



DELROI CONNECTION: BOOK FOUR

# CLAIMING EARTH

LORIBELLE HUNT

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## **Blurb**

Janice Hawkins is on a mission, and it doesn't include getting wrapped up—or naked—with Delroi warrior Falkor Trace. No matter how appealing and sexy he is.

She's determined to infiltrate the shadowy Tel Group homebased on Earth. The secretive organization of telepaths trained her, used her for dishonorable means, and may have been behind the death of her parents. When word reaches her the organization is once again recruiting minors, she knows the time has come to act. She may not be left standing at the end, but she's taking them with her.

Falkor is intrigued by Janice—enough to follow her to Earth—but when he begins digging, he discovers she is a mix of lies and secrets. Unraveling them exposes a woman of courage and honor. A woman who has always walked alone. She may not be willing to admit she needs help, but he's not about to leave her to such a dangerous undertaking on her own. But to emerge victorious, they must learn to trust each other—and time is running out.

## Chapter One

"You sure you're okay?" Janice watched Britt carefully for her answer. The assassin's blade, only the day before, hadn't cut the skin but there was a fading red mark where it'd pressed too close.

"Of course. I'm fine."

Sure she was. Janice wasn't the only one concerned. Across the rooftop deck, out of hearing of their softly spoken conversation, Britt's husband Barak, or mate as they said on this world, watched her as closely as Janice did. His brother stood tall and still and silent at his side. He turned to look at Janice every now and then, his gaze at once hot and chilly.

Falkor Trace.

It was a name that haunted her waking hours and soothed her nights. She'd only been on Delroi a few days, yet already she felt altered. Every new place she went to changed her. Sometimes in little ways. Sometimes big. This change had the power to completely change her life. She wasn't sure she was ready for that yet.

It was the promise of a different existence that had brought her to Delroi, the chance to eventually set aside the nomadic assassin's life she'd led so long. She looked away from Britt, closed her eyes and took in a deep lungful of the cool desert air. What would it be like to breathe free on Earth? Really free? To not always be looking over her shoulder? Not always calculate every move? She turned and looked at Falkor.

To chose a lover for no other reason than she wanted him?

She would have none of those things if she didn't complete her mission here and return home for the final part, the personal part. She forced all those thoughts deep into her mind. She was sitting in the open air with three telepaths, the strongest one an old friend and her former boss. Another who turned her on like no man had ever done before. And none who needed to know what she was up to.

She stared at the desert visible beyond the city's crowded buildings. Most of the planet was dry and arid. She'd flown over the green zone on her way down to meet Britt, an area reputed to be home to some of the fiercest soldiers on Delroi. No doubt from generations of fighting to keep their farmlands. But as pretty as it had looked from the air, it couldn't compare to the stark beauty of the Southern desert. It was wild and brutal, beautiful and beguiling. Just like the people who populated it. Or one in particular. Falkor was dangerous. More to her state of mind than her life.

Why in hell had she agreed to stay? Just to torture herself? She sighed and knew it gave away too much when Britt turned a sharp, knowing gaze on her.

"Second thoughts?"

"Of course," she echoed Britt's earlier response with a half smile. "I don't belong in this kind of scene. This quiet family gathering thing y'all have going on."

It said something about her state of mind that her Southern drawl was coming out, didn't it? Britt shrugged.

"I fit. Why shouldn't you?"

Janice shook her head. "Mostly they used you as a spy, Britt. Me?" Even to her the laugh sounded bitter, not like her own. "My skills are known to be a bit more specific."

Britt leaned closed and lowered her voice. "I know that at one point at least, you were part of The Tel Group and I suspect you want out. They don't let anyone go easily. But this is a new world, a new *life*, Janice. You can be whatever you want here."

She was stunned at Britt's observation and not about to admit her connection to The Tel Group, a secret fanatical group of psychics on Earth. Britt had no idea how lucky she was to have escaped their notice as a child. By the time she was old enough to be required to register as a telepath, she was too established in Intelligence for them to bother with. Britt already knew all that and she was a good friend to offer Janice a way out. But Janice liked her too much to risk her safety by explaining why she couldn't break with Tel just yet.

She wanted to at least tell Britt there was no way she could stay on Delroi, but what would be the point? She'd agreed to this mission in a fit of weakness, ignoring for a moment her true purpose on Earth. She planned to enjoy a respite for a few days and then get back to reality.

"I don't know if a new life is possible," she said lightly, standing up. "I do know it's very late and I'm exhausted. I'll see you in the morning, okay?"

She didn't wait for more than a nod before leaving. Britt tried to hide it, but she was worried, and that worry beat at Janice's mind. If she could be saved, Britt wouldn't be the one who did it.

She followed the stairs from the roof, down two floors and into her rooms, pulling clothes off as soon as she shut the door behind her. Not sure if she was torturing herself or Falkor or trying to force him to make a move, she pulled the blankets off the bed and crawled under the thin sheet.

He didn't keep her waiting long, but he didn't come anywhere close to giving her the release she needed either. Entering silently, he sat in the chair across from the bed and removed his boots. Then with a deep sigh he leaned back, one hand rising to shield his face.

"It would be more comfortable in bed, ya know."

He didn't budge. "Go to sleep, *der'lan*. You are not ready for that step."

She huffed. "If you insist on sleeping in here every night, you might as well be comfortable. I'm not offering to fuck you. Feel better now?" she ended sarcastically.

He rose and circled the bed. Her heart raced when it dipped. "I will not feel better until that happy event actually occurs," he muttered. He climbed in behind her, fully clothed, and his arms circled her waist.

"This isn't really what I had in mind."

"I know what you had in mind. Fucking me. And then leaving me. It isn't going to happen. Go to sleep, sweetheart."

And damned if she didn't.

## Chapter Two

Two days later, Janice entered the temple with Falkor, Britt, and Barak. The place was massive. And packed with people. Falkor took her elbow and led her through the crowd, following Britt and Barak to the wooden benches in the front row. She sat on the end next to Falkor. Leaning close, she spoke to him telepathically.

*Why are we here?*

She should have asked before they left the house, but she was so wound up after being in such close confines with him she just wanted air.

*For the blessing of the new warrior elevation. We do this once a year for the boys who've completed beginning training. It will be short; then we'll go to the graduation ceremony.*

*And then?*

*A few private parties given by the clan chiefs who have family members in this class.*

*Oh. Okay.*

She fell silent as a group of priests came out of a door behind the altar. They wore white floor length robes with long sleeves, and all had the facial tattoos of the Southern clans. She hadn't seen many of them in the north and found them oddly transfixing. She had a large dragon tattoo on her back, but couldn't imagine sitting still long enough, through the pain, of getting something inked onto her face.

One of the priests stepped forward and she guessed he was the most senior. The hem and wrists of his robe were trimmed in red. The others fanned out behind him and he began to speak in Delroi. She let her mind wander trying to recall the last time she'd been in a church on Earth.

*You're not paying the least attention.* Falkor's voice in her head sounded amused.

*Sorry.* She tried to sound contrite.

*No, you aren't.* He stood and tugged her to her feet. *We're done anyway.*

*Well, that was quick.*

*Yes.*

*So we're going to the training compound now?*

*Yes.*

It was a short walk and a ceremony that was almost as brief. Then they were on their way again following a twisted path through the city until she was hopelessly lost. Finally they were welcomed into a large house. Inside the crowd was boisterous and Falkor kept her close. He steered her through the crowd with one hand on the small of her back until they were part of a much smaller crowd of men and women. She only recognized one, the clan chief called Roarr. He looked her over then turned to Falkor.

"Guess you'll be calling the tattooist next? Am I going to end up the only one left single?"

The assumptions in his statement, that not only were they together but it was serious enough for her to tattoo Falkor's mark on her neck the way Southern women did, were enough to throw her into panic. Somehow she kept her expression serene, but her mind was in turmoil. Sure, when Falkor wasn't being arrogant and overbearing she liked him. And there was no denying he was sexy as hell. But she wasn't free, wouldn't be free until

the Tel Group was taken down, and anyone who got too close to her would be in constant danger.

Even if that weren't a concern, she just wasn't sure if she'd ever be able to manage being in a long-term relationship. She'd been alone so long. Walked alone so long. Her path had been dark and deadly. She wasn't *good*. It would take a lifetime to make up for the wrongs she'd committed and until she did, she didn't deserve a man like Falkor.

She was so lost in her thoughts she was startled when Falkor made their goodbyes. Outside with Britt and Barak, she looked around trying to remember the way back to the house.

"Where to next?" Britt asked Barak.

"I should go back to the house," she interrupted. People already had the wrong idea about her and Falkor. She didn't want to make it worse.

Barak gave her a cold, hard look and jerked his head over his shoulder. "A word."

She followed him a few feet away, shading her eyes against the glare as she looked up at him. "What?"

"In some ways, Delroi is just like Earth. Appearances matter."

What did that have to do with her? "And?"

"And you are Falkor's *der'lan*. You are the only one denying it. It's plain for everyone else to see."

She huffed. "Look, I'm not sure what that means, but trust me when I tell you it's impossible. It would never work."

He shrugged. "That's between the two of you. It's appearances that count today, of all days. He's the second most powerful warrior in Saber City. In all of the Southern territories. You can imagine how it would look for such a warrior to appear publicly spurned by his *der'lan*."

Her stomach knotted. "Bad?"

"Yes."

She sighed. The last thing she wanted was to damage Falkor's standing with the clans. "Alright. I'll come with y'all."

\* \* \* \*

He kept Janice's hand tightly in his as he pulled her, laughing, through the streets. They called it Festival. A spring celebration she likened to Mardi Gras or Carnival. Except it was so different. Oh, the partying was definitely there but it was in celebration of the year's new graduating warrior class instead of a religious event.

Janice was relieved the day of ceremonies and smaller private gatherings was over. She'd been surprised to be invited to those, even more surprised that everyone thought she was Falkor's mate. She'd learned the proper word was *der'lan* and loosely translated it meant 'mate of my heart.' He certainly didn't hide his attraction, always keeping her close.

She'd never forget the stunned look on his face when she'd tried to excuse herself after the first party. If Barak hadn't explained, she might have insisted. She didn't want to mislead anyone about her role and for some reason, since it was Falkor, that mattered to her. But since the perception was already there and for a warrior to appear publicly scorned by his *der'lan*, well, apparently there wasn't much worse, she'd gone along.

She'd stayed close and played the role. It was something she knew how to do,

pretend to be someone she wasn't, but as the day wore on she hated herself a bit more and more for being so good at it. It wasn't fair to Falkor. It wasn't fair to her. And it became clear to her as the day passed that she could never be what he needed. She was not political wife material. She could act the social butterfly when the mission called for it, but it wasn't her. She hated every minute of it. Which was ridiculous considering she'd spent a great deal of time and effort over *years* to build a reputation as a socialite party girl with no real life. She should be used to it by now. She wasn't.

So she'd been beyond relieved after dinner when he handed her a mask and said they were going into the city anonymously. The party was in full swing when they stepped outside. After an hour of just wandering and ogling and laughing at the antics of a normally staid people set free of inhibitions for one night, he pulled her out of the throng to a makeshift bar and handed her a glass of blue liquid.

"What's this?" she asked taking a sip.

"It's called *gazzi*. Like your wine on Earth."

It was light and sweet. "Nice. Trying to get me drunk, Falkor?" she joked.

He didn't reply to her flirting, just gave her a steady, sober look and a slight shake of his head. "I already told you. When I ta—"

She cut him off. "Yeahyeahyeah. Since *you're* the tease here, let's go do something. Have some fun."

She swallowed the last of the wine and set the glass down before walking away. She didn't get far before he grabbed her hand. He didn't seem to have any particular destination in mind. He let her lead, and she couldn't remember the last time she'd had such a great night. There were performers everywhere. Singers, small street plays, even fire-eaters. Then there were the stalls, like an outdoor town square market, everywhere she turned. Incredible art, clothing, food.

She stopped by a table of scarves. They were light and filmy, soft and smooth, almost like silk, and hand painted. She gently ran her fingers over one done in rich reds and oranges with a desert landscape and city in the background. One of the region's famed saber cats was silhouetted against its skyline.

Falkor stood behind her, looking over her shoulder, and bent his head to whisper in her ear. "Shall I buy it for you? These are more for decoration than use but you make it prettier."

She groaned as his hot breath brushed over her skin and leaned back against his chest. "Janice?" he prodded.

She let the scarf drop back on the table and shook her head reluctantly. It would be the perfect addition to the collection of art she'd gathered over years of travel, but it was an expensive gift she couldn't accept. She gave it a last lingering look before turning her back on the table and tilting her face up to meet his gaze.

He cocked an eyebrow. "You don't want it."

She shrugged one shoulder. "It's beautiful, but I can't accept such an expensive gift. It's just too much."

His expression never changed. His mind pulled back a little bit from hers, but she could still feel his irritation. He pulled a card from a hidden pocket in his shirt and handed it to the stall's proprietor. The transaction was performed quickly and he handed her the bag containing the scarf. She wasn't sure if she was angry or charmed that he'd ignored her wishes. One look at his face and she knew better than to argue. In this, he'd



have things his way.

Near dawn he led her to a cafe near the house and found a table outside.

"Barak and Britt are going to meet us."

She knew they'd been out in the city too, but she hadn't spotted either one of them.

"Great."

She smiled and excused herself to go in search of the cafe's lavatory. Inside, the small restaurant was packed. She picked her way through the crowd, keeping her shields as high as possible, dangerously high. She wouldn't be able to sense a coming attack, but she'd be in worse shape if she went into sensory overload from so much physical contact. It was a calculated risk, one her body insisted she take. It made her as nervous as going in with no shields at all.

She was almost to the lavatory door when someone jostled her, forcing her to grab the frame to prevent falling. She knew that move. Dropping her shields a little she let her senses flare out, but didn't find anyone. She pulled the door open, stepped inside, and checked her pockets, heart sinking when she found a handwritten note, barely more than a scrawl.

*Behind the cafe. You have two minutes.*

She used the facilities quickly and found the back entrance, hoping Falkor wouldn't come looking for her. She was wary, but not overly concerned. It didn't surprise her she wasn't the only Earth spy on Delroi. She suspected there were several.

But when she stepped outside, when the man waiting for her removed his mask, she had a hard time controlling her fear. The Shadow. She didn't know his name. She doubted anyone knew his name. Another member of the Tel Group. He was a military telepath, able to kill with his mind alone, like her. Spy. Assassin. He was frightening even to her and she was well aware of how deadly her gifts were. But he was the silent unnamed monster in the night parents used to scare their children into obedience. She doubted even Britt knew he really existed the rumors were so wild. She only knew because she'd worked with him once, many years and a lot of life lessons ago.

He actually bowed, low and formal. "Ms. Hawkins. Your mission doesn't include taking up with the locals."

She decided to brazen it out. Arching an eyebrow, she answered, "That's exactly what it is. To get to know them."

"Including their mating bond?" He betrayed absolutely no emotion, no thoughts. Her heart stopped.

"What bond?"

He smiled and it wasn't at all what she expected. It was gentle, almost brotherly, instead of cold or cruel. Afraid he was influencing her mind she desperately checked her shields. He shook his head. "I'm not that good. Well, not with someone as strong as you."

But he was good enough to guess what she was thinking despite her mental walls.

She dropped the party girl mask she wore so well. "What do you want?"

"I don't want to be ordered to kill such a strong talent, Janice. Or the people she cares about." He paused for effect. "There's nothing more here to learn. It's time for you to return to Earth."

"We had an agreement. My report. My freedom. I can make the report from here."

He looked sad, disappointed in her almost. "The Group won't let you go so easy, Janice."

She knew when she was being manipulated. She'd learned from the best. Why did this asshole get to know her name and she didn't know his? She kept her cool but she could feel her anger rising dangerously.

"And what's in it for you? If they can get you here, what do they have on you?"

He actually laughed. She couldn't have been more surprised. "I'm not ready to share that with you yet. But I want the same names and locations you want." Proving he had firsthand knowledge of her private conversation with the Prime Minister. "They own me until then," he added grimly.

Was he suggesting an alliance between them? Could she trust him or was this a trap? It was a calculated risk. She was strong, stronger than most telepaths on two planets and she suspected he was stronger than her.

"Between the two of us we can force him to give us the information."

Part of her flinched back from the idea. It was a kind of rape, forcibly taking information from another's mind.

This time his laugh was bitter. "His mind is too strong."

To have a mind so strong two martial telepaths couldn't influence it or get information from it, he would have to be a telepath himself and one hell of a strong one. It was illegal for one of them to hold a national office, but... "Why am I not surprised," she murmured.

"Nothing surprises you anymore?" The tone was joking, but dry and cynical too.

Nothing surprised her except the persistence of one Delroi warrior. She pushed him from her mind. "Not much. No."

Silence stretched for several minutes. She didn't know what his excuse was, but she was sifting through everything she knew about the new Prime Minister. He must be a member of the Tel Group. No wonder he'd been sure he could get the names of the men who'd killed her parents. Not because technically Tel was a part of the government, but because he had total access. He wouldn't be the mysterious Chairman of the Group, he was too public, but he'd be high on the totem pole. Eventually, the Shadow spoke, interrupting her thoughts.

"You must return to Earth. Give your report. Get the Prime Minister's information. Maybe then we can all be free. I won't be the only one they send, Janice. Everyone you care about, everyone you love, is expendable. You know how this game works."

He also knew she cared about too many others. Britt. Kendall and Laney and her baby. Falkor.

"Getting off this planet is not as easy as getting on it."

He held his hand out. "Come with me now."

Could she leave just like that? No goodbyes? No final moments? No one last night with—she cut the thought off. The Shadow could read her too easily and she wouldn't endanger anyone else. She shook her head, hesitated.

He took a cautious step forward. "There are rumors. That the recruitment program has started up again."

His words hit her like a punch to the stomach. She actually staggered and he reached out to steady her.

"You aren't the only one who lost family," he said softly but his effort at control didn't cover his rage. "The PM's information might help us stop that. I know you want out of this life. I can read it. I can even understand why. But can you, in good conscience,

walk away while the recruiting is still going on?"

She jerked away from his grip on her arm. She couldn't let her parents' murderer walk the world free. Free to repeat his crimes. Free to ruin the lives of other children. The Shadow knew that.

"I'm going north with Britt tomorrow. They'll be busy here for a few days." With a massive training exercise but she didn't explain that. Tomorrow, she'd leave. But for now she'd enjoy one last day with Falkor, yearning for what could never be.

"You'll find your way out tomorrow then."

She didn't argue and he turned to leave. "Hey!"

Turning back, he stood almost in silhouette, tall, broadly muscled, and very good looking. If she didn't know better she'd think he was a Delroi warrior. He was hot, but he didn't do it for her. He wasn't ... she was not going there. "Do you have a name?"

He grinned and it was young and boyish and playful. It was a damned shame he was so much like her. She felt a pang of sympathy. He'd probably never have anyone to share that charm with.

"Call me Shadow. Everyone else does." He nodded at the rear door to the cafe.

"They're waiting for you."

She looked at the door and when she turned back Shadow was gone.

### Chapter Three

She'd come home, to the place that held vague childhood memories of a happy existence before the world went to hell. The valley and small village were refuge, the tiny world she retreated to when her search for answers continued to lead her nowhere. They welcomed her with wide smiles and open arms, never complaining when she disappeared for days on end, but an alien, a warrior half a galaxy away, haunted her. Hunted her.

Janice Hawkins stood on a ridge, watching as a Delroi shuttle swooped gracefully down into the valley. He'd taken longer than she'd expected—a full three weeks—but he'd come for her. She wasn't sure if it was anxiety or anticipation twisting her stomach in knots, but she wasn't happy with either.

"What's wrong?"

Tessa. She looked down into doe-soft eyes, the gaze of one of the young girls in town who seemed to have adopted her and who she was determined to keep safe from monsters the world hadn't yet shown her. Monsters Janice was all too familiar with since she was one of them.

"Nothing, sweetheart. Let's go meet them, shall we?"

The doe eyes went black around the edges and Janice felt the pulse of the girl's power as she struggled to contain it. And did.

"Very good," Janice praised her and was rewarded with a bright smile.

"The ship scares you," she offered hesitantly.

The observation gave Janice pause. She'd have to be on her guard around this child, this powerful empath just learning to control her abilities. Janice didn't want any of the ugliness of her life to bleed over. She was determined to shield Tessa from the kind of life Janice led.

Taking the girl's hand, she shrugged and started down the path to the village.

"Sometimes, the unknown is a little scary."

The girl frowned. "But you know the Delroi. You even went to their planet."

Ah, this one was smart too. It was why Janice had taken her under her wing. "That's true. But sometimes..." Hell. How philosophical could she get with a ten year old?

"Well, when you first meet people or you met them not long ago, you don't really know them well yet, right?"

Tessa pressed her lips together and her brow creased as she thought it over, as they wound their way down to narrow track to the valley floor. Finally she nodded. "It's like Mary McKay. I didn't like her when she moved here. Not for a long time."

Said so seriously Janice repressed a smile. She knew Mary and Tessa were the best of friends. "I suppose it's like that."

They came around the last curve in the trail into a clearing. The Delroi ship was there, many of the locals milled around gawking and pointing, while the Delroi warriors simply stood and waited. It was only one warrior she was interested in however, and he lifted his head when she came into view, his mind pushing at hers, gaze pinning her still.

*Falkor.*

She stumbled as she drank in his familiar form. Tall and broad and mouthwatering. Tattoos stretched down one side of his face and neck, disappeared into his shirt but

became visible again on one arm all the way to his hand. But she only knew that from memory, her gaze caught and held on his face. He hadn't shaved recently. His cheek would be rough against her skin. Abrading. A knot of need tightened in her belly, but his expression didn't change at all. There wasn't one flicker of lust or interest or any emotion she could discern in his expression. It wasn't fair.

*Sweetheart.*

She wasn't aware she'd used telepathy until he answered. He shouldn't be strong enough to reach her mentally, especially if she didn't invite him into her mind, but for reasons she hadn't been able to figure out on Delroi her powers seemed to heighten his. At first he'd had to physically touch her to reach her mind, but not anymore.

*I'm not sure what I want to do first, my der'lan. Stroke you or spank you.*

Well, she'd been wrong about reading people before. Just because he didn't show any emotion sure as hell didn't mean he wasn't feeling it. She didn't respond to his promise, ignored the desire winding through her as she spotted her uncle, her only surviving family member, walking down the trail to the clearing.

*Option C. This village is remote. They haven't met the Delroi yet. So behave.*

Wicked male laughter in her mind and a promise to be good. Very, very good. It was hard to ignore the blush heating her face.

Avoiding Falkor's gaze, she met her uncle at the ship and forced a smile. He leaned down to kiss her cheek, an amused glint in his eyes and she wondered how much of the private conversation he'd overheard. That's the part that sucked about living in a valley full of people with extra-sensory talents.

"Uncle Henry." She took his hand and pulled him forward. If he was going to get so much enjoyment out of this, he might as well serve as a shield. "This is Falkor Trace. My uncle, Henry Hawkins."

The Delroi warrior stepped forward and nodded, shook her uncle's hand. Without even considering the action or why she was protecting him, she extended her mental shields to include Falkor.

"Sir." He introduced the three men and young boy who'd accompanied him. She narrowed her eyes when he got to Roarr. Why had one of Barak's clan chiefs come? Then the thought fled as Falkor shocked the hell out of her. She should have been reading him instead of shielding him. "On my planet, a warrior would make his intentions clear to his mate's closest male relative. That would be you?"

She hissed. "Don't you dare."

"But sweetheart..." His protest was lightly spoken, but his eyes were glittering with anger. He tugged her hand until she stumbled against his side and she felt the full brunt of his emotions. "Isn't that why you made me trek halfway across the galaxy?"

Glaring, she jerked away. "No. It isn't. *I* didn't."

*Can't you just leave me alone? That's what I really want.*

More of that teasing laughter, but there was fury underneath it. Bitterness. Hurt. She should have fled while she'd had the chance, when she'd seen the shuttle flying overhead. But damn it, she was tired. Tired of always having to be someone she wasn't, tired of always being the spy. The assassin. The only place to escape that was here, so she'd stayed. Here was her only place of respite while she searched for her parents' killer. But she'd known he'd follow. She scowled at the thought. *No*. She didn't want him to come after her. Did she?

"Well." Clapping his hands together, Henry interrupted her thoughts. "No matter the reason, the Delroi visiting our humble village is an excuse to celebrate. Come, let me show you around and tonight we'll have a feast on the green."

Henry gave her a speaking look, and mental commands, as he pulled Falkor and the other warriors with him. She sighed, then realized the girl was still at her side.

"Well, Tessa, let's go find your mom so we can organize this thing."

## Chapter Four

It was late. Throwing together a party for two hundred people at the last minute was time consuming and exhausting. She just wanted to collapse on her bed and sleep for twelve hours, but she almost turned away from her front door. Almost. A sudden surge of pure anger held her in place, her hand gripping the doorknob. Falkor waited on the other side. His energy pulsed at her, at once angry and enticing. Furious, yet enthralling. With a deep breath, she steeled herself against an ache she couldn't fill, twisted the handle and stepped inside.

She never invited anyone in. The government she worked for didn't even know where she lived. How had he found her? But she knew the answer. He would find her psychic energy the same beacon she found his. All day and night she'd been aware of his presence, had had to fight the urge to seek him out. Hell, she'd felt him drawing closer for days. That shouldn't be possible through space.

She'd caught glimpses of him all day, watched him with his quiet calm way speaking to her neighbors, her uncle. Once there'd been a kind of pain when she'd overheard him compliment Tessa's mom on the cooking. What was that about anyway?

And now here he was. A dream that could never be hers. In the space she never shared with anyone, not even the young girl she was helping to train.

It was nothing like the grand house he lived in on Delroi. The floors were stone, the rough plaster walls were covered in shelves, and wood beams stretched parallel across the ceiling. It was one large open room, combining the living areas and kitchen, filled with books and artwork she'd collected over years of traveling. Upstairs—where he was *not* going—was the house's only bedroom with the balcony she liked to sit on and watch the sun disappear in the mountains to the west.

"What are you doing here?" The words came out sharper than she'd intended.

Gently, he traced the rim of a fragile vase. "Getting to know my *der'lan*."

He continued to walk around the room while she stood with her fists clenched unsure how to get him to leave. Unsure if that's what she really wanted. He stopped in the half-hidden alcove that hid her loom. The scarf he'd bought her was draped over it with her framing supplies propped against the wall. She'd decided to put it behind glass and display it, but hadn't quite worked herself into yet. Once she did, she wouldn't be able to stop and finger the soft fabric, would dwell less on the man who'd given it to her.

"You aren't at all what people think, are you? That confidant flirty creature I met on Delroi isn't you at all."

Heaven help her. Why was it this man, of all possibilities, could see that? She took a deep breath, prepared to plaster on an insipid smile and pretend to be that Janice, but it didn't come. She'd let her guard down and he'd invaded her space. He'd seen through her mask.

She kicked off her shoes and tossed the sweater she'd carried to ward off the night's chill on the sofa. She didn't try to hide the weariness suddenly weighing her down. The frantic preparations of the day, and okay, fighting the craving for him for weeks, caught her all at once.

"You can look around tomorrow. I'm exhausted."

It was probably the most honest she'd ever been with him and it surprised her so much she wasn't prepared for how fast he moved. One minute he was fingering the gentle scarf on the loom several feet away, and the next he was standing in front of her.

"So?"

"I want to go to sleep, Falkor." She tried to keep her voice even but she knew he heard her irritation. It only seemed to please him. She would never understand this man.

He nodded. "You do look tired. We'll speak in the morning."

But he made no move for the door.

"Look, I don't have a guest room. Come back when the sun is up."

Maybe if he left her alone for a few hours she'd regain some control, but he gave her a sexy smile that made her feel like she was in free fall and she knew that wasn't going to happen. "We have no need of a guest room."

Didn't he get it? "I'm not sleeping with you." Even if he had traveled the galaxy to get to her.

His eyes glowed. "Finally ready to move beyond sleeping?"

This time she glared. "Let me rephrase that. I'm not having sex with you."

She wasn't stupid. There would be no return from that. No running away. But God, she wanted to. She wanted to know what it would be like to be held, to be touched by a man like him. By a man who could focus such single-minded devotion on one woman. If only she could give it back...

She expected anger, frustration at least, but again he only shrugged. "Sex or sleep, I'm not going anywhere, sweetheart."

Damn it. What would make him go?

"You slept in the same room with me for a week on Delroi. Sometimes even in my arms."

And he'd kept the nightmares at bay. He left it unsaid, but he must have realized they'd come back as soon as she left. She slept so very little.

She was tired of arguing and she couldn't force him to leave, but the truth was the lure of a few hours uninterrupted slumber was too tempting to pass up. What could she say? She felt like she was using him for sleep of all things while he expected his patience to eventually pay off.

Without a word, feeling guilty but not very apologetic about it, she went around him and up the stairs. She never paused to see if he followed, didn't hesitate to pull back the covers on the large bed before she began to remove her clothes. She heard his groan when she was down to her bra and underwear.

"Enough, Janice. I am not a saint."

She preferred sleeping in the buff, but she wasn't going to push her luck if it meant actually sleeping for more than a couple of hours.

"Turn around then."

When she was certain he wouldn't get an eyeful she walked to the long dresser and found an over sized t-shirt. She dropped her bra on the dresser and pulled it on before slipping into bed. Neither one had turned the light on and she rolled to her side to stare out the balcony doors where the full moon's light bathed the valley below them, trying desperately not to hear the unzipping of his boots or rustle of his clothes.

Her heart started to race when the bed dipped, though. Then he was behind her, arms pulling her close. He'd kept his pants on but she could still feel his cock hard against her



butt. He made no move to seduce her. She relaxed, a feeling of warmth and safety slowly seeping into her until she started to drift to sleep. His voice was ragged, so soft that later she was sure she'd imagined it.

"Don't leave me again, sweetheart. I don't think my heart would survive it."

## Chapter Five

Falkor Trace was acknowledged the most patient hunter in Saber City, but even he had limits. Out the balcony doors he could see the sky beginning to purple as dawn approached, and he repressed a moan of relief. He'd made a vow to himself to give Janice enough time to come to him on her own, a vow easier said than kept when she was pressed against him, sleepy and warm and soft.

Sometime while he'd slept his hand had inched up under the hem of the thin shirt she wore to rest on her belly. When she took her next deep breath it took all his self-restraint not to slide it up further to test the shape and feel of her breast. Still dark or not, he had to rise; this game was too dangerous. She was too tempting, and he was sick of tormenting himself. But when he tried to withdraw she stopped him with her smaller hand over his. Rolling to her back, she looked up and met his gaze.

Tall for a female, around 5'9, she was muscular and lithe, no denying the strength of her body, but also soft and rounded in all the right places. And that softness was pressed against him now, welcoming him. Her short blonde hair was almost white, framing her tanned face and dark sooty eyes. She was impossible to resist.

"Don't you think it's time you stopped denying both of us?"

She was a carnal enticement, one it would have been impossible to deny if he wasn't in her mind. Groaning, he shook his head.

"I told you before. When I take you it will not be a one night stand," he said picking the phrase out of her mind. Males vastly outnumbered females on Delroi and they'd invaded Earth with the hope some of her women were destined *der'lans*. There was only one for each male and once forged the bond between them was for life. Unbreakable. "Delroi mate for life, Janice. You know that."

He didn't let her see how it bit at his soul, her belief she could have sex with him once and then make him leave.

"I've tried to explain why that wouldn't work," she said softly, almost begging him to just accept her words and give up on her. On them.

*Patience*, he reminded himself. She required patience. He leaned forward, unable to resist just one kiss, and pressed his lips to hers. She opened her mouth for him when he nipped her bottom lip, moaned when his tongue slipped inside. He ended it before he could get carried away. When he lifted his head she glared at him.

"You're a tease, you know that?"

"And your explanations are nothing but fear," he countered.

He knew the words were a mistake as soon as he uttered them, but Gods, a man could only take so much. He was frustrated, horny, half in love with a woman he was realizing didn't actually exist, and she was trying to shut him out again. She sat up and tried to squirm her way to the edge of the bed and his temper finally snapped. He grabbed her hand and pulled her back lying down on top of her to hold her still. She spread her thighs so he rested between them and her eyes widened when he thrust forward, the motion not entirely voluntary. His cock was so hard it almost hurt.

He knew he should move, get out of the bed, out of the house even, but he was ensnared by the mating lust between them, losing control to the heat in him demanding to

be assuaged by the heat in her. He rested his elbows above her shoulders, his forehead against hers, and shook as he fought the wildness inside for control. He would have won the battle if she hadn't touched him, if she hadn't leaned up and kissed his throat, if her hands hadn't come up to stroke his back.

He recognized the growl as his but he was beyond caring. Splaying his fingers, he thrust them into her hair, holding her head still as he claimed her lips, as his mind thrust into hers.

*There's no going back from this, sweetheart.*

Her legs came up around his waist. *Don't you dare stop, Falkor.* There was a vulnerability in her voice he'd never heard before and a hint of fear. He broke the kiss, wanting to see her eyes, her face.

"Janice?"

She looked dazed and he cursed himself silently. She was as caught up in the mating heat as he was, but unlike him she had no idea what she was getting into. He should back off, wait until it was a decision she could make consciously.

"Don't stop," she said again. *I ... need this.*

He sat up and straddled her hips, fingers gripping the hem of her shirt.

"This? Or me?" He barked a short laugh. "I can't believe I keep saying no to a beautiful woman. My own *der'lan*."

But he didn't move. He didn't have the strength for that yet. And her eyes held him still. The daze was gone but the heat remained along with uncertainty and disappointment.

"There's no making this go away, is there?" she whispered. "This is what Britt tried to warn me about, isn't it? I should have left Delroi the second I laid eyes on you."

"I just would have followed you," he said, keeping his voice gentle, wanting her to keep talking. This was progress of a sort. She took a deep breath and his eyes tracked the movement as her breasts rose and fell. He didn't hide his interest. She had to know what she did to him, how much he needed her. It wasn't a perverse desire to deny either of them that kept them apart. He was simply waiting for her to accept him.

"You keep assuming I'm capable of that." She'd read his thoughts and looked away but not before he saw the glistening in her eyes. "You don't know where I've been. The things I've done or how I survived. You don't know me at all."

"And whose fault is that, sweetheart? I could try to find the information in your mind, but that's a breach of trust you would never forgive. See?" He smiled. "I do know a thing or two."

Like it was time to get out of this bed before he gave into temptation. She gave him a wicked smile and he knew he hadn't shielded the thought enough to keep it from her.

"Why not give in?"

She reached up and gripped his neck, tugged until he reluctantly followed her down.

"I'm reading your mind," he warned.

She only laughed. She was playing with fire and she didn't care. *I think it's time to feed this craving, Falkor. I think if you're really serious about this mate business you should indulge me every now and then.*

He froze inches above her. "Do you know what you're doing? No going back. I meant that."

She cocked an eyebrow. "I know you mean it. I'm new to this. Hell, so are you."

Exercise some of that patience you're so well known for."

He tried to pull away, intent on doing just that, but she held on tight. "*Out* of bed. Falkor. If you don't kiss me soon I'm going to kill you."

There was no denying the pleading note in her voice, but he didn't give in right away. If they were doing this, they were doing it right. He freed himself long enough to get out of the pants he'd slept in, then pulled off her scanty clothes. It was hard not to stare. He'd seen her naked before, but never with the anticipation he had now. Now that no one was being denied.

She didn't give him time to admire the bounty before him. She didn't speak; she didn't have to. He heard the demand in her mind, felt her arousal rise and join his in a conflagration he'd never imagined possible before.

\*

Janice was going out of her mind. Her *skin* hurt she craved him so much. This man. His touch. His kiss. And God please, his cock. She'd said last night she wasn't having sex with him, but she'd known her resolve wouldn't last long. It never did. He pissed her off and she promised herself she'd never fuck him. But the oath always faded fast. This was far from the first time she'd offered herself to him. He always said no. He always walked away. This morning he wasn't walking away, damn it. He wasn't leaving her a desperate ball of need again. And maybe, maybe, she would finally get him out of her system.

He said forever but she wasn't buying it. Eventually he'd discover things about her, things she didn't want to remember herself. If she'd learned one thing about Falkor Trace it was that the man had a streak of honor a mile wide. When he finally figured out what she was, what she was capable of, well, he'd be long gone. She wanted it that way right?

There was no warning. No foreplay. The truth was she didn't need it. She was wet and wanting and so damned hot. He thrust into her hard, leaving her gasping and filled and wanting to weep with the joy of it, but he held himself still over her until she looked up ready to demand, ready to beg if necessary.

"That's right, sweetheart, look at me." He started to move in short shallow strokes that did nothing to ease the ache, just heightened her arousal. "I am not going anywhere, Janice. No matter what is so horrible you think I'd leave you. I will never leave you. Never."

God, she wished that were true. He wasn't shielding at all, his mind wide open to her, and she felt the purity of his heart. His fierce loyalty. His determination that she not be allowed to retreat back into her own mind, not be allowed to escape him again. He wanted nothing more than to be allowed to share her life and he had no idea how unworthy her life was.

He took her away from all of her worries. His strokes quickened and deepened. His lips found her nipple, sucking hard when she wrapped her arms around his head and cried out. His stubbled face rubbed against her sensitive skin, the roughness heightening her arousal. Her need. Her skin would bear witness to his claiming. It should have bothered her but it didn't. It thrilled her. All the while his mind whispered to hers. Dark, sinful promises. The things he wanted to do to her. Things she would do in return. His words kept her so wound up she almost missed the softer ones hammering at his mind. The words he fought to say. She knew they must be the binding prayer that Britt had warned her about, that those words would forge an unbreakable psychic bond between them.

She should have aided him in fighting that urge. Should have, but then she was

coming, coming so hard she thought her mind would splinter with the pleasure, and there was a tiny hidden part of her selfish enough to want to belong so completely to one person. To this man. Only him. So she didn't aid him. She clung to him in the aftershocks of her orgasm, amazed that as he whispered those words she could feel the threads of the bond coming together. It completed in a stunning blast of mental power she'd been completely unprepared for. She had no idea how much time passed before she became aware of Falkor next to her, breathing as hard as she was.

## Chapter Six

"Wow."

He looked over at her, his smile a little worried. "Don't regret this, sweetheart. I will never wish for someone different."

She took a deep breath, wondered how long he'd hold to that line. Already she could feel him wrapping around her heart and knew it would be best to tell him the worst of it. Best to cauterize the wound of his leaving from the very beginning. She sucked in a deep breath.

"Before the Delroi came, there were many wars. My parents were scientists. They designed weapons." She looked around the bedroom. "This was their house."

He squeezed her hand but didn't say a word. She felt his acceptance in her mind though and it made her want to weep.

"I'm a telepath. A strong one. You know that. They weren't. My uncle Henry is though, so make sure your shields are good. Anyway, when I was twelve some people came to see me. They were recruiting for a private school."

She didn't mention the Tel Group or their connection to the school. That was the kind of information that could get you killed, and she wouldn't risk his life more than necessary.

"They were looking for young talents to groom for the intelligence program. I was young and stupid and a show off and I wanted to do it. They painted it as this great glamorous world. My parents said no. A week later, when I was away on a school trip, the valley was bombed. It was blamed on rebels, but I found out years later that wasn't true. There's no proof, but I think I always knew it.

"I went into the school a few weeks after they died. And I became exactly what they didn't want me to be," she ended softly and hoped the blow would come quickly though she hadn't even told him the worst of it.

When she graduated she wasn't pulled into the Tel Group's structure. She was sent to work her way into one of the intelligence agencies. In her case, the Army Intelligence Division. A sort of spy of spies. She had little contact with Tel, but every now and then over the years they'd come to her for information. She'd grown to hate the shadowy intrusion, the agents who would appear with no warning and veiled threats of meeting her parents' fate. Eventually she'd found a telepath as disillusioned as she was who'd told her the truth. Or what he suspected the truth was. She'd blamed herself ever since, searching for the killers and way to bring down Tel.

Falkor squeezed her hand. She couldn't stop the first tear. Didn't try to stop the second.

"It wasn't your fault."

"Intellectually, I know that. I do. But I will never forgive myself for it or what I became later. You have to understand..." She hesitated. How far was she going with this confession? Something in her just wanted to get it over with but she'd been so strongly conditioned to keeping secrets, she couldn't do it. She had to give him something though. Something he'd probably already guessed at. "You know I worked for Britt? The thing is, I didn't only work for her. I wasn't on Delroi out of curiosity. I wasn't there just to visit an

old friend."

She got out of bed and started to pace, refusing to look at him.

"You weren't there to kill anyone. Information then? They think Laney is holding out on them." He was more perceptive than she thought. A hard edge came into his voice.

"What did you tell them, Janice?"

"Nothing they didn't already know." She sighed. She'd held back with her people, too. "Nothing I learned in Saber City." Leaving Britt and his brother safe. "I did not tell them about this mating thing you do either."

That was the kind of thing she should have shared. She'd told herself she was just holding it in reserve, for leverage if it became necessary, but really it had felt too much like betraying Falkor. She hadn't been able to do it even when the Prime Minister hadn't come up with the promised names when she'd returned from Delroi. Well, if he was part of the Tel Group that didn't surprise her. She'd started her own investigation. Not that it'd gotten her anywhere, and Shadow had disappeared of course.

"And I had orders *not* to kill anyone. But it wouldn't be the first time. You want to make an impossible assassination? You call me. You want to kill someone but the justification is a little murky? You call me. *That's* who I am Falkor. They send me when they need someone who has absolutely nothing to live for."

She felt him watching her but she refused to turn around and look. It would hurt too much to see censure and disgust on his face.

"You have something to live for now," he finally answered.

She laughed, but it sounded watery and choked not happy. She was close to breaking down and couldn't remember the last time that had happened. "How long do you think they'll allow me that luxury? It wasn't just for my own peace of mind I resisted this."

She'd never forget Shadow's words. He'd been right. Tel would never let her go. It was only that time and place that had allowed her to pretend otherwise.

"So why did you give in?" He didn't sound angry. Just his usual calm, infinitely patient self. She couldn't decide if that was irritating or comforting. Probably a bit of both. She turned to face him. He hadn't left the bed though he'd propped up the pillows behind him and was sitting up.

"Because I'm selfish. Because I wanted something for myself. Just once," she whispered. She angrily wiped away an escaped tear. Her own rash actions had made her what she was and in a moment of weakness she'd given in to her wish to go back in time. Have a real life.

"You have to leave. They will never let me go and they will never let you live. I shouldn't have allowed either one of us to get into this position."

She felt the beginnings of a major panic attack coming on. An assassin who got panic attacks. It was beyond ridiculous and her most closely guarded secret. Her fingers went numb and her stomach rolled. She took a deep breath and willed her heart, which felt like it might beat right out off her chest, to slow. Was it fear for his safety or fear he'd reject her that triggered it? Either way, she wouldn't repeat the stressors.

Finally he stood and he wore an expression she'd only seen a couple times. Hard and angry and determined. Her heart started to race for an entirely different reason. He came close and stopped in front of her, and for some stupid reason she wished she felt free to weep while expecting his rejection. She'd been playing at believing in the impossible and here was her proof it didn't exist. Instead of repudiating her, he grabbed her and hugged

her close. "No one is going to separate us, my *der'lan*. No one."

She almost believed him. She wanted to believe he was that determined, that powerful, and she clung to him. "I think you really believe that."

"I do. We can go home. They can't get to you on Delroi. Not that they can get through me here, but if it makes you feel more secure..."

But they could get to her on Delroi. She groaned and shook her head, gave him part of the truth. "I came home because I just want that part of my life over with."

He gripped her shoulders and held her away from him, meeting her gaze. "You came back here because you were running away from me."

She laughed. "It actually is not all about you, Falkor."

"You're right. This is about *us*."

"Just listen, would you? I can't live in Saber City. It's worse than here. I know Barak is making progress but the politics and conspiracies and rebellions ... I don't want any part of that. If I was there how long do you think it would be before Barak and Britt ask me to get involved? Britt knows what I'm capable of. It wouldn't take long. I don't want to be that person anymore."

"Two things, *der'lan*. Women are not warriors on Delroi, which means they also are not spies and assassins. You saw enough of us to know that."

She snorted. "And your faith in the ability of women is another issue."

He cocked an eyebrow. "I have every confidence in your abilities, Janice. But you said yourself you want out."

He had her there. "And second?"

He took her face between his palms, forcing her to look up at him. "You are *my der'lan*. Barak would never ask something of you if I told him not to."

"Kind of hard to avoid the realities of the situation in his house though. The pressure to get involved whether people suggest it or not."

"I do have my own place, sweetheart." He smiled at her, and god, it did something to her resolve to stay away and protect him. "Up in the mountains. Private and secure. You won't have to see anyone you don't want to."

"I didn't know that."

He shrugged. "You were at Barak's. I wasn't leaving you alone."

"You're too good for me." She lifted her hand to his face, stroked her thumb up his stubbled cheekbone. "Do you know that, Falkor? Are you really willing to take me on?"

And when her business was concluded would she really be willing to take the risk? Part of her said no way, but that other part, the part so long suppressed disagreed. Then his arms were around her.

"You're mine. Let's be really clear on that point. No matter how bad you think you are, you're *mine*."

She took a deep breath and let herself start to believe in the impossible. Britt had told her to do that, but there was so much Britt didn't know.

"I can protect you anywhere, Janice, but I have to return to Delroi," he said softly, almost sadly.

Of course he did. He was Barak's second in command, and Barak's control of Saber City and the Southern clans wasn't solid enough yet to spare Falkor for long.

"How long? Before you have to go back?"

Because she wasn't going anywhere until she finished what she'd set out to do.



Careful to keep those thoughts to herself, she pulled away, avoiding his gaze while she got clean clothes and walked into the bathroom. He followed silently but it was impossible to ignore his presence; his energy surrounded her, alive and pulsing.

She turned the water on and without a word he stepped into the shower stall with her, taking the soap and cloth from her hands. His touch was gentle but he was careful not to miss even one spot and she was panting by the time he spoke.

"You're still keeping secrets, my *der'lan*."

The simple observation startled a laugh out of her. "My *life* is one big secret, babe. You can't expect me to give them all up at once," she teased.

"I don't see why not."

Grinning, she wrapped her arms around his neck. How did he manage to make her feel young and carefree and not so tainted? "I think I will carefully dole out my secrets. I wouldn't want you to grow bored."

She rubbed her belly against the long length of his cock. Right now, sharing her past was the farthest thing from her mind. He smiled down at her and cocked one eyebrow.

"You think to distract me with sex?"

"Mmm." Leaning forward she traced the areola around one nipple with her tongue. "Is it working?"

*Janice?* She backed away so fast she would have slipped on the slick floor if Falkor hadn't reached out and grabbed her. Her Uncle Henry's voice in her head at a time like this? It was just wrong on too many levels to count.

*Yes?*

*I think you should get down here. Tessa's mother had a visit you'll find familiar.*

*On my way.*

Damn it. There'd been rumors that recruitment of minors with psy-talents had started up again, but she hadn't believed it. Shadow wasn't the only one to tell her about it. When the program she'd been in was exposed the political fallout had been horrendous. She couldn't believe Richard Andros, the new Prime Minister was stupid enough to attempt it. How many was that? The fourth or fifth since the Delroi invasion? But if it wasn't the Prime Minister or his government, then who was behind the recruitments? She knew the Alliance intelligence community better than most. There were secrets within secrets within secrets and just as many groups to go with them.

She barely dried off before pulling her clothes on, then hurried to find shoes. Falkor caught her before she could open the front door.

"Where are you going?"

She was facing the dawn and blinked against the glare, lifting her hand to shield her eyes. She'd actually forgotten he was there with Henry's shocking news.

"Henry called me." Falkor blocked the path. "I have to go."

"And I'm going with you. But tell me what I'm walking into."

Henry had been a young man when the Tel Group was formed and had declined an invitation to join them believing there was too much chance for corruption in such an organization—something she'd learned much too late. He'd been quietly gathering information on them for the better part of fifty years. He would not appreciate Falkor's presence, but she recognized the look on his face.

"It looks like someone is trying to recruit young psychics again. Someone was at Tessa's house."

His eyes narrowed and glittered, but he moved aside and fell into step beside her. "It is unforgivable to steal a young child from her parents."

She snorted. "Isn't that what you do with your boys on Delroi? With your warrior training."

"No, it isn't." He gripped her elbow and pulled her to a stop. It was understanding rather than anger she saw when she met his gaze. "Our sons will go into warrior training and they'll live at the training facility when they reach the appropriate age. But you will have free access to them. You will see them as often as you like."

They continued walking, but her mind was in more turmoil than before. "No more talking about sons. Or children at all. I'm having a hard enough time accepting you and you go throw something like that at me?"

God. She'd make a horrible mother. She knew about death, not life.

*You will make an excellent mother.* She didn't have to turn to look at him. She heard the smile in his mild, caressing tone, felt it in the soft stroke of his fingers up the inside of her arm. She jerked away.

"Stop it. Seriously." They reached the edge of the village. "I have to concentrate."

His chuckle was low. Sinful. "I interfere with your ability to concentrate?"

They turned down a well-kept side street and she stared straight ahead, refusing to answer his question. There was no way to safely do so. She'd either be giving away too much or be forced to lie. A day ago, she would have lied but, she rubbed her hand over her heart and a sudden tightening that hurt, today she couldn't make herself do it. The bond between them was strong. She was surprised she couldn't reach out and touch it. It scared her, that strength.

"Sweetheart?" he prodded softly.

She shook her head. "I'm fine. This is it." They turned up the short drive to Tessa's house. The door was opened before she could knock and Henry glared at her.

*Why did you bring the alien?*

"Don't look at me. You're the one who invited them to stay."

Falkor just shrugged. "I stay with Janice."

Henry looked like he wanted to protest but bit his tongue. Stepping aside, he allowed them to enter. The house had a similar design to hers. She bypassed the kitchen and joined Angie and Tessa on the sofa.

"Hey," she greeted, taking Angie's hand and keeping her voice gentle. "Why don't you tell me what happened?"

She looked confused and then angry. "I wish I could."

Leaning forward she picked up a white business card from the table and handed it to Janice. There was a Capital number on it and a name, John Black. She would bet her bank account the name was a fake. Below the name were the letters she'd come to despise. TG, Inc.

"He was here." Angie jerked her chin to indicate the name on the card. "With a woman. But I'm damned if I could tell you anything about them except they want Tessa for some school."

"They were not nice people," Tessa interjected.

*How right you are, baby doll.*

She sighed. "I hate to ask, Angie, but can I look in your mind? We need to know who they were. What they look like."

She nodded. "Henry already tried, but he said your talent is different."

Not really different, just stronger. Angie didn't need to know that though. Janice took Angie's hands in hers and let her mind relax. Physical contact wasn't always necessary, but someone had used telepathy to alter her memories so it might help.

She found the brief memory of the meeting, felt Angie's confusion and frustration at having her mind messed with. Unfortunately, the parts that might have helped were just ... gone. Whoever the telepath was, he was strong enough to actually remove the memory whereas most would have had to settle for covering it up and confusing it.

It was disappointing and distressing. Tessa offered her hands and Janice shook her head. There was no way she was trying to read an empathic child under the current circumstances. Besides, she was pretty sure she'd find the same thing.

"What do you remember, Tessa?"

She shrugged, not nearly as upset probably because she didn't fully understand what was happening. "Same as Mom."

Janice picked the card up. "Mind if I keep this? It might help me find these people."

"Of course. I knew you'd help, Jan."

"Whatever I can do." She smiled back in return and stood, leading the two men out of the house. The rest of what she needed to say required privacy.

"Coffee?" she asked Henry.

He nodded and they walked down the street to his home. Inside no one spoke until mugs had been filled and they surrounded the small kitchen table.

"What do you think? Will this lead you to the people you're after?"

She was startled at how dark and forbidding his face was. He was usually so cheerful it was easy to forget he was also once a spy. Old age and a growing belly had facilitated his escape. She'd like to get out while she was still young enough to enjoy what the universe had left for her.

"I think so. Maybe. Probably the people who ran the old school are starting this one. I can't believe they're doing it again but we'd heard that was happening, so it really isn't news. Right?"

"No. It's proof."

"Yeah."

"Any ideas? We could try calling that number."

She shook her head. "I have someone I can trust to run it down. We need an address and a real name before they know we're on to them."

Henry knew that of course. "Won't go anywhere."

"Probably not."

He stood and paced around the kitchen. "Damn it, I refuse to be helpless this time," he muttered, but she felt his frustration in her mind.

"Have you heard of the Shadow?"

"Of course. He's a legend."

"Do you know how to contact him?"

It wouldn't surprise her if he did. Sometimes she thought he knew everyone. He returned to the table, first looking curious then alarmed.

"I don't think he'd be involved in this kind of thing, but even if he was and you could track him down, you wouldn't get anything out of the meeting but a body bag."

"You didn't answer my question," she said dryly.

He scowled. "No, I don't know him. I doubt his own handler knows how to find him. And you just leave it like that. He's dangerous, even to people like us."

"Not this time. He's looking for the same people I am."

Falkor's hand rested on her nape and squeezed. "And how exactly do you know that, my *der'lan*?"

"Good question," Henry seconded.

Shit. There went another secret.

"He found me on Delroi." Henry turned white. "It's okay, Uncle Henry. I worked with him once before, that's why he sought me out."

She tried to ignore the live wire of fury sitting next to her, but it was impossible.

"How did they get a male spy on Delroi?"

"Only male? Don't care about the other half?" she asked sarcastically.

"We knew what you and Britt were. You were allowed anyway and I think you know why." The bond between them hummed with power.

She snorted. "They didn't know about me."

"Don't count on that, sweetheart."

"Okay. Fine. I don't know how they got him on the planet, but you can be sure he isn't the only one."

*That's why you fled.* Even mentally his voice vibrated with fury. *He frightened you and you didn't trust me to protect you.*

With a sigh, she rose, rinsed her mug, and left it in the sink. "I'm going to see if I can flush out a shadow, Henry. I'll keep you posted." She rolled her eyes. "I have a feeling I'm going to spend the entire two hour drive to Capital City getting yelled at. That should make you feel better."

"It does actually."

Feeling childish and petulant, she stuck her tongue out at him as she walked out the door. Behind her she could hear him speak to Falkor.

"Keep her safe."

"Always," came the curt reply.

## Chapter Seven

"Was it fear of this man that made you run or something else?"

They were the first words he'd spoken for over an hour, and by that point she was furious that he was furious. Unlike Delroi, personal vehicles on Earth sat on four wheels and actually touched the ground. Unfortunately, the suspension in hers was too good to bother searching out a nice deep pothole on his side of the car.

"He's looking for the same killers I am. And he knew about the recruiting. I came home to stop that."

"That's not all." Why did he have to push the issue? "Janice." The warning in his voice was undeniable.

"He didn't scare me for myself. But he did make me realize I'll never be free. If they can get the most secretive, feared assassin on Earth to Delroi to threaten me imagine what else they can do. They'd keep sending people for me if I refused orders. Eventually one of them would get lucky."

But it wasn't for herself she feared.

"You thought to protect me."

She shrugged. "And Britt and Kendall. Laney and the baby. There aren't a lot of people important to me, Falkor. I won't risk the ones who are. Besides I can't sit on the sidelines while kids are still being targeted."

"I wouldn't expect you to, but you don't have to do it alone." He fell silent but she felt him struggling with his anger. It pulsed in the air. She sighed.

"You might as well get it over with."

"What?"

"The yelling."

"That's not my way." He took her hand off the gearshift, turned it palm up, and pressed a kiss in the center. A brutal punch of arousal seared through her at the contact. "I have much better ways to punish than yelling, sweetheart."

"P-punish?" She actually stuttered. Unreal.

"You should have told me when this man approached you." His voice was hard, anger barely suppressed, but it turned her on more than scared her. Her growing desire made it difficult to concentrate and reluctantly she tugged her hand free. That only made it marginally better.

"I'm used to working alone, to being alone, Falkor. It's why I've survived so long."

"You're not alone anymore."

She couldn't help smiling. "So you keep telling me."

"Is it sinking in yet?"

"Getting there." She glanced over to see him watching her intently. "It won't happen overnight."

"At least it won't be possible to have more secret meetings with dangerous men since I don't plan to ever leave you unsupervised again."

Unsupervised? Did he have a clue how chauvinistic that sounded? He should know her better than that. But wait. Was it possible?

"Are you actually jealous?" she blurted out.

He gave her a mock growl. "Add it to the list of your transgressions, sweetheart."

She was delighted. She couldn't help herself. When had she ever mattered enough to someone for jealousy to come into play?

Neither spoke as she pulled off the highway onto a side street and parked. It was a nice spring day and they decided to walk. Most of the people she wanted to see were in the surrounding buildings.

As far as plans went it wasn't great, but she knew a lot of dangerous people. It stood to reason Shadow did too. Would anyone tell her how to find him? Probably not. But someone would tell him she was looking. Eventually.

She'd prearranged several meetings on the drive to Capital City. Most were outside in crowded public areas in walking distance of each other. The intelligence and military headquarters were all in the same, concentrated blocks so it made things easier. Somehow she convinced Falkor to hang back, and surprisingly, despite his unusual height and the tattoos covering half his face, he blended into the crowd so well she often lost sight of him.

But even when she couldn't see him, she felt him. His energy was a constant pulse in her mind. Though his anger had abated a bit, it was still there, sharp and bright. Anger she could handle. It was the desire that was slowly killing her. It was warm and heavy and inviting, working its way through her consciousness to her body. Making her needy. Making her *hurt*.

Finally she spoke to everyone on her list, checked in with her boss at her own agency, and led the way to a small cafe she favored. After they ordered, she glared across the table at him. She couldn't stand it anymore.

"Lay off, okay?"

He cocked an eyebrow. "Lay off what?"

"The crazy alien pheromones. I need to concentrate. *Not* be distracted by sex."

He gave her odd look. "Search your mind, sweetheart. It's your desire you're feeling, not mine."

She closed her eyes and did as he ordered. It appeared ... he was right. No way. He took her hand, his thumb stroking over her palm. He might as well have stroked her nipples for all the difference in sensation. His expression became almost pained.

"Now who's projecting?" he asked. "Normally, I'd be very pleased you're coming to trust me that much and I wouldn't be keeping such control over my own desire. But there is too much potential for danger here. You have to control it."

He released her hand and she had the oddest sense of rejection, a twisting wrench in her chest. It became hard to breath. He slid his chair close to hers and gripped her nape.

"Stop it, Janice," he ordered. "I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere."

"This isn't like me." She heard hysteria rising in her voice and it scared the hell out of her. So she'd had a couple of panic attacks in her life. Never this close together though. And it was over sex and not worry. It made no sense.

*What the hell did you do to me?*

She wanted to express her fury, wanted to demand answers she knew he had, but couldn't find the words. Gradually, his massaging touch on her neck and shoulders calmed her enough to think more clearly. The waiter set their plates down before she could ask her questions.

"Eat first," Falkor ordered. The man and his damned orders. She glared, almost

refused, but when she looked in his eyes she saw deep concern and she found she couldn't ignore it. She picked up her fork and pushed the fish and rice around.

*Eat, Janice.* It was a whispered command, one she found herself obeying without thought.

She was relieved when they finished, didn't even argue when Falkor took the check from her. There was no one else in the city she could speak to today and she just wanted to get home. Wanted to get some place relatively safe where she could feed the craving still alive in her blood. Thankfully, the car was only a few feet away.

Falkor gave her a considering look as they got in. "I should stop by our embassy."

She sighed and started the engine. Of course, he should. "Today? Are you sure? Falkor, I need..."

Leaning over the short space between them, his lips grazed hers as he spoke. A flight of butterflies erupted in her stomach. "I know what you need, my *der'lan*."

For the second time in an hour she lost the ability to breathe, but at least it wasn't from anxiety. Every cell in her body came screaming to life. Demanding. Craving. With a wicked smile, he sat back on his side of the vehicle.

"The embassy. It won't take long. Then I will see to all your needs, sweetheart." Did his voice have to drop so low? Did he have to be such an invitation to sin?

Gritting her teeth together, she tried to master her desire. She regained a little control when Falkor withdrew his mind from hers, but it was an uncomfortable kind of control. The fear of rejection and loss came back, though his reminder that he wasn't going anywhere helped. He fed her strength and love, without the ever-present lust mixed in, and she concentrated on how he did it to keep the other feelings at bay.

After a couple of minutes she felt much calmer, but before she could ease into traffic Falkor made her switch positions.

"You drive our vehicles? I never saw anything on wheels on Delroi."

He grinned, clearly pleased at her surprise. "I spent a few weeks here after the peace talks."

She arched an eyebrow. "No one told me that."

"You didn't ask."

That was irritating. There was too much she didn't know about her alien warrior. He definitely knew his way around though. He got to the highway and went south. The direction of her house, but also the old military base that had been given to the Delroi as their headquarters.

And it was a good thing he knew where he was going because the longer she sat in such close proximity, the more her control of her reaction to him slipped. She was fighting the urge to squirm in her seat when thirty minutes later they finally pulled up to the gatehouse.

"Lord Falkor." The guard nodded and handed him a small device. Falkor pressed his thumb to it, gave it back, and they drove through.

A few minutes later they stopped in front of a large building and got out. He took her hand as they walked up the long walk to the entrance, nodding at people who greeted him on the way. She was surprised to see a sign by the door that declared it Saber City headquarters. Either he knew her well enough or he was reading her mind because she didn't have to ask any questions.

"The Overchief has his own buildings, both his clans' headquarters and the Warrior

caste's headquarters. With the ongoing tensions between the clans, it was thought it better to keep to this separation."

"You don't agree?"

He shrugged while holding the door for her. "More peaceful perhaps, but in the end it just emphasizes our differences."

A grim faced aide met them as they entered. "Lord Falkor, I wasn't informed you were coming."

Falkor's face went blank, but his irritation with the other man was easy for her to read. "Jafri. Anything immediate?"

The other man looked Janice up and down, a slight sneer on his face, and even she knew that was *not* done among the Delroi. Beside her Falkor went stiff, his mind icy cold, his voice quiet but diamond hard. "You will be on the next flight home."

Jafri opened his mouth to speak, but Falkor's words stopped him. "You will do it stripped of all rank if you are not careful."

With a final glare at her, the other man fisted his hand and slapped it over his heart in the Delroi warrior's salute, then hurried out of the lobby.



## Chapter Eight

Fury. That was the only way to describe the rush of emotion at Jafri's insult to his *der'lan*. Though, considering the source he shouldn't be surprised. He was a warrior with the heart of a bureaucrat. When Falkor and his father had picked men for their delegation to Earth, they'd both been happy to put Jafri on it knowing they wouldn't have to deal with him on Delroi. Now that was blown to hell. He'd deal with the idiot when he returned to Saber City, if Barak didn't do it first.

Falkor was reluctant to delve into what kind of damage Jafri had done to the morale of the Southern warriors on Earth, or the position of the Southern clans in the caste. This was not what he had in mind when he'd brought Janice inside and the questions would have to wait. There were several warriors in the lobby; none would have missed the exchange with Jafri. He called the highest ranking, Galinn, a minor clan chief's heir, over.

"My lord," he greeted with the traditional salute. His eyes and nod to Janice were impassive, but he couldn't hide the twitch of his lips. Falkor sighed. He and Galinn had been friends for years. Grown up together. Trained together. He'd probably already heard an earful about Janice from friends back home.

"This is Janice. My *der'lan*."

This time Galinn actually bowed. "A pleasure, my lady."

Falkor pulled her up under his arm. Galinn had a certain reputation. Charming. Roguish. Men in Saber City hid their daughters and sisters when they saw him coming. The ones with sense anyway.

"Congratulations. You just got promoted to administrator." Jafri's former job. "My office in one hour."

He didn't wait for Galinn's response. The crowd cleared as he pulled Janice with him to the stairs. He had to remind himself to slow down, that she couldn't match his stride without running. Though running sounded like a damned fine idea to him.

He'd told her he knew what she needed and he did, because he felt the same need. There was no way he would survive a two-hour journey back to her home. Since he had to check in here anyway, it was the perfect place to layover.

On the fourth floor, he led the way to the end of the hall and pressed his thumb on the plate by the door. It opened into a large office. Beyond was the door to his private quarters. Inside, he locked the door behind them, leaned against it and looked around. It had been kept clean in his absence, but he barely noticed. The only thing that registered in his mind was Janice, standing a few feet away, hands twisted together. Her mind was a jumble of questions and rising lust.

"This is why you had to stop by the embassy?"

He nodded. He couldn't speak. If he did, he would demand she strip, demand she offer herself to him without reservations. She was his. His body knew it. His mind knew it. His heart knew it. And he was warrior enough to expect nothing but her complete surrender, despite her feelings, whether she was ready or not.

"You're a little scary when you get this intense," she said, fingers lifting to the buttons on her blouse. The first slid free, followed by the second, but then she stopped and her hands fell to her side. He groaned, took a step forward before stopping himself.

*Sweetheart, I am out of patience.*

Her smile was both wanton and sweet. "Really? Then why are you over there?"

She was teasing him? His eyes narrowed on her. "It's not a good idea to tease a Delroi warrior, especially your *der'lan*. You might get more than you bargained for."

"Maybe that's what I want," she said softly, seriously. "Maybe I don't want you holding back so much."

He merged his mind with hers with more swiftness than he thought he was capable of.

*Do you know what you're asking, Janice?*

He found nothing but understanding and acceptance in her mind. It stunned him that she was so aware of how difficult he found it fighting his instinct to dominate his mate. She hadn't totally accepted her place in his life or even that she would have a life, but she was willing, even wanted, to take this step.

"Take your clothes off," he ordered, ignoring the gruffness in his voice and the way it made her tremble.

She wanted to see what he was really like? The man he struggled so much to reign in? He'd be happy to oblige her. He waited until she stood, exposed and available to her mate, before he approached her. Circling, he let his fingers trail from her belly around to her back where he paused to lean forward.

He'd seen her naked, but he'd never been so free to explore. Now he planned to indulge his senses. She quivered when his lips touched the tip of the large dragon tattooed on her back. So fierce and independent. Like the woman that wore it. He straightened from her back, leaving a trail of kisses up to her neck while his palms flattened on her belly and moved up to cup her breasts. She moaned and arched back against him. He bit the soft skin between her shoulder and throat in punishment.

"Still. You are not the one in control here, sweetheart."

He squeezed her nipples, restrained his pleased chuckles when she gasped, her pleasure flooding his mind.

"Are you trying to make me beg?"

He shared her mind. The question was half joke, half desire and he couldn't conceal his satisfaction. That was exactly the goal of every Delroi warrior with his mate. Reluctantly, he released her and nudged her towards the bed. When she was sitting in the middle he began a search of the room.

Like any good red-blooded male, he had a collection of toys designed for his mate's enjoyment. Unfortunately, he'd left his on Delroi. They'd have to wait until later. For now, he'd settle for restraints. He found handcuffs, both in metal and hard synthetic leather, but she needed something softer, something that wouldn't feel like such a big risk to her inexperienced mind and body. He finally settled on ripping up an old shirt. It was soft, thin, pliable. It was acceptable.

She arched an eyebrow when he returned to her side, tearing it into long strips.

"What do you plan to use those for?"

She asked, but she knew.

"You wanted to know what you're getting into, Janice. Remember?"

Her expression turned wary. "Yeah, but..."

"We can continue or I can leave the room." Making the offer damned near killed him. He found himself trying to explain. "I'm not Earthling, sweetheart. The need to

dominate and control my mate is in my genetics. Allowing me that privilege is a demonstration of trust. If you aren't ready for that, tell me. Despite what you think I am not the most patient of men."

She watched him for a long moment. He wondered what the hell she was thinking but stayed out of her mind. This was a decision she had to reach on her own, without any influence by him. She had to give herself to him. The primitive part of his soul wouldn't accept anything else.

"I don't trust easily."

"I know."

"You're asking a lot."

"I'm asking for everything. You say yes, and I won't let you hold anything back."

He was sure he damned himself with that statement, but finally she nodded. Then she held her wrists out. He was careful to keep his euphoria private as he took her offering. First he tied her wrists together, then urged her to scoot closer to the headboard so he could secure her wrists to it.

He sat back on his heels to admire her. There was nothing more striking than a woman, *his* woman, restrained and waiting for him to please her. Her cheeks were hot with a pink blush and her lower lip was between her teeth. He leaned forward to tug it free, urging her mentally to open her mouth and return his kiss. She did instantly.

When he pulled away he read her struggle in her eyes. Part of her was terrified to put so much trust in him and another terrified not to, afraid he might be her best chance at holding onto her humanity. She was also disturbed that she'd fought her desire for him for so long but now had no boundaries left so quickly.

"That prayer," she whispered. "I thought I knew what it would mean, but it's nothing like experiencing it, is it?"

"It's not," he agreed, standing and removing his clothes. They were suddenly unbearably tight. Much too restricting.

Her eyes clouded, but not with lust. "It's dangerous. Being with me could get you killed."

She still refused to believe he could protect them both? He crawled into the bed, settled between her thighs, and rested above her on his elbows. "I can keep us both safe, my *der'lan*."

This time the cloudiness was from desire.

"I hope so, because God help me, I can't walk away now."

"I wouldn't let you," he said right before his lips fused over hers.

He held nothing back. It was rough and demanding, full of his frustration at her running away, his anger at her keeping secrets, his determination to convince her they belonged to each other. And his hope that she would give them a chance to grow closer, to share a life together.

She was gasping for breath when he broke away and kissed a trail down her throat, over her collar to her enticing breasts. For weeks he'd dreamed of touching her, tasting her. Now he was free to gorge, but he wanted to take his time. Nibble instead of take big hungry bites. Savor her.

He flicked his tongue over her nipple and she bowed into his embrace, ignored his half growled order to stay still. He sucked the hard point between his teeth and rolled his tongue over it, savoring the taste of her desire, her soft cries of delight.

\*

Janice rolled her head back and forth on the pillow. This was a kind of torture. A slow slide to decadent fulfillment she wasn't sure she deserved, not to mention would survive. But even if she could find her voice, she wouldn't protest. A bit of guilt for that. It was a little strange, not being allowed to participate, and not anything she'd ever been interested in before. She suddenly had a much clearer understanding of her friends' various kinks.

He nipped her before lifting his head and glaring at her with hard eyes. "You are not supposed to be capable of thinking."

Her laugh was surprised and delighted and maybe a little nervous. "Not even if I'm thinking about how good you make me feel?"

A small smile tugged the corners of his lips. No matter how hard he fought to keep his face stern she felt the satisfaction, the triumph at her words in his mind.

*Keep thinking that, sweetheart.*

The words were a carnal promise whispered in her mind and he didn't give her time to consider them. He moved down her body with a trail of biting kisses. He stopped over the curls hiding her sex and unsure why, she held her breath, held herself rigidly still. After a few seconds that felt like hours his breath blew over her.

*Very good, der'lan.*

Then he parted the lips that hid her and his tongue stroked forward, over her clitoris, again and again. Fast then slow. Soft then hard. Designed to drive her stark raving mad. She came. Over and over again. Small, intense orgasms that only left her yearning for more. Until finally she begged, then cried, for him to take her. To fill her.

"Stop teasing, Falkor, please," she whispered. "I need you inside me."

It was the only thing that would sooth the ache, satiate the crawling need in her body. He took his time moving up her body. Hands and mouth exploring. Lips and tongue tasting. She was wound tight enough to spring when his lips finally settled over hers, soft and gentle instead of the rough and marauding she expected.

Soft and gentle was *not* going to do it. She wanted hard and fast and ravaging and out of control. A smile curled his lips and he stopped kissing her, resting his forehead against hers a moment before shaking his head with a chuckle. He was *laughing* at her? She'd retaliate if she wasn't tied down.

"No one else could make me laugh at a time like this, sweetheart."

He went expressionless, but she felt the struggle in his mind. Propping up on one elbow, he guided his cock to her entrance, worked in slow, a long gradual slide while he watched her face until he filled her.

"Perfect," he whispered.

She tugged her arms, wanting to touch him, wanting to cling to him, before remembering she was still tied to the headboard. His smile was slow and a little evil. She liked it. A lot.

"You're at my mercy."

"What are you going to do about it?" she taunted.

He moved. Hard, sure thrusts that scraped across enflamed nerves and delicate skin. His free hand moved between them and found her clit. He held himself over her, his eyes staying on hers as he teased her to another orgasm. Somehow she kept her eyes open through it, gaze locked on his, when she wanted nothing more than to let them slide

closed and just *feel*.

She knew he could see too much in her eyes. Too much need. Too many secret desires. Too much of *her*. But she couldn't stop it. Couldn't hide it. It snapped his control, she felt it break free in his mind, like a brittle wire pulled too tight for too long. Finally, he gave her what she'd been looking for. Deep, hard, fast thrusts. He took her over and she became nothing but feeling and she loved every single second of it.

It was more intense, bigger than anything she'd ever experienced before. She came screaming and he came with her, his cry buried in her neck. Neither moved for a long time. The panic returned when her mind started to weave back together. Too soon. Too much. She was going to get him killed. He was suddenly leaning above her and glowering.

"Your lack of faith in my skills is insulting, my *der'lan*."

She rolled her eyes, would have hit him, but oh yeah, she was still tied up. "You can let me go now."

He didn't. He rolled off of her, and she repressed the part of her that missed his weight and warmth, concentrated instead on the angry part. The frightened part. Standing beside the bed, he looked at her impassively.

"If we were on Delroi..." His words faded off as he shook his head. Silence stretched and neither moved. She reached for his mind, but he'd discovered how to shield his thoughts, even from her. For some reason, that hurt so deeply she almost felt it physically. His expression softened just a bit.

"If we were on Delroi," he continued, this time with a low sexy voice and hooded eyes, "I'd leave you here like this. With a little electronic help. Then perhaps you'd learn, or at least start to learn, that you are mine. Your pleasure. Your pain. Your protection."

It took a moment for his words to sink in.

There was no way, absolutely no way, she was going to let any of the ugliness of her life touch this man. She did the only thing she could think of to save him. She shut down. Shoved every emotion into a secret hidden recess in her mind.

"You'd rather have me willing," she reminded him.

For a minute she worried he saw through the ruse, but finally he leaned forward and set her free. She didn't move while he stood and walked to a door she hadn't noticed before. He turned and cocked an eyebrow.

"I assume you can act the part anyway? You did before," he said, referring to that Festival day on Delroi. Oh, that cut deeply. His indifference. "We'll have company soon. You can stay in here if you prefer."

Why did his giving her that choice make her want to weep? He disappeared through the door and a moment later she heard water turn on. She got up, picked up her clothes, and tossed them on the bed. It took considerable effort to *not* reach out for his mind. To try to explain that yes, she wanted him. The longer she was around him, the more tempted she was to take the risk. But the risk wasn't just her heart. It was his *life*. She couldn't bear to be responsible for his death.

She was conflicted and getting more pissed off by the minute. He'd left the door open and she slipped through without a sound, only to be brought up short. The shower door was clear and his back was to her, his palms pressed flat against the far wall. It wasn't his stance that held her frozen. In the small space he couldn't hide his feelings from her, and his were ... despair. There was a lurching sensation in her chest and she rubbed her fist

over the ache. He stiffened when she stepped into the shower behind him, and set her hands on his back.

"Don't do this," she whispered.

He spun around and his arms came around her, crushing her to him, but she didn't protest. Head laid over his chest, she heard the furious pounding of his heart as he took a breath that shook his whole body. While touching there were no walls, no boundaries between his mind and hers. His anguish and disappointment filled her. That she refused to accept him. That she wouldn't acknowledge his right to protect her. There were no thoughts of letting her go, but a great sadness for what misery that might mean for their future.

"Don't I have the right to protect you too? Falkor, don't ask me to change that part of me. It's one of the few good parts," she said, keeping her voice soft and soothing.

She couldn't stand to see him like this. It wasn't right, and it was her fault. He took a deep breath.

"You're being true to yourself, Janice. I understand that."

He didn't call her sweetheart. She was so accustomed to hearing it something seemed to crack in her heart. They both needed distance, so why did it hurt so badly? But she knew. Distance would be healthier, at least for her peace of mind, but it wasn't what they needed. It starved the mental bond between them, made them both physically ache. That was her fault and it wasn't right.

But to fix it required her to take a step she wasn't sure she was ready for or even capable of. Her life had only been about killing for so long, and yes she wanted to change that, but was she capable of giving a part of herself so wholly to someone else? Did that decent part even exist?

"Now who's tormenting herself too much?"

Still pressed against his chest she smiled. "I'm allowed to. You aren't."

He laughed and spoke mentally. *It doesn't work that way, sweetheart.*

Was it bad the endearment made her melt a little?

"You're *supposed* to melt for me, *der'lan*. As your mate I insist upon it."

His voice was low and sexy, and his hands slid down her back to mold her ass. She shivered, rubbed against him, and then groaned when a bell rang through the room.

"Your company?"

Sighing, he released her. "Galinn. Here to report." He kissed her quickly before stepping out. "Get dressed and come join us."

She cleaned off with swift efficiency, careful to keep her hair dry, then hurried to join him. Falkor was sitting behind the wide desk and he motioned to her, grabbing her hand when she was close enough and tugging until she fell into his lap. His cock was hard and she blushed, avoiding his gaze and the warrior's sitting in front of them. There was a minuscule pause in the conversation before he continued.

"And we've just received word the Overchief's *der'lan* is pregnant."

"Kendall is? Can you send my congratulations?"

He inclined his head. "Of course, my lady."

*Why does it disturb you, sweetheart?*

And she'd thought she'd kept her unease to herself. *It doesn't. Not the way you're thinking. It's just occurred to me...* And what was wrong with her she hadn't considered it before? *We didn't use any kind of protection.*

*You don't want children?*

*It was never anything I could consider. Not in my line of work.*

How could she bring a child into her life?

*That wasn't the question.*

She didn't have an answer. Tessa came to mind and she smiled. The child was a joy. Smart and cheerful, always discovering something new. In love with life.

*Maybe. But not until I find my parents' murderer. Not until I make sure other talented kids are safe.*

*Of course. Once that is taken care of, we'll revisit this conversation. However, it might be too late by then.*

*There are ways to prevent pregnancy, Falkor.*

He scowled. *I won't tolerate this barrier you are envisioning between us.*

She rolled her eyes. *There are other methods. Leave it to me.*

*I still don't like it.*

*But you'll indulge me anyway?* She teased. *As long as it's not that distasteful barrier?*

His sigh was heartfelt and loud, and Galinn who'd been talking and unable to hear their private conversation paused and arched both eyebrows. She repressed a laugh. That was a whole lot of expression in a race she'd found held their thoughts and emotions very close.

"Go on," Falkor told his warrior and continued mentally with her.

*I think I've allowed you entirely too much freedom, my der'lan. You seem to be confused about the exact nature of our relationship. I give the orders. You follow them.*

From anyone else those would have been fighting words. Hell, a month ago she would have been livid hearing them from him. But his tone was gruff and affectionate with an underlying acceptance that she would never follow orders. Again with the melting sensation. This relationship stuff was really going to ruin her edge. She hadn't shielded the thought and he laughed out loud, waving Galinn to continue when he paused and looked at them both oddly. He did but his worry was easy to read.

*Great. Now your man thinks you're nuts. And probably me by association.*

Falkor's chuckles faded away and he shrugged. Galinn, apparently finished though she hadn't caught a word, stood.

"Would you like me to send for the tattoo artist?"

He was looking at her neck and she knew why. She covered it with her hand. She wasn't quite ready to go that far. Southern warriors on Delroi were covered in tattoos, head to feet on their right side. The symbol on each male's neck was personal, like a name, and when they took a mate, she got a matching tattoo. She'd watched Britt get hers and had sworn silently she'd never do the same. Now she knew better, but not yet. Not yet. Thankfully, Falkor didn't push her. He shook his head at Galinn.

"We'll take care of it later. Right now," he said, urging her to stand. "We need to get on our way. I'll call later and make those arrangements. It may require he come to us."

Galinn nodded. "Of course, my lord. Whatever you need."

He walked downstairs with them and after short introductions with the warriors hanging out in the common area they were on their way back to her house.

## Chapter Nine

After stopping at the small market in town for a few groceries, she left Falkor at his shuttle to check in with his brother on Delroi and she drove on to her house. She knew she wasn't alone when she stepped out of the vehicle. She didn't think the intruder was a threat but years of training and suspicion overrode instincts. Weapon drawn, she entered the front door. If it weren't a telepath waiting for her a stealthier approach would make sense but it was stupid under the circumstances. They were both aware of the other's presence.

He was waiting across the large room, hands held wide. "You won't need that." He nodded at the gun in her hands.

"Good," she said, lowering the weapon to point at the floor. "In that case, I have things to get from the car."

"If I offer fetch and carry service, do I get dinner?"

"If you survive my guard, that can be arranged," she said dryly, and right now? She wasn't sure if even she'd survive him.

Shadow grinned. "Where is he?"

"On the way."

And coming fast. She'd reached out telepathically to tell Falkor her quarry had found her and entered despite his order not to. Now she heard a low, steady string of Delroi curses in her mind interspersed with carnal promises of punishment that didn't frighten her nearly as much as they should.

Shadow got the bags and opened a bottle of wine while she pulled out a large pot. There were stools on both sides of the long island and he sat opposite her as she started chopping vegetables for her pasta sauce. She added them to the pot along with a jar of fresh tomato sauce one of her neighbors had given her. It all went on the stove to simmer as Falkor and Roarr rushed in. Falkor came straight to her while Roarr positioned himself between them and the door.

She rolled her eyes.

"You got here quick," she said to Shadow.

"I was coming anyway. To meet your warrior."

"Why?" Falkor asked, voice harsh and suspicious.

Attempting to keep her curiosity to herself, she stood, gathered more veggies, and returned to her seat to start chopping a salad. Maybe if she acted like everything was normal, the tension level would drop a bit.

"My father is dying," Shadow said. "He wants to go home."

Roarr and Falkor exchanged a long look and she knew she was missing something significant. Something they suspected and Falkor wasn't sharing with her. It was completely irritating.

"Keep talking," Roarr said.

"He was part of an exploration crew forty years ago. Something went wrong with the ship and they crash landed here. The ship was destroyed."

"Were there other survivors?"

"One. Dad said they went their separate ways early on. We don't know where he is."



If he's even alive."

"What's your name?" Falkor asked, but she could feel a growing certainty in his mind.

Shadow took so long to respond she didn't think he was going to answer. "I'm only making this contact now for my father's sake."

"Okay," Falkor answered picking up Earth slang.

"I'm Sergei. Trace. My father is Dax Trace."

That surprised her. "You're related?" Falkor didn't look at all surprised.

"Cousins. Dax was my father's younger brother. One of our survey teams found the remains of the wreckage a few weeks ago. They suspected there was at least one survivor since it was so well concealed."

"Well. That's interesting." She poured herself a glass of wine and looked Shadow—no, Sergei—over. "Guess the Delroi genes are dominant. You're what? Six-four?"

"Yes. But I don't know if you're right about that. My father is a good four inches taller than me."

But Falkor and Barak were about the same height as Sergei.

"Guess my kids will be giants," she mused softly before catching herself.

God, he had her seriously thinking about what their children would look like. Falkor laughed because of course he was sharing her thoughts. She elbowed him in the stomach.

"It's not nice to laugh at me," she grumbled.

She put the finished salad in the refrigerator and carried her wineglass to the sofa. Falkor sat beside her and Sergei took the nearby chair. Roarr apparently felt he didn't belong in the middle of the little family reunion and left after exchanging a quick nod with Falkor.

"He's your man?" Sergei asked Falkor.

"My brother's. Same thing really."

Sergei nodded and for a minute she got the impression he was very far away, but then he focused on her. On Falkor's protective posture.

"You didn't include the mating instinct in your report, I hope?"

"No." She rolled her eyes. "Or my encounter with you."

"Good. What have you found out? Since you spent the morning traipsing around the city asking about me, I assume you *did* find something?"

"Not exactly." She retrieved the business card left with Tessa's mother and handed it to him. "They're definitely recruiting again."

She saw her anger reflected in his eyes.

"Damn it." He jerked to his feet and paced across the room. For a moment his power pulsed before he got it under control. But the strength of it... How did they control him? How did they keep him from turning on them? He turned and met her gaze. There was anger there, yes, but also sorrow so deep she doubted he'd ever recover from it and as she watched it changed to desperation.

"You want to know why I don't go after them?"

"Yes."

He rubbed a hand over his face and took a deep breath. She waited him out. Falkor too didn't say a word, sat still at her side. Divulging secrets wouldn't come any easier to Sergei than it did to her.

"My father was Vasin's twin." Vasin was Falkor's father.

"And?"

Falkor picked up the conversation before Sergei could continue. "Barak and I are twins. It runs in the family."

Sergei nodded. "I have a twin sister."

Have. Not had. "Where is she?" She had to ask, but she was sure she knew at least part of that answer.

"I don't know," he said softly. Bitterly. "They let me see her every couple of years. Just to keep me in line."

She couldn't blame him for his acrimony, but she needed information. "Is she a telepath?"

It didn't usually run in families, but both Barak and Falkor, twins, were telepaths.

"Yes. But that won't help in finding her. They have a drug that represses that part of the mind."

She sucked in a breath that hurt. Telepathy was so much a part of her life that to be robbed of it would be horrifying, almost a kind of living death. She'd heard the rumors of this drug too. It was whispered of in dread in the underground that unregistered talents occupied. She had no idea what kind of mental damage long-term exposure to such a drug would do, but the speculations were ugly.

"When will you see her again?"

"Two days. They set the meeting up about an hour north of here." There was an undercurrent of excitement, expectation in his voice.

"That's unusual?"

"It's a first. We've always met on the west coast. I think their base must be here and for some reason her guards need to be here this time."

Something in his manner suggested there might be another reason. "Or?"

He sighed. "Or they've decided we're expendable. Not only did they switch coasts, but they've already sent me the coordinates."

And that that wasn't the kind of thing they'd do until the last minute didn't need to be said. There would be less chance of him being able to plan a rescue if he didn't know where he was going.

"I checked it out, of course. Good place for an ambush. Lot of great cover for a sniper."

He didn't ask her to join him. He didn't need to. His sister being present complicated matters but didn't change anything.

"I want to see it ahead of time."

The fierce satisfaction was so sharp—in two days she'd track the people who'd killed her parents—she missed Falkor's reaction until he spoke in a biting, cold voice. "I don't think so."

## Chapter Ten

Falkor was tempted to strangle them both, especially his newfound cousin. The man hadn't even asked Janice to help. He just assumed she would rush headlong into danger with him with no regard for her safety. Or the permission of her mate. He didn't bother to keep that observation or his anger to himself so he wasn't surprised when she turned to glare at him.

"This is what I do, remember? Besides, the same people killed my parents and have approached Tessa. I was going after them anyway. This just complicates things a bit."

"So you will help?" There was no mistaking the relief in Sergei's voice.

"Of course," Janice said.

Falkor was tempted to pick her up, toss her on his ship, and get the hell off this planet.

"You wouldn't dare."

Unfortunately, he knew she'd go kicking and screaming the whole way. Not the peaceful future he envisioned. But that didn't mean he couldn't make his displeasure known. With both of them. And there was another matter to discuss.

"This is family business. You should have contacted us at the beginning of the invasion."

There was no way they'd leave a female relative in enemy hands. Even though they'd been at odds at the time, he and Barak would have torn the planet apart to find her if necessary.

Sergei crossed his arms over his chest and widened his stance. "These are my people. Earth is my home."

Falkor couldn't put his reaction in words. Anger. Shock. Sadness for what the younger man had missed out on growing up on Earth. Loyalty was deeply ingrained in the Delroi, especially among the Southern warriors. Sergei may not have been raised with them, but he *was* one of them.

If he'd been raised on Delroi he'd know how inappropriate it was to ask someone's *der'lan* for this kind of assistance. He'd know what it meant to be a Trace and that his cousins could be relied on to help his mission succeed. And they'd help him exact vengeance. There was no question of that being necessary. Honor demanded it.

Janice squeezed his hand and he met her gaze. "He doesn't understand that world any more than I do."

Falkor sighed. "You both have a lot to learn. Most of it can wait until we return to Delroi." He gave Sergei a severe look. "And you *will* be joining your father and sister on Delroi. She will be safer there and as her closest male relative it's your duty to protect her."

Next to him he felt Janice's exasperated sigh.

"Speaking of which, I'll be with you on this rescue mission of yours. You do realize the people you search for probably won't be there? Their talents wouldn't be wasted on guard duty."

"They aren't low level guards either, otherwise I'd have freed my sister long ago. It's not always the same group, but together they always have too much power for me alone."

"We need one alive," Janice said. Her voice was calm but he felt the rising, restless energy of their new bond.

"Yes." He stood, pulled her to her feet, and spoke to Sergei. "We'll go see this place tomorrow and makes plans."

"But for now get out?" he asked wryly. He stood near the house's rear entrance and with a nod reached for the handle on the door. "Until tomorrow then."

When he was gone Falkor picked Janice up and went upstairs. "That was rude," she said, but she sounded distracted.

Her eyes glazed with arousal as he helped her undress. When she was nude he turned her and placed her palms on the waist high rail that overlooked the living area far below. He nudged her feet to shoulder width and stepped back to admire her. She looked over her shoulder, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth. Her nervousness was easy to read and pleased him more than it should.

"So, kinky? Not really my thing."

"Really? You seemed to like it this afternoon."

She blushed. "That was different."

"Hmm." He moved close to her and ran one palm from the base of her spine to her nape. She shivered. "How is it different?"

His hand moved back down her body. He took his time. Enjoyed to the soft feel of her skin. She sucked in a deep breath and rushed to answer. "It didn't hurt."

He smiled. So he hadn't kept his plans as well concealed as he'd thought. Both hands were on her now, but he kept his strokes gentle.

"This hurts?"

"Of course not."

His touch was light as it moved over her ass. Her tension gradually subsided as he stroked her, molded and explored the smooth soft skin. She'd been trained to withstand torture and she didn't associate pain with pleasure. But she liked rough wild sex, the small hurts and aches that made her feel sated. He read all that in her mind. For some reason she'd resisted drawing the connection on her own. He had every intention of educating her.

He started with a light tap. She jerked but didn't let go of the rail or try to move out of the way.

"Does it hurt?" he asked keeping his voice light.

She shook her head and the next tap was harder.

"You have to answer me, sweetheart."

*No. It doesn't.* And she was embarrassed and confused that it didn't. He was careful to keep his triumph and satisfaction to himself. There were so many things to teach her. About pain and pleasure. Control and surrender.

The next taps were harder yet not quite enough to mark. She professed to feel no sting and there was nothing but anticipation in her mind. His excitement grew and he wished he'd brought along a flogger, though she probably wasn't anywhere near ready for that. The next slap was hard enough to smart and leave a red spot on her tender flesh.

She didn't protest so he gave her another and then another. Until she groaned. The pain and pleasure were mingled in her mind. Sharp. Desperate.

*Sweetheart? Should I stop?*

*God, no.*

So he continued, until her ass was rosy red, until his own desire was so fierce he thought he might burst with it. He stopped only long enough to remove his pants certain when he thrust into her from behind he'd find her ready and wet. Gripping her hips, his cock touched her entrance but he held still. He wanted to draw out the pleasure, the happiness of that first surge into his mate. He should have remembered she could be a beguiling vixen when she chose. She moved back against him.

*Now, Falkor, please. Please.*

Ah, was it possible to deny your *der'lan* under such circumstances? When she begged? He could at least control the pace and his entry was slow enough to torture them both. His first few strokes were easy and gentle but they were doomed to be short lived. He had her more than willing, begging in fact, in a submissive position and the primitive side of his soul demanded he take her hard.

As his control of that side of his nature slipped, his strokes became faster. Rougher. And when her pussy convulsed around him and she cried out, his control snapped. Lust was a primal wild thing amplified by the mating bond between them. He hammered into her, through the first orgasm and a second. Her body was soft and welcoming, her mind open to him and full of pleasure and fulfillment and acceptance.

His orgasm started at the base of his spine and flooded through the rest of his body in one huge fiery blast. It seemed to short-circuit his mind for a few minutes, and definitely his body. When he could focus again, his heart damned near stopped.

Janice had her forearms on the top of the rail, her head resting on them while he covered her back, his hands still biting into her hips. She was still and quiet. Panicked, he jerked upright, his arms around her middle to pull him with him. She voiced a sleepy protest at the abrupt move.

*Are you all right, sweetheart?* He'd never forgive himself for going too far. There was a good reason Delroi warriors were known for their control. "Janice?"

He moved to the bed and laid her down, kneeling next to her to check her over. She cracked one eye open. "You're looming. Lay down with me."

It was definitely an order. He smiled and complied. He could check her just as easily lying next to her, but she rolled over before he could, burrowing close to him. He didn't find anything but exhaustion and contentment in her mind. No sign of censure or dislike. She sighed heavily.

"I'm fine, babe. Better than fine. I've never *been* so fine."

He chuckled and wrapped his arms around her, held her as close as possible and probably too hard. "Is that right?"

"Mmm," she hummed, pressing a kiss on his chest. "Now let me sleep."

"A couple of hours." And then he could repeat that incredible mind blowing experience with her. His *der'lan*.

This time she laughed. "I need more than two hours recovery time."

"Three?" he teased.

She groaned. "Insatiable."

*Get some rest. You're going to need it.* It was a wicked promise he intended on following through with first thing in the morning.

## Chapter Eleven

Janice expected to wake with Falkor touching her, or better yet moving inside her. She was disappointed to open her eyes alone in their bed. But the house was far from empty. She entered Falkor's mind easily.

*Good morning. Dress before you come down.*

*This isn't how I wanted to spend the morning, she pouted.*

*Me either. Duty must come first, however. This time.*

She rose with a sigh, grabbed some fresh clothes, and headed for the shower. She waited until she was naked under the hot spray before speaking again.

*Who's down there?*

*Sergei, Roarr, and Galinn. They brought breakfast.*

She'd prefer her breakfast be *him*. Damn. When had she developed this lascivious streak? She felt his amusement.

*Oh, shut it.*

His amusement only grew at her grumbling so she retaliated the best way she knew how. Soaping up a washcloth she started cleaning herself, sharing the sensation with him. Asking didn't he want to join in? Legs and torso done, she moved between her thighs, slowly pushing one finger inside her pussy. His growl was loud in her head, his snapping teeth almost real.

*You'll regret it if you come without me.*

The threat made her tremble. In a good way. Desire not fear.

*Get your ass down here, der'lan.*

Her smile was a feminine curl of satisfaction. She didn't hurry, but she did stop teasing them both.

*Why is Galinn here?*

*I called him when the other two showed up. We'll use one of the commando teams from the base.*

*That's probably not wise. They might be expecting that.*

She rushed to finish dressing, leaving her shoes behind when she jogged down the stairs.

The three were all sitting around the kitchen island and even though Sergei hadn't been raised on Delroi, when standing next to three warriors his origins were unmistakable. She poured a cup of coffee before taking the stool next to Falkor with the other three on the opposite side. He leaned close to nuzzle her neck, his murmured good morning more mental than vocal. She was disappointed at the smooth contact. He'd shaved when he woke.

*You'd rather I scratched you?* He didn't try to hide his amusement.

*Maybe.*

She wasn't about to admit the marks on her body, left by his mouth and teeth and whiskers, made her feel cherished. Made her feel like she belonged to him. He felt it anyway and for some reason his satisfaction left her with a warm glow.

"How many people are on this team? And are any of them telepaths?"

Galinn looked surprised at the question. Or maybe surprised that she'd asked the

question. He probably shared the same sexist tendencies the rest of the males on Delroi seemed to hold to.

"Be nice." Falkor tugged on her hair. "Ten on a team. We can put together a team that's mostly sensitives at least, but not telepaths."

She looked at Sergei. "What do you think? We can test everyone. See who has natural shields. That might be better," she added, remembering that when she met Falkor his talents hadn't been fully developed and she'd had to teach him to shield.

"Let's pick ones with natural shields," Sergei said. "There are probably a higher percentage in a commando unit than the general army."

She had to concede that. Specialized soldiers were more likely to develop those mental walls on their own. It came from a life spent hiding and infiltrating. She finished her coffee.

"All right. Let's go see this place. I want to find the best sniper blinds."

Again Galinn looked surprised. "Surely, my lady, you'd rather stay here."

She arched an eyebrow. "Surely I wouldn't. I prefer to choose my own firing locations."

He gave her the slightly bewildered totally disapproving look she was used to seeing on the faces of Delroi warriors when they realized they were faced with a woman just like them. Falkor stepped in before she could say something snide.

"My *der'lan*. My problem."

"Of course, my lord." He was instantly contrite, no doubt recalling his comrade who'd been sent home for insulting her. Then Falkor turned his disapproving look on her. She pressed her lips together and studied the floor. She couldn't decide if she wanted to laugh or throttle him ... or give in. What the hell was that about?

"Damn. I might like Delroi after all. Is there a class on how to make a strong willed woman back down?"

Her eyes snapped up to glare at Sergei. "Keep it up," she said sweetly and he realized the error of his ways right quick. Hands up in a placating gesture, he stood.

"Not me, honey. No way."

"Honey?" She felt Falkor's displeasure at the other man using an endearment with her and didn't hide her grin.

*Talk your way out this one*, she sent to Sergei smugly.

"Sorry. That's what I call my sister. Seems nicer than the other thing I call her."

"And that would be?"

"Brat."

*I believe that evens the scorecard?* Sergei smirked back.

"Not even close, bubba. Better watch your six."

He grinned and she couldn't help grinning back. Her instincts said he'd be a fun ally on Delroi. Falkor just rolled his eyes.

*You two will be separated or chaperoned on Delroi*, he grouched.

She kept her delighted laugh to herself. *Are you actually jealous?*

*Of him? Of course not.* His tone was derisive. *But the trouble you two could get into?*

*We'd never do that.* She smiled and batted her eyelashes but it was clear he wasn't buying it.

And then it struck her; she was having *fun* with all this banter. She couldn't remember the last time that had happened because her life required her not to connect

with anyone. Falkor had made that impossible and he was slowly sucking her into his world. A land full of people and personalities and teasing. It was strange, this burgeoning sense of belonging to people rather than a non-personal at best, malignant at worst, organization.

It was a revelation. One she wasn't sure she was ready for.

"Let's go," she said, suddenly uncomfortable with the way things were changing. Falkor behaved in his typical fashion, refusing to let her withdraw. His mind was firmly entrenched in hers, his hand on the nape of her neck massaging away the sudden tenseness.

*One step at a time, sweetheart. You have me. You can let the others closer when you're ready.*

The point being, of course, he wouldn't let her withdraw from *him*. She knew she should, but that fight was no longer in her. Dangerous or not, good or not, he was now a permanent part of her life. The only question left was how long would that last?



## Chapter Twelve

Falkor insisted on being her spotter so she was forced to choose what she considered a less than ideal location to accommodate his extra size. When he pointed out it was actually a better spot, she just glared. She wasn't about to admit it, but the shallow hidden cave was a pretty damned good choice.

The meeting was set to take place in a tiny gorge. Three sides were surrounded by sharp, forested inclines though they were more hill than mountain. An old logging road came in from the fourth side and dead-ended in a small clearing. Their hiding spot was little more than an overhang carved into the rock and covered by flowering red rhododendrons. The entire area was wooded with thick brush. She marked the Delroi warriors in their assigned secret spots through her scope and tried to remember what a sniper's patience was like.

It was hard to come by with her body pressed so close to Falkor. He invaded her senses. His masculine scent was stronger than the surrounding pine. His soft, even breathing louder than the howling wind. All she saw from the corner of her left eye was his impossibly wide shoulders and all she felt was the pressure against her skin, even through the layers of clothing separating them, where he came into contact with her, shoulder to ankles. She'd move, try to put a bit space between them, but there was no room.

Her watch pulsed against her wrist and she pushed the stop button. It was time. She looked through the scope. Forced herself to think only of the mission. It was a full ten minutes later before four men showed up in an old crew cab truck. They got out, dragging a downtrodden young woman with them. Angel, Sergei's twin. Janice studied her through the scope. A bit more than just demoralized. She looked ill, much too thin, and disoriented.

Janice adjusted the sights to check on Sergei. He controlled his reaction well but she could see his tension, or maybe she was feeling it. They'd agreed to not use any kind of psychic powers. Doing so would give them away too soon. They'd tested all the possible Delroi warriors for this mission and all had good solid mental walls. If anyone gave away the game too soon, it would be her, Falkor, or Sergei. And the stakes were too high to do that yet.

Her face rested against the stock, her eye glued to the scope, waiting to shoot. They'd agreed not to prearrange it. Less chance of being read that way. When she judged it safe for Angel, she'd take out three of the captors. At the same time a squad would secure Sergei's and Angel's father in his home on the other side of the continent. These people would no longer have anything to hold over Sergei's head.

The man gripping Angel's arm released her and she stumbled ten feet or so to her brother. Janice didn't hesitate. She shot. Fast and sure. Before it even registered on the four men, three of them were dead. She crawled from her hiding space, slung the rifle over her shoulder and half slid down the slope lending her telepathic strength to Sergei as she went.

The Delroi warriors poured out of the surrounding woods but the final remaining bad guy didn't seem concerned. He swept Sergei with a dismissive glance.

"You aren't strong enough to take me on, boy."

Angel stood behind him clinging to his shirt and trembling. Not in a good way. Man, that pissed Janice off. She didn't quite run when she got to flat land, but she hurried and she let her power swell inside her as she did.

"What about two of us?" she asked sharply. "I'm pretty sure two of us can take you on."

The man's gaze flicked to the trees surrounding them as if expecting reinforcements at any moment.

*He's expecting someone else to show up. If it was a trap for me and Sergei ... well that's how I would do it. Let the enemy think they'd won and go in for the kill.*

Falkor nodded at Roarr and the warrior stepped up behind the guard with a hypodermic in his hand. He administered it with efficient speed and after a few seconds the telepath passed out. One of the other warriors came forward, cuffed the telepath's hands behind his back, and slung him over his shoulder.

\* \* \* \*

They'd decided it would be safer to interrogate him from the Delroi ship in orbit. He wouldn't be able to call for help and they could make sure there were no weak minds close enough to take advantage of. She hadn't realized how creepy a mostly empty Delroi warship was, though.

"It's not that bad," Falkor teased as they left the brig, but she could see he found it weird also.

When they'd arrived on board, Sergei and Roarr took his sister straight to the medical bay, while the rest of them hauled the still unconscious prisoner to the brig. They'd left his hands cuffed and dropped him on the hard metal shelf that served as a bed. Four warriors stood guard outside the door while she and Falkor went to check on Angel.

Janice wasn't prepared for a family reunion however, and she could tell by the stunned silence in Falkor's mind that he wasn't either. Angel was clinging to an older Delroi warrior, with the tattoos of the South on one side of his body. He was taller than Falkor, and looked just like Falkor's father. He passed Angel back her brother and stepped forward with a slight approving smile.

"One of my brother's sons, yes?"

Falkor inclined his head once. "Falkor. My twin, Barak, is clan chief now. I am his second."

"I was sorry to hear of Vasin's death. I'd hoped to see him one last time. I am Dax, Vasin's twin as I am sure you already know." He gave them a tight cold smile. "I must thank you for rescuing my daughter. I wish I could have joined you."

His words were strong, but it was obvious his body was not. He still had the great height of a Delroi warrior but that was all. Whatever disease was killing him, it had taken its toll on a once muscular frame. He swayed and Sergei snapped at him.

"Dad. Sit down. You shouldn't even be out of bed."

The older man snorted and waved off his son when he tried to assist him, but did as directed. "There will time to rest when I'm dead. Let me enjoy the time I have left."

Angel joined him on a long couch. Now that she wasn't occupied with killing bad guys, Janice had the chance to really look at the young woman. She was gaunt, her skin sallow, but her eyes shone with alert intelligence. And Janice knew her. She wondered

how long it would take the drug inhibiting her powers to wear off. Before she could ask Roarr came in and told them the prisoner was awake.

"Let's let him stew a bit," Sergei said. "He's probably not going to willingly give us anything useful anyway."

She shrugged. She'd take it by force from his mind if she had to. "I don't have any issues with taking what I need."

He met her gaze and nodded his understanding. The prisoner was part of a shadowy group willing to do anything it took to control all the talents in Alliance territory. Government sanctioned or not, no matter what it took, she was putting the bastards out of business. But first...

"We were at school together, but you weren't called Angel." She frowned, trying to remember the younger woman's name. And if she'd gone to the talent school why didn't Janice remember Sergei there?

"It's Angelia. Everyone called me Lia there. I remember you." She grinned. "Everyone was afraid of you."

She flinched and Falkor crowded close to her, lending his strength. She leaned back against him.

"You weren't there," she told Sergei.

He pressed his lips together and his face, which had moments before been so full of expression, went blank. "I was in the other compound."

The other compound didn't have a name, but it had been whispered of with fear and awe. No one really knew what its purpose was but if you disappeared into it, you didn't tend to reappear. Some of her more specialized training had taken place there but she'd never been forced to move in. She'd never seen the private living areas and never dared ask about them either.

*We should leave them to their reunion.*

*Okay.*

"We'll leave the prisoner alone for a few hours. Maybe then he will be prepared to cooperate." Falkor took her hand in his, and nodded at Roarr. "Roarr will show you to one of the guest suites when the healer releases you."

"Thank you, Falkor. For everything," Sergei said.

Falkor smiled. "You have much to learn of Delroi families."

"Yeah, I guess I do."

## Chapter Thirteen

Falkor led her out of the med bay and to his private suite. They had two hours to spend and he knew just how to do it. His mate's desire was strong. Edgy. Underlying it was a need to be comforted and cared for she probably wasn't even aware of. He considered this a teaching opportunity.

He pressed the ident pad to gain entrance and ushered her inside. "Go through to the bedchamber and remove your clothes, sweetheart."

She cocked an eyebrow, protest hovering in her mind, but she obeyed. He went to the communication console and scrolled through his waiting messages to give her time. There were several things that needed to be dealt with as soon as possible, but most could wait.

The ship was the personal warship of Daggar, the Warrior caste Overchief. When he'd loaned it to Falkor for his journey, he'd suggested the he might find the Captain's cabin useful when he caught up to his escaped mate. Knowing only rumors of Daggar's sexual preferences, Falkor had been intrigued and made a thorough search on his trip to Earth.

The bedchamber was fully equipped and he looked forward to making use of it. But what first? She would be fully secured, but he should he restrain her on her knees on the small dais that rose from the floor? Or to the four posters on the bed? He walked in to find her waiting for him, sitting quietly on the bed with a nervous look on her face.

The bed, he decided. When he was done with the lesson and ready to take her, he wanted it to be face to face. He smiled as he approached.

"You're up to no good, aren't you?"

"Don't worry, sweetheart. It *will* be good. Lay down and spread your arms and legs."

She gasped. The scandalized interest in her mind was a heady aphrodisiac. "Not my legs too."

He sat on the end of the bed and pushed the button that released the bindings hidden in the bed's posts. A length of chain was attached to a fur lined leather cuff that he buckled around first one ankle then the other. Then he moved to her wrists.

"Are you ready to tell me about the Tel Group yet?"

Her brows drew together. "How do you know about it?"

"You aren't as good at hiding your secrets in your mind as you think." He paused. "Well?"

She shook her head. "Can we talk about that later?"

"Certainly."

He let her think she'd won and went to the fully stocked cabinet, grabbing a few items before returning to her. He set them on the bed behind him where she couldn't see anything except the mask he held up. Solid black and soft silk, it had a band of elastic to hold it in place. Leaning forward, he lifted her head to slip it into place.

When he was certain no light got in and she couldn't see, he knelt between her thighs. He kept his touch light and teasing as he touched her, spreading the lips that hid her cunt and exposing her clit. He leaned forward and sucked it between his teeth while his thumbs rubbed along the sides of her pussy and down to her anus. Shock held her

still.

*Have you ever been taken here?*

No. Her voice was barely a whisper in his mind.

*You will be.* There was a spike of panic. *Don't worry, sweetheart. Not now. It will take ... working up to.*

Preparation he intended to begin now. While he continued to suck on her clit, he squeezed lube onto two fingers. She froze when he started to work the first one into her ass, relaxing bit by bit as he pushed in first one knuckle then the second. He worked the finger back and forth a few times, letting her body adjust to the invasion before introducing the second finger and repeating the process.

The lubricant did its job, aided by his tongue caressing her clitoris. When he judged her ready, he removed his fingers, smiling at her moan of complaint, which grew louder when he gave her one last lick and sat up on his heels. He held up the anal plug, wishing her eyes were uncovered so he could watch them widen. That didn't mean he couldn't torment her little though.

"Are you ready for the anal plug, sweetheart?"

"Anal plug? Oh God," she groaned.

It was a little bigger than he'd normally start with, but it was the cabinet's smallest offering, and though there was a bit of fear in her voice there was more excitement. He lubed it up, squeezing more around her tiny hole, before putting the tip in place. He placed one hand on her thigh. It trembled in tension.

"You have to relax, sweetheart. It'll hurt going in, but that will fade when it's in place."

She nodded. "Get it over with then."

The slender tip expanded to a wide bulbous base. It was about five inches long and about halfway home before she gasped. He was ridiculously proud when she took a deep breath and forced her protesting muscles to relax. He waited for her signal before continuing and he finished it swiftly. When the wide rim was snug against her skin he reached for a remote and switched it to the lowest setting.

The com center in the other room beeped to signal an incoming call, but he wasn't quite ready to answer it yet. He reached for the last item, a small clip attached to another remote control. He spread the lips of her pussy again, exposing her clit, and put the clip in place, tightening the tension just enough to hold it in place. Then he turned it on.

"Falkor!"

"Mmm," he hummed, pressing a kiss to her navel. "What is it, my *der'lan*?"

The com center beeped again and he sighed. Standing, he leaned forward long enough to press a quick kiss to her lips. "Duty calls," he murmured.

It took a moment for his words to register and he was in the other room before she yelled after him.

"Damn it, Falkor, you can't leave me like this!"

*Oh, but that is exactly the point, Janice. You're my der'lan. I can do as I wish. Especially when I feel it is in your best interests.*

*My best interests?* She sputtered. *You've lost your damned mind. How is this in my best interest?*

He frowned. He didn't want her capable of thought or protest. He wanted her accepting. He flipped the switch on the clitoral clip and was rewarded with a gasp that

was more in her mind than a real exhalation.

*I have work to do. And you have a lesson to learn.*

She ignored him, concentrated on trying to force her body to not respond to its current stimulation. He grinned. If she did that, he'd just be forced to add something else. He almost hoped she managed her goal. He shook his head and focused on the messages. Barak first. He keyed in the call to his brother's private office. When the screen flashed open, Barak was behind his desk with a flushed Britt on his lap.

"Hey Falkor. Did you track down Janice?" she asked.

*You know, if I scream she'll want to talk to me.*

*Do you want me to explain exactly why she can't talk to you right now? Because I will.*

"Yes. She's unavailable right now."

He smiled and Barak's laugh was short though full of understanding. "Is that right? Pleasure or punishment?"

"A bit of both."

In his mind, Janice groaned in embarrassment. *I can't believe you told him that. Britt will think I'm the biggest wuss ever going along with this whole submission thing. I am not submissive.*

*In the rest of your life? No. But sexually? Sweetheart, you have a nice little submissive streak and I'm going to teach you all about it.*

And revel in every moment of it. She went quiet again, trying to control her body's reaction to him and his toys.

"Britt," he spoke to his new sister. "I need to know about the Tel Group."

*No, Falkor, please, Janice begged. I'll tell you everything. Don't drag Britt into this. Please.*

*It's too late for that. You had the chance to tell me everything.*

He adjusted the plug to a higher level and focused his attention on the view screen. Britt looked disturbed by the question.

"It's a secret organization of psychics with varying levels and skills. They seem to have a finger everywhere. In all the intel agencies. The military. The government. By the time I became aware of them, I was too well known to be of use to them. They're dangerous, Falkor. Don't mess with them."

"And Janice's connection to them?"

She looked down and he knew she was struggling with loyalty to her old friend and the desire to serve the needs of her new family. If she chose wrong, Barak would no doubt deal with her privately. Finally she shook her head.

"I don't know. I know she went to a boarding school that is rumored to have belonged to them, but I just don't know. And Falkor? If I did, I wouldn't betray her secrets even to you."

Barak must have said something to her mentally and she looked over her shoulder at him with an exasperated sigh before turning back to the screen.

"Look, she's my friend and she's your *der'lan*, right? So actually she's my sister. I am *not* betraying the family. She's one of us. But there are some secrets..." Britt paused, her expression sad yet determined. "Some secrets are better left in the past. Bring her home, Falkor. Let her come here and be the person she always wanted to be, not who they made her."

He was surprised at Britt's vehemence over the matter until he reminded himself how alike the two women were. Both convinced they were monsters and determined to be something better, but also fierce in the defense of those they loved, no matter what it cost. He wanted nothing more than to take Janice home and protect her.

"It's not so simple," he said and told them about finding Sergei and Dax and rescuing Angel. "And this group is responsible," he concluded.

Britt pressed her lips together and nodded. "Let me make some calls. We'll get back to you in a couple hours, okay?"

"Fine."

He disconnected and walked back into the bedchamber. Janice had gone still in his mind as she'd heard Britt's words. She was stunned and humble and no longer fighting. She'd stopped struggling for control in the situation he'd left her in, and he stepped in the room just in time to watch her orgasm. He flicked the switches on both controllers to the off position, released all the restraints, and sat on the edge of the bed to remove the blindfold.

Her face was tear-streaked and he leaned down to kiss the drops away. She rolled to her side, facing him, and spoke with a raw voice. "If you leave me like this, I *will* kill you in your sleep."

He removed the plug and clip, dropping them in the sanitizer before returning to the bed and lying down facing her. He stroked her face with his knuckles, repressing a laugh at her mental complaint.

"It isn't sex you need right now."

She snorted. "The hell you say."

Pushing him to his back she straddled him and even though he was still clothed he felt every inch of her, felt her heat and readiness when her pussy rubbed over his cock. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders and pulled her down so she lay flat against his chest. The kiss was slow but soul sucking and he rolled them over so she was pressed into the bed, tight against him.

*You have too many clothes on, she complained.*

*Because right now you just need to be held.*

*I need you inside me.*

Gods, she had a way of ruining his good intentions, but he wasn't about to deny her. He stood and stripped quickly and then he was with her again, slowly pushing into her welcoming warmth. But her losing all control, physical and emotional, seemed to aid his own, and he kept the pace unhurried and gentle. Offering the comfort, the care, he knew she needed even if she wouldn't admit it.

For once, she didn't make demands. She simply accepted what he gave her. Her arms were wrapped around his neck but it wasn't enough contact for him. He wanted her *closer*. Holding him tighter. Her legs circled his waist and she smiled against his smile.

"Like this?"

"Mmm." He bit the tender skin between her neck and shoulder. "Perfect."

\*

Janice was in a state somewhere beyond perfect. She was in love and blissful with the feeling. Later she'd probably fall back to reality and difficulties and remember all the ways it could go wrong, but for now she just wanted to wallow in it. He lifted his head to meet her gaze, his next thrust so deep she wondered if it was possible to touch her soul.

And his smile, oh my God, he might kill her yet. Sexy and sweet and irresistible.

"No more fighting our bond, *der'lan*?"

She opened her mouth to answer but no sound came out as his cock brushed her g-spot. She just moaned in enjoyment. He nipped at her again, this time tugging on her lower lip.

"Janice?"

"I give up. Do your worst." She tilted her hips closer to his. "As long as you never stop this."

"You can depend on that."

He gave her another slow deep kiss and she sighed her disappointment when he broke away.

"Now. The Tel Group."

*Holy shit. He wants to bring that up at a time like this?*

"Now?"

She didn't bother to hide her disbelief or her sense of betrayal. It was like he'd soothed her with promises of heaven and then dragged hell into it. His eyes narrowed to hard points.

"We need to repeat that lesson so soon, *der'lan*?"

No. She didn't want to do that again. Denied his touch. Denied even his presence.

"What is there to say? They killed my parents so they could have access to me. And I was one of the lucky ones. They let me go after school. Mostly."

He withdrew from her, rolled to his side propped up on one elbow to listen. She almost wept from the loss.

"Mostly?" he prodded.

"They'd come to me sometimes wanting information, or more often, an off the books assassin."

"And you agreed?"

There wasn't any disapproval in his mind, just curiosity. She sighed. She'd been such a young, gullible fool.

"It's been sixteen years since my parents died. Officially the bomb that killed them was a rebel terrorist attack. I bought that story, probably because I couldn't accept my own guilt in the matter, until I'd been in Intelligence for a few years."

She didn't want to go on. Really didn't want to be forced to remember that horrible year when the truth came crashing home. Falkor would never let her off easy though.

"What happened?"

"Two years ago I was sent to debrief a spy seeking asylum in the Alliance. He took one look at me and freaked out. He didn't know my name, but he knew who I was. *What* I was. He knew about the Tel Group. And he shouldn't have. It's one of the best kept secrets on the planet.

"And that is when I discovered the underground. I had no idea such a thing existed. Every government on Earth requires anyone with mental talents—telepathy, telekinesis, empathy, whatever—to register. Officially, it's to protect people who don't have gifts. Well, that's the year I learned maybe that wasn't the only reason. Because before that I bought all the patriotic rah-rah bullshit, ya know?"

"Patriotic rah-rah bullshit?" he interrupted with laughter in his voice.

"Do you want to hear this or not?"



He sobered but she still felt the amusement in his mind. "Yes. Continue."

"Anyway, the official line at Tel was we served the Alliance, protected the Alliance, and well, sometimes it was better if the people didn't know how. Someone's got to do the dirty jobs, right?"

She paused a long moment trying to organize her thoughts. Trying to make it all make sense.

"Janice?"

"Sorry. Got lost there for a minute." She forced a small smile. "In my mind, protecting the Alliance meant ending the war as quickly and decisively as possible with minimal loss of life."

"A worthy goal."

"Yes. But according to the spy I was debriefing, *not* the goal of the Tel Group. It was in their best interest to continue the wars."

He scowled. "Why?"

"Power and money." She didn't want to get into a long discussion about the geopolitical world two years ago, before the Delroi invasion. "We were involved in several small wars at once. Some with enemies of the Alliance and some with territories trying to withdraw from it."

"Richard, the spy, told me that Tel assassinated one of those rebel leaders. I already knew that, because I was the one they sent. What I didn't know was the Alliance had been secretly negotiating with him. We were going to let that territory go. When he was assassinated it was blamed on a rival faction the Alliance wouldn't negotiate with."

She took a deep breath and forced herself to hold his gaze. "I have blood on my hands. It'll never wash off."

"You followed orders. I take it you verified this man's claims?"

She nodded. "It took a long time, and thankfully I was working for Britt by then. Most of the time I was able to avoid working for Tel. I tried to refuse the next time. They said Uncle Henry would disappear."

His anger swept over her, cold and severe. "They threatened your only family."

"They aren't good people," she said dryly and almost laughed at the understatement. "Of course, Henry was beyond pissed at me when he found out. He thought I should have refused, thought he'd be safe from them." She shrugged. "Maybe he is, but I'm not. No one survives leaving Tel."

"You don't belong to them. You belong to me."

He said it so arrogantly, as if the power of the Tel Group was some tiny thing he could squash, she laughed. He rolled on top of her and it felt natural to spread her legs to cradle his hips. Like she'd been welcoming him into her body her whole life. She felt something snap deep in her mind, her final barrier, the last of her resistance. He felt it too. His eyes widened just before he thrust into her.

His mind was in hers, part of hers. Strength and love. Determination and devotion. Acceptance. The power of their bond shook her and when she embraced it, his big body shuddered with her.

She grinned. This was hers, whether she deserved it or not, whether she survived the coming cat and mouse game with the Tel Group or not, and she planned to enjoy it to the fullest while she could. She pushed at his shoulder until he rolled over so she straddled him.

\*

Falkor looked up into the smiling euphoric face of his *der'lan* and for the first time in his life he was afraid. Silently he promised the gods of his world whatever they wanted as long as he could have many long happy years with her at his side. He was determined and single minded, but he wasn't stupid. The Tel Group was a formidable enemy, the only real threat to her life. He wished he could just spirit her away, take her home, and he'd never run from a fight in his life.

Did that make him less of a warrior? Or more? Most would say less and part of him agreed. But ... he wouldn't survive if he lost her and as much as he wanted her out of this fight he knew it was a demand he couldn't make. These were her emotional scars to heal and to do it she needed to be part of the effort to eradicate the Tel Group. She had to do that to have a secure and happy future with him. So he'd stand in front of her when he could. At her side when he must.

"Now who's thinking too much?" she asked giving him that beautiful teasing smile that first made his heart stop then pound as if he'd been in battle all day.

"You're supposed to be distracting me, woman," he said, his voice gruff with emotions.

Why try to hide it? She could read him as easily as he read her. He groaned when she slid slowly down the length of his cock, a slight pivot to her hips. He'd never thought to put himself in this position, with a woman in control, but it had distinct advantages.

He pulled her closer and leaned up to tease one pert nipple. Gently at first, rolling his tongue over it, before sucking it into his mouth. When he bit down she arched against him, her pelvis moved harder against his seeking that touch of pain that turned on her and pushed her over the edge.

He was happy to oblige, but not quite yet. With one hand gripping her hip, he slowed her down while he separated the folds covering her sex with the other. He watched her face as his thumb brushed over her clit. She held her breath waiting for him to return, skin glowing and eyes bright. He repeated the action. Once. Twice. Always soft. Always gentle. She gave a kitten-like mewl of protest but he refused to hurry.

*Beautiful.*

*You're going to tease now?*

*Mmm.* He leaned up and caught her nipple again. She tasted so sweet, sweeter now that she was no longer fighting him. *It is my right.*

The muscles of her channel squeezed around him and he bit her, sharp and quick, a small punishment that was anything but. She grew slicker around his cock, ground against him when he wouldn't allow her to move.

"I'm supposed to be in charge right now."

He chuckled at her complaint and flipped them over. Withdrew once and thrust back in hard and deep. She wrapped her legs around his waist and encouraged him to do it again. He did, but kept his thrusts slow enough she couldn't come. Not yet. Not when he was enjoying the glazed look that came over her eyes so much, the glow that seemed to infuse her body inside out. The effects of the bond. How had he ever lived without her? Without the love and succor of her body?

She curled her fingers in his hair and tugged until he leaned down to kiss her. Her lips were sweet honey. Her tongue a scalding brand when it swept into his mouth. Demanding and teasing.

*Please, baby. Please let me come.*

Impossible to deny her pleading especially when she used that sweet open tone, when her mind was his to plunder and he knew she was thinking of nothing but the release only he could give her. When she was thinking of nothing more than giving herself completely to him.

Because of that he decided to give her back some of her control and rolled them back to their previous position. And discovered the other advantage as she took the reins and moved over him, slow at first then with building speed. He watch her face as she took him, watched passion overtake her as she lost control. She moved fiercely, hard and taking him as deeply as she could until he knew he wouldn't last many more strokes. That would be completely unacceptable if she did not come with him.

He moved one hand between her legs, fingers seeking her clitoris. Soft at first but with growing pressure he rubbed the small nub between them. Her channel squeezed his cock as she cried out, holding herself still above him as the orgasm washed over her.

Withdrawing, he flipped her over and pulled her to her knees, driven by something primal and out of control. He thrust hard, dragging his cock over her g-spot with each withdrawal. She moved back against him with each retreat, her soft whimpers like music to his ears, a soothing balm to his soul. When her pussy tightened on him a second time, he didn't hold back. He slammed into her. Two, three strokes before he was coming too, shaking and filling her with his seed, before they both collapsed to the bed.

He pinned her under him, waiting until the jets of ejaculation stopped, before reluctantly withdrawing and moving to her side. She rolled over and pressed tight against him, toes to shoulders, her nose on his chest rubbing gently back and forth.

*You're going to kill me.*

He smiled but didn't speak, sensing she had more to say.

*But what a way to go.*

*You loved every minute of it.*

She sighed and if possible snuggled closer. He wrapped his arms around her. The sense of contentment, of belonging filling him was unfamiliar uncharted territory but the sense of rightness was so strong, so perfect he didn't care. They would be partners, the rest of their lives, two people whose ultimate and final loyalty lay only with each other.

"Don't even think it," she whispered.

"What?"

"That because ... our bond is so strong we can ignore the world. We can't walk away from our responsibilities. *I* can't. I thought I could not be a spy anymore. An assassin. And I don't want to. But I also thought that meant I didn't want anything to do with ... service, I guess. The thing is I can be useful without being a killer, can't I?"

She took a deep breath and tilted her head back to look at him. Her eyes caught his, swimming with emotion, with self-awareness.

"This bond?" Her half smile was a temptation. "It's our escape when the world gets too crazy. But I don't think either one of us wants that escape to be permanent."

She was right. He rolled to his back, pulling her along so she was draped over him.

"How did I end up with such a wise *der'lan*?"

The saucy grin came out in full force. "Luck?"

He slapped her ass but she moaned instead of protested. "Okay. How about perseverance?"

"Better," he growled, one hand on her nape pulling her down so he could nip at her lips. She smiled against him.

"How about stubborn? Mule headed?"

Before he could roll her over and show her stubborn the com center beeped an incoming call. He groaned and with a last peck on his lips she jumped up.

"That's probably Britt."

She grabbed the blanket, eschewing clothes, and he followed her into the other room.

## Chapter Fourteen

If Britt thought it odd she was answering a call wearing a blanket, she didn't let it show. Janice hid a grin. Actually, after seeing how hot and heavy Britt and Barak were, she was a little surprised Britt was fully clothed although maybe the flush on her face was an indicator the clothes were a recent—very recent—addition.

"I'm sending you an encrypted file," Britt said, with no preamble.

She waited while it downloaded to the com terminal and Janice had a glance through it. The first document was a simple journal, the first entry dates years ago. Janice felt her eyebrows rising as she skimmed it and finally looked up to meet Britt's gaze on the screen. The other woman shrugged.

"I may not be part of the Tel Group, but I'd be stupid to ignore it."

And it didn't have to be said that Britt Anderson Trace was not stupid. The journal appeared to be a concise record of every encounter she'd had with Tel. Dates, names, locations. It was a much more complete list of members than Janice had put together. She was shocked at the number of politicians and businessman. Britt couldn't have put the information together on her own. Janice wasn't sure how she could use it yet, but she knew she would.

"There's more," Britt said sending a second transmission.

The first page was nothing more than an address and directions to a place about an hour from Capital City. Janice knew the area. It was protected land. Heavily forested. Her excitement built. Surely, Britt hadn't discovered...

"Headquarters," Britt supplied.

Janice couldn't believe it. She'd been searching for years. The next page came up on the document reader. A diagram of several buildings.

"How did you get this?"

Britt arched an eyebrow. "You know I can't tell you who she is."

She sighed. She did and even understood why. Britt had to have a source inside the Tel Group, and the less people who knew about her the safer she was. Britt had at least told her the source was female. Before she could examine why the final pages opened, and she leaned forward to study them. Security plans. They detailed where the fences were, entry points, keypad locations. Notes in the margin named the alarm system and special modifications.

"Of course, you need the security codes to go in quietly."

Janice didn't anticipate that being a problem. With Sergei's help she could take those codes from the prisoner's mind.

"My source says there's an emergency meeting there tomorrow and most of the board will arrive tonight." Britt looked worried. "Janice, I know you want to go after them, but that's a lot of telepaths in one place and they won't be on your side. The risk..."

"Will have to be taken," she said more sharply than she'd intended. "There's no telling when there will be another chance."

Britt switched her gaze to Falkor, who nodded once. "We'll discuss it."

Janice bristled, but kept quiet until the call was disconnected.

"Don't tell me no," she said softly, ignoring the fact she might even obey if he did.

The idea of risking everyone's neck, not to mention her own, didn't thrill her. She could admit that. He paced away, stopped and crossed his arms over his chest. A heavy, put-upon sigh transferred from his mind to hers.

"I'll agree to do this if you give me your word to be careful and follow orders."

Why did her heart jump at the idea of obeying him? Smiling, he approached and stroked her face with the back of his knuckles.

"Because you know how good it is when you do follow orders, sweetheart. Because you want to please me as much as I want to please you."

With a shaky breath, she stepped back. His hand fell to his side but he was still smiling.

"We don't have time for that now."

"No." He sent a message for Sergei to join them. "But when this is finished, there will be nothing but time."

Then he spoke to the healer and told him to synthesize the drug he'd found in Angel's blood. She was glad he thought of it. With the drug, they could leave the prisoner and not have to worry about him trying to influence anyone's mind. The squad currently on board would have to go with them and there wasn't time to find a replacement team with mental shields as solid.

When Sergei arrived, they filled him in and then went to the brig. She hated this part. It was one thing to speak to someone mentally, but she was going to have to go into the prisoner's mind to get what she needed. At least he wouldn't be able to fight her. The healer was waiting outside the door with the hypodermic. Two warriors held him still while the drug was injected into his neck.

It took she and Sergei thirty minutes of searching to find the information they needed. When she pulled back into her own mind, she wondered if she'd ever feel clean again. She'd found the prisoner's mind a vile warren of evil and deceit. He was a murderer who *enjoyed* it and he was probably typical of the people who ran Tel. She went directly back to Falkor's cabin, scrubbed first her teeth and then her body, thanking every god in Earth's vast pantheon she'd never fallen so low.

But she still didn't feel clean. Falkor took her in his arms, his mind a calm steady presence in hers, and soothed her without saying a word.

## Chapter Fifteen

According to Britt's source there would be better than thirty telepaths and telekinetics in residence. They decided to infiltrate the compound a couple of hours before dawn broke. The guards would have to be killed quickly before they could sound an alarm. Then the explosive team would set charges on the buildings.

Falkor wanted to just bomb the whole place, but she and Sergei vetoed that idea. For one, they'd have to use one of the Delroi ships and they didn't want any hint that the Delroi were involved in the operation. Talk about intergalactic incidences.

More importantly, Britt's source had come back with more information. A short list of possible prisoners. Janice was not about to leave behind any Tel captives if she could help it. Sergei backed her up and Falkor reluctantly agreed. Though he was also proud of her for insisting. His reluctance was because he wanted to avoid putting her in danger, even if it was only stubbing her toe.

So here they were, two hours before dawn, creeping through the woods, Falkor to her right and Sergei to her left. There'd been a short bitter argument with Angel about coming along which only ended when Sergei locked her in her quarters and set a guard on the door. She glanced over, checking to make sure he wasn't distracted. He gave her a look that screamed *gimme a break* and she had to bite her lip to keep from laughing. She sure as hell wouldn't want to be him when they returned to the ship. Angel's powers were returning and she was *very* unhappy with her brother.

One of the Delroi warriors signaled the approach of a rear gate that Britt's source assured them would be minimally guarded. Janice was more and more curious about who that unknown female was. The guard was overpowered without any fuss and the team was inside. She, Falkor, and Sergei approached the building where the captives were supposed to be held while the rest of the warriors went to work putting the explosives in place.

The grounds were poorly lit and they stuck to the shadows as they made their way. The two guards were quickly dispatched, the security code entered, and they were inside. It was a small building, basically one large room and two prison cells with one occupant in one and two in the other, all women. Next to her she could feel Falkor's rage rising.

If she'd discovered one thing during her time on Delroi it was they were almost fanatically overprotective of women. She'd found that very annoying, but she was getting used it, and in this case at least, shared his anger. But uncontrolled fury might waken one of the telepaths and they couldn't afford that. She squeezed his hand and he let the wild energy slowly dissipate.

The door creaked when they shut it behind them and Janice winced at the loud sound even though she knew it couldn't be heard at the main building. It was loud enough to waken one of the captives, however. She stood slowly, moving to reach through the connecting bars to tap one of the others on the shoulder. In seconds all three stood, waiting with wary expressions as Janice approached the bars.

"Keys?" she asked softly.

The one who was kept alone walked over to the bars, looked Janice up and down, and jerked her chin towards the far wall. "In the desk over there. I'm Kareena."

"Janice."

Sergei found the keys and rushed to free the women. He looked them over and Janice grimaced at what he saw, knew exactly what he was thinking. They were all in bad shape. Gaunt and sallow skinned. She hoped they were in better condition than they appeared.

"We have to move fast," Sergei said softly.

"We'll keep up." Kareena spoke for the three of them, but the other two nodded in agreement. Her tone was arctic with determination. "I hope you have something planned for the ones left here."

"Oh yeah," Janice said and the two of them shared a vengeful grin.

Kareena and her two compatriots were true to their word. They hurried barefoot through the woods without complaint. Outside the fence, their group met with the rest of the Delroi and they started the trek back to where a shuttle was hidden.

But Janice was tense. It was too easy. The enemy waited to strike until the metal skin of the shuttle was a beckoning glint through the trees. The force of the mental blow drove her to knees as she shoved at Kareena.

"Run," she bit out, staggering back to her feet she turned to see Sergei in not much better shape.

Kareena hesitated and Janice turned to Roarr. "Get them on the shuttle."

He waited for Falkor's permission before herding the three women off. Janice didn't bother to take the time to be irritated. Instead she let her senses flair out to see what they were up against. There was no way she was leaving without at least doing some damage.

"Four of them," she told Sergei. "I think."

He shook his head. "There's another hidden."

They could feel the power building, like the electric surge in a thunderstorm. "Get ready," he said.

Falkor grabbed both of them, pushing them towards the shuttle. She dug her heels in. He snarled at her.

*Babe, I can't concentrate if you're dragging me through the woods.*

*Damn it. Be careful.*

He was pissed, but he stopped. She didn't tell him the risks of what they were doing, shoved the knowledge deep in her mind and reached for Sergei's hand. Together they might be able to take on four telepaths. Maybe. She suspected these guys were a great deal stronger than average though, especially if they were board members. She sensed Roarr and a couple of other warriors return but didn't turn to see who.

Instead she joined her mind with Sergei's, gathered and focused her energy to strike. They waited until the last minute, right before they felt the others preparing to strike at them. They had a small advantage. While the four enemies coordinated their attack, they did not join their powers. She felt two fall when her and Sergei's combined power struck. Those two would never rise.

The other two recovered much too quickly, however, and she felt a spike of fear. She and Sergei would not be enough. Before she could even ask she felt Falkor's strength fill her and just before the next strike came from the enemy, her Uncle Henry.

Still, she swayed under the blow, the only thing holding her upright Falkor's arms. Roarr caught Sergei before he fell.

*One more time?* Sergei asked. *Then we get the hell out of here.*

She was glad her back was to Falkor and he couldn't see the blood beginning to



trickle from her nose.

"We're going to attack once more," she told Falkor and Roarr. Her voice sounded raw. "You'll have to get us out fast."

Since Falkor would have to get them out, she didn't draw as much power from him as she could have. Henry offered her everything he had, which was considerable, but she was careful not to take too much. It might kill him if she did. Hell, this was probably going to turn her mind to jello anyway. She buried that thought deep. Falkor would try to stop her if she didn't and then she'd never be free.

She and Sergei separated their minds, each picking a target, and counted down. She pulled all the energy she could and focused it to one sharp point. So much energy her mind couldn't handle it for long. Energy that had to be released with such force and speed that alone might kill her. But when the time came she didn't hesitate. It found its mark but the backlash was so severe she passed out before she could ascertain if it had done its job.

## Chapter Sixteen

Falkor took her home.

He was able to get his original party, plus his newfound relatives and the three female Earth captives onto one of Daggar's jump ships. He also took her uncle, her young pupil Tessa, and Tessa's mother. He wanted her to have no excuses to return to Earth.

The trip took five days and Janice slept most of it. For the first twenty-four hours, she didn't open her eyes. Didn't move. The healers assured him she would be fine. That her brain was taxed and sore but recovering on its own. For the next few days she woke only long enough to drink, eat, and use the facilities. Even that little exercise exhausted her.

Still the healers insisted this was normal for a telepath who'd expended so much energy. And each day, she was awake a bit longer. So when they reached Delroi, he handed over all the people he'd brought along for her sake to his brother, and took her to his home up in the mountains.

Feeling like a triumphant conqueror, he carried her inside, through the villa and to the spacious master bedroom. He laid her on the bed and pushed the controls that made the long stone wall slide away to expose the view of the valley and city below.

It was about three hours from dusk. He needed to fly back in and let Barak know what had happened. See for himself that everyone he'd brought home with him was safe and settled. He smiled. She would expect that much of him when she was herself again and he didn't want to disappoint her. Leaning over her, he kissed her forehead and left before he could talk himself out of it.

It was a short flight and the house was in controlled chaos. Kareena was arguing softly with Barak and Roarr when he walked in. Her distress was so obvious it beat at him. He glared at his brother and pulled them a few feet away.

"What's wrong?"

"They want Zola and Parker to stay here. And me," she shot an evil look at Roarr, "at his house."

Barak shrugged. "Space."

Falkor knew that for a lie. Barak had plenty of room. Sergei, Dax, and Angel had been given their own house. The house that had been Dax's before he left to explore the universe. It would belong to his children when he passed to the next realm. So Barak's house while full, was not packed. Especially with Falkor and Janice not in residence. Still ... for Roarr to want this one close could only mean one thing. He kept his thoughts to himself. The drugs had worn off and he didn't know what Kareena's gifts were.

"His house is only across the street and two down. You can see your friends everyday. This way everyone will have space." He paused a moment. "What did the healer say? You are recovering from the drug fine? There is no reason for the three of you not to be housed together?"

She reacted the way he expected. So much like Janice. Her spine stiffened and her eyes glowed. "No reason we have to be together. But why are you separating us? We trusted you."

Roarr stood behind her and Falkor looked him over. He showed nothing but

indifference but Falkor wasn't buying the act.

"It is simply a matter of rooms," he told Kareena. "You'll be close. You know how to reach me or Sergei if you need assistance."

Not that that would happen. She kept her mind closed, but she had an air about her like Janice. She wouldn't give any part of herself to anyone she wasn't sure deserved her. He felt a little bit sorry for Roarr. He had the feeling this woman would put him through the wringer.

He wanted to stay longer, make sure everything was going according to plan, but he felt Janice stirring. He found his brother before he left.

"I'll be back in the morning."

Barak shook his head, a half smile on his face. "Come back when you're ready."

Britt laughed and rolled her eyes. "Don't worry. He'll come get you when he needs you." She sobered in an instant. "Take care of my new sister, Falkor. She means a lot to me."

He couldn't answer past the emotion choking his throat, just nodded, and he got out of the house as soon as he could. He wanted to get home. To Janice. She was on the bedroom balcony, waiting for him when he arrived. Still weak, still recovering, but all Janice when she turned and met his gaze.

"It's not over," she said softly, reluctantly.

"Maybe not." He moved to her quickly. She looked so fragile in the waning light. Swaying a bit, even in a few days losing more weight than she should. "But you aren't going anywhere. You're staying right here with me."

He grabbed her around the waist, determined to take her inside and put her back to bed. Her eyes held him still. Full of light and life and ... love?

The bond couldn't be denied but did she love him?

Her head fell back when she laughed, a full joyful sound that he wanted to hear forever. He also wanted to spank her ass. She was purposefully leaving him in suspense. Finally she shook her hair out and leaning back in his arms looked up to meet his gaze.

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't love you. From the minute I left Delroi, even though I didn't realize it, it was the promise of your love that made me go on. To be free to love where I chose."

He slid his hands down her back to cup her ass. Not quite yet, but soon she'd be ready to take him no holds barred. Sighing she leaned against him, her mind ready even though her body wasn't. She rubbed her face against his, though he knew it must scratch. It was a sensation she enjoyed.

*You haven't shaved,* her mind whispered on a sigh.

*You don't seem to like it when I do.*

*Mmm.*

Her pleasure and happiness bloomed in his mind. He chuckled, picked her up and carried her to bed. He lay down next to her and held her hands away when she reached for him.

After a moment she was drifting off to sleep again, her body still insistent on rest whether she approved or not. He held her close, sheltering her with his body, and knew she was his. Completely.

*Of course,* she teased. *Now let me sleep.*

He laughed. *I'll be waiting when you wake. I love you, sweetheart.*

*I know.* The sigh in his mind was sweet surrender and it was all he'd ever wanted, a beautiful dream come true.

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

As a native of the South, is it any wonder Loribelle has a love of storytelling? She started writing seriously as a teenager and finished her first manuscript, a mystery, when she was nineteen. After a few bumps along the way and stints as an Army MP, a waitress, a book store manager, a student, and a wedding photographer, she turned to writing full time. Now she divides her time among a husband, three kids, writing, and a part-time photography gig.

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