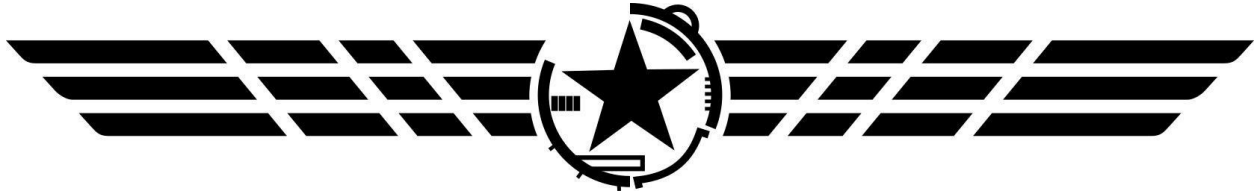
“Talk to his wives and find my fucking sister,” I growled, and I was surprised at how clear my words are.

“Yes, Adam,” Eve said quickly, and the four women slowly stepped away from me before they turned to walk toward Kuroda’s wives.

No, not Kuroda’s wives. They were mine now.

It was all mine.

I was the tiger.



Chapter 16

I sat on a throne of rhodium and held a scepter of diamonds. Black armor with engraved feathers etched on the surface encased my body, and a crown of light sat upon my head.

Eve, Zea, Madalena, Kasta, Paula, Juliette, and Sivaha sat at my feet while Persephone sat on my lap. The women wore the black almost non-existent lingerie that the black winged angel wore in my dreams, but they didn't seem to mind. They all stared at me with adoration plan on their beautiful faces.

This pleased me.

Beyond my women I saw the bridge of a massive starship. Hundreds of Nordar crew attended the battle stations, and the last few minutes of a massive armada battle played out before my eyes. When a last black ship was destroyed, the crew cheered, and my women all bowed before me.

Lux and Calisto approached my throne, and held in between them was a dark-haired SAVO woman that looked somewhat like Eve. Her evil red eyes bore into mine, but instead of my usual fear, I felt only amusement.

I lifted Persephone from my lap and set the winged woman on her feet. Then I stood, kissed her full lips passionately, and descended past my other women. They each reached up to touch me, and I held my hands down so that my fingers could run through theirs as I passed.

The SAVO woman thrashed in Lux and Calisto's arms, but she either lacked her kind's incredible strength, or the two Valkyries were immune to her powers. I came within touching distance of the SAVO, and she made a

sudden jerk forward. Her teeth missed me by some ten centimeters, but I didn't flinch.

"Ohhh gawww," she growled. "Yoouuu woouonn nooot winnnn. Ahhhdeemmm."

"I already won," I said as I reached both my hands up to her cheeks. She thrashed against my touch, but I pulled her face to mine and kissed her. The vampire woman resisted me at first, but then she seemed to change her mind, and her tongue left her mouth to press against mine.

I pulled my mouth slowly away from hers, and her red eyes stared at me in confusion. Then she licked her lips to taste what saliva I had left there, and she shook her head.

"Why?" she asked, but I just leaned into her again as if to kiss her once more.

Then I lifted her chin and tore out her throat with my teeth.

It was the bite of a tiger, and it took most of her neck off when I jerked my head back. She couldn't even scream because I had torn out her vocal cords, but then I twisted my arms down and tore her head off her shoulders.

Blood sprayed across Lux, Calisto, and me, but the two Valkyries did not even flinch. I tossed the SAVO woman's head on the ground next to her still twitching body and then walked back to my throne.

I sat down on the massive chair and then beckoned for Persephone to occupy my lap again. As soon as she sat, she leaned into my face and licked the blood that had sprayed onto my cheeks and mouth. She moaned a bit while she cleaned me, and the other women sitting beneath me sighed with obvious jealousy.

This pleased me as well.

"Bring me the next one," I ordered Lux and Calisto.

"Yes, my lord," they said, but neither one of them moved.

They stood frozen, and I heard them repeat my name.

"Adam?"

"Adam?"

"Husband? You are dreaming."

“Huh?” I groaned as I peeled my eyes open. The ceiling looked too far away to be my suite inside of Persephone. The roof was also painted red, and I saw stylized dragons carved into the crown molding.

A hand touched me on the chest, and I turned to see Madalena. She was wearing her black Vaish uniform, and her hair was up in a tight braid.

“Uhh, where am I?” I asked as I looked around the room. There was an IV drip connected to my right arm, and I reached over with my left hand so I could pull the needle out.

“You are in Emperor Kuroda’s castle,” she answered.

“Did we stay here after the party? I don’t remember much after speaking with the emperor.” I frowned as I spoke, and some of the memories began to drift up from my subconscious.

“Do you remember battling him?” she asked as she gestured to my body. I looked down and gasped when I saw I was covered with dried blood.

“What the fuck happened? Shit. I’ve ruined these sheets.” I tried to push my body off the white satin bedspread, but I saw that the damage had already been done. It looked like I’d taken a shower in red paint and then done a snow angel all over the bed.

“The sheets do not matter,” Madalena said. “I misspoke earlier. This is not Kuroda’s castle.”

“Huh?” I asked as I crawled toward her so I could get off.

“No, it is your castle. This was once his room and his bed, but it is yours now. As are his systems and his armada. He has given them to you. Do you not remember the battle?”

“Fuck,” I groaned as I cupped my head in my hands. “I remember dancing, and then there was an explosion. We came into the castle and then met him...”

My voice trailed off, and I recalled my melee with Kuroda. Some of the details were still fuzzy, but I remembered him ripping out my stomach, and I looked down to confirm that I wasn’t still hanging my guts down to my knees.

There wasn’t even a scar on my stomach.

“It was a stressful battle,” Madalena said as her hand came to rest on

my bare shoulders.

“How long have I been asleep?” I asked.

“Nearly four days,” she answered.

“Four days?” I shot to my feet, and a wave of dizziness overcame me. “Where are Zea and Eve? Did you find my sister? What about the attack on the castle? Why did Kuroda give me his castle?”

“Husband,” Madalena said as she gestured to my naked blood coated body. “Zea and Eve are occupied at the moment, and it was my turn to watch you sleep. You should shower. I will answer more of your questions as I clean the gore from your body.”

“Alright,” I said as I turned in the direction she gestured. The room was massive, maybe some fifty meters wide, but the only pieces of furniture in here were the bed and two dressers serving as nightstands. The bed was one of those four post ones, and it was about three times the size of what I slept in on Persephone. I supposed the emperor needed one that size if he wanted to sleep with all four of his wives at the same time.

Madalena sensed my distraction, and she pulled on my hand. There was a side door in the massive bedchamber, and we walked through the doorway and into a Japanese style bathroom that was about twice the size of Persephone’s bridge. There was a massive soaking tub, a smaller whirlpool tub, and three alcoves where I saw shower heads. Madalena led me to one of those alcoves and then began to take off her boots as she spoke.

“Zea, Kasta, and Paula were able to search through the security program. They found where Yu’s men had hidden your sister, and we retrieved her.”

“She’s here?” I asked. “In the castle?”

“Yes, she wishes to speak to you, but you must shower first.” Madalena finished taking off her boots and then shimmied out of her tight fitting uniform pants.

“Damn. I can’t wait to see her,” I said as I thought about the young woman I’d left behind so many years ago.

“After the shower,” Madalena stated as she pulled her shirt off and folded it on the pile.

“Yeah, of course.” I twisted the water on and the three shower heads in the alcove turned on. The water heated up to a comfortable temperature instantly, but I still shivered when I stepped under one of the jets.

“What of the attack on the castle?” I asked after I ran my eyes over Madalena’s naked body.

“Kuroda told us it was thwarted by his men, and it was.” She shrugged and then stepped under the jet next to me. Our pleasure was already beginning to feed off each other. She knew I enjoyed looking at her body, and the feeling of her excitement was feeding into mine.

“And Kuroda gave me his castle because I defeated him in combat?” I asked to confirm my broken memories.

“Not just his castle,” she said. “His entire kingdom, including his wives.”

“Because I beat him in a fight? Shit. That makes no sense.”

“His staff, wives, and advisors have been subservient to us. You are their emperor now, and the King of the Vaish. Your empire grows larger and more powerful.” Madalena’s eyes stared intently into mine, and I could feel her desire wash over me.

“Did he say why he challenged me?” I asked as I tried to ignore my own arousal.

“He has been recovering for the last few days. We have not spoken to him, but Baccor and Reeyal have asked to attend to you as soon as you are ready to receive them.” Madalena grabbed a bar of soap that smelled like honey from a tray and began to rub it over my shoulders and arms.

“I’ll see them, and Kuroda after I see my sister,” I said as I reached up my hand to trace the water that was falling across Madalena’s shoulder. I could feel her pleasure at my touch, and she let out a soft sigh when I moved my fingers down the side of her stomach.

“I am glad to see you,” she whispered after a few moments of silence. “Your emotions were strange when you fought against Kuroda. I was going to assist you, but Eve prevented me.”

“She did?” I asked as I tried to drum up more memories. The battle seemed like something that happened in my distant past, but I could

remember looking at Zea and Kasta screaming at Eve while Madalena hung suspended on her toes.

“Yes,” the Prime Valkyrie confirmed. “She said we would all be killed if I interfered, but I argued that you would die if I didn’t. Then he tore your stomach out, and she used her powers on me.”

“I see.” I sighed. “I’m going to guess that you both are not happy with each other right now.”

“I am displeased with her,” Madalena admitted. “But you are alive. I would have been dead if Kuroda had killed you. Perhaps I lacked faith in your abilities, but you appeared grievously injured, and I could feel your emotions spiral out of control. You were dying, and Eve prevented me from comforting you.”

“I am sure she had a reason,” I said.

“She did, and she was correct, but I am still angry with her.” Madalena finished washing my front, and she gestured for me to turn around.

“Don’t be. I still need you all to cooperate. We have a lot of work to do still.”

“You do not have to remind me of our work, Adam.”

“I know, sorry. I don’t need to remind you, or Eve. That is why I want both of you to get along. I would die to defend you, and you would die to defend me. Eve might have saved both of us.”

“Yes. I will consider it more.” I felt her hands rub soap on my legs, and I closed my eyes so that I could focus on her touch.

“You are clean, Husband,” she said after her hands worked over my feet.

“I’ll have to take care of you now,” I said as I turned and took the soap from her.

“I have already bathed today,” she said, but her cold eyes sparked.

“That’s okay,” I replied. “I’m only going to be able to rub you down a bit before I’ll have to make love to you.”

“Then you should skip the soap and just begin the lovemaking,” she replied as she directed a warm smile at me.

After we made love under the warm spray of water, we stepped out of the shower and dried ourselves off by sinks on the far side of the sprawling bathroom. Robes were hanging up beside the sinks, and I took the largest one and wrapped it around myself as I watched Madalena dress.

“I feel like we’ve had a bunch of victories,” I said.

“Yes. You combined the Skyad clan with the Vaish. Now Yu is our prisoner, and his small army here has been defeated. There is still the question of his fleet, but the station guards have captured his two ships, so they will be unable to alert the vessels he has one system over. Emperor Kuroda challenged you, and you defeated him. Now you control his empire.”

“It seems ridiculous that he would put it all on the line like that,” I said.

“He thought he could beat you. He was wrong, but he was almost right.”

“What about my sister? Has she spoken to you? Did she speak of our mother?”

“Let us go to her, and you can ask her.” Madalena fastened the last button of her shirt and then she reached out to take my hand.

We both walked out of the bathroom and through the massive red bedroom without speaking, and then we twisted and turned through what felt like a dozen other hallways. The castle had looked large from the outside, but the inside was a maze. I had not remembered the journey that took me from the throne room to Kuroda’s bedroom, and I wondered how I found it.

“I forgot to mention Sivaha,” Madalena said as we walked.

“What about her?” I asked.

“You said she would stay in her room for two days,” Madalena said.

“And I’ve been asleep four,” I said.

“Yes, I decided to let her out. I can understand if you are mad at me, but your orders were for two days, and she is your wife. I wish to treat her with respect even though she disobeyed you. It is your task to discipline her.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “Is she still on Persephone?”

“No, she is here. Last I saw her she was with Zea, Paula, and Kasta reviewing the docking records of Yu’s ships.”

“Ahh. Good idea.” We reached a grand foyer and Madalena led me to the right. Then we walked down a flight of green jade stairs, made a right into a wide hallway and came to a door. Madalena knocked, and Eve opened it.

“Hello, my love,” the vampire said as soon as she saw me.

“Hi,” I replied as I pulled her to me. We kissed for a few moments, and then I rubbed her dark hair back from her face so I could stare into her eyes.

“Your sister is inside,” Eve whispered. “We have been speaking of you, but things are not as you might think.”

“What do you mean?” I asked with concern.

“Please, just speak with her,” Eve said as she gestured into the room.

“I will. Thank you both for finding her.” I looked to the two women and knew they understood how thankful I was.

“It was Madalena’s doing,” Eve said. “She led the strike team.”

“Thank you,” I said to the Prime Valkyrie, and then I stepped past the door, and into the room with my sister.

“Hello Hanekawa,” I said, and her name tumbled out from my tongue clumsily.

It had been a long time since I said her name.

“They call you Adam now,” she said instead of greeting me. She sat on the edge of her bed with her hands folded in her lap.

“Yu gave it to me,” I said. “Or he called me Subject Two. Did that fucker hurt you at all?”

“Who?” she asked as her eyes narrowed.

“Yu... The... Scientist...” I stared at her eyes and felt dread spiral down my spine.

Her eyes used to be brown, but now they were a golden yellow color. Just like mine.

“Why would he hurt me? What is with your friends? If that is even who they are. They won’t tell me anything that is going on. They killed the men protecting me and brought me to this castle. Where is Calvin?”

“Calvin?” I asked.

“He gave me the money to get you here. I hired the Black Hearts. We’ve been helping each other for almost a year. Ever since he said he lost you and couldn’t help with your treatment.”

“What?” I growled, and the beast screamed.

“Shii--Adam,” she hissed as she almost said the name my father had given me. “Why do you think we went through all this trouble to find you?”

“Yu’s name is Calvin?” I growled. “He’s a fucking piece of shit that experimented on me for two years. He did things to me that--”

“No,” she interrupted me. “You are wrong.”

“I’m wrong?” I took a step away from her and turned to see that the door to our room was closed. I guessed the Eve and Madalena wanted us to have some privacy, but I wanted to know if they were hearing this same bullshit.

“Yes,” she said. “Calvin wants to help you. He helped me.”

“How the fuck did he help you?” I was almost screaming now. “He took me from prison and shot me full of drugs. He sliced up my DNA and now I’m this freak who can change into half man-half tiger. He put this thing in me, and it’s trying to take control. I came here to find you so I could rescue you from him. I came here to find him and make him fix me.”

She stared at me for a moment and then blinked her eyes a few times. A tear fell down her cheek, and I stared at it as another wave of confusion hit me upside the head.

“Look, Hanekawa, I don’t know what lies he told you, but I’m here now. I’ve got a ship, and I am somehow king of this nation. We have Yu locked onboard and we just need to get him back to my new home system. Then we can figure out how to get this thing out of me. You don’t have to worry. He’s not going to fuck with us anymore.”

“Stop,” she said. “You are wrong.”

“I’m wrong? What are you talking about?”

“You’re wrong!” she screamed.

And my sister’s body grew before my eyes.

She growled, and her teeth fell out of her mouth as she stood from the

side of her bed. Orange, black, and white fur erupted from her skin, and her muscles became long and lean. Her new teeth popped out of her jaw, and she stepped toward me with her clawed hands extended.

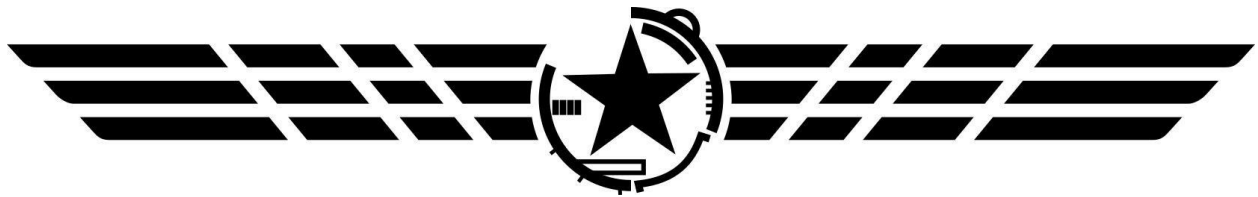
The world seemed to freeze, and my heart stopped beating.

Her tiger-woman form was a bit larger than my human form, so she was able to push me back against the door easily. I didn't even resist. I was dumbfounded by her transformation even though I knew I should have expected this.

And I should have expected the next words that came out of her mouth.

“He didn't put this in us. It was already there. We were never human.”

End of book 8



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