



Reflections of Fate
Patty Schramm

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By
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Chapter One

Cherokee, North Carolina
Earth — 2015

Leoni Wolf slid into the driver's seat of her Cherokee Indian Police Department cruiser and settled in for her afternoon shift. The morning rain vanished in the warm April air, replaced by bright sunshine. She put on her sunglasses and pulled out of the station parking lot.

The mild weather brought the tourists early and already Cherokee bustled with out-of-towners. Most were headed to Harrah's Casino, since a lot of the seasonal offerings weren't yet open. She drove past a long row of shops and fought the urge to roll her eyes. Some idiot wearing the expected "Indian" garb stood in front of a teepee set up in the parking area. He wore a long, feathered headdress and tanned, likely fake-leather pants and shirt, also adorned with feathers. To Leoni he looked like a Sioux Indian. The average tourist would never know that he was completely out of place on the Cherokee Reservation. Nor would they know, or care to know, that her people had never lived in teepees. Cherokees weren't nomadic; they lived in cabins made from the trees around them.

She really wanted to arrest the guy for blatant stupidity. Then again, she'd have to arrest another dozen more just like him.

She came to an intersection, and a second before she drove through, a blue Civic came flying past and nearly crashed into a white Chevy pickup. The driver of the pickup laid on the horn, but the Civic kept going. Leoni gave chase, sure she recognized the car as she gave chase. Once close enough, she switched on the cruiser's overhead lights, signaling the driver to pull over. They crossed the bridge over Soco Creek and pulled into the parking lot of a tourist shop on Paint Town Road. The Civic parked right next to one of the fake teepees. She called in the stop to her dispatcher and approached the vehicle.

The driver's window was down, and a familiar face popped out and grinned at her. "Hey, Leoni."

She paused next to the driver's window, stared at the young man, and pulled her sunglasses down. "Jonathan Two Feathers, what the hell do you think you're doing? You ran a Stop sign right in front of me and almost hit that white Chevy."

"What white Chevy?"

"That's my point. I have half a mind to call your daddy—"

"Aw c'mon, Leoni. I won't do it again. Promise." He grinned at her with a smile she was sure could woo any young girl. From the disheveled appearance of the passenger, Leoni figured he'd wooed her pretty well.

"Give me your license."

"Leoni..."

"Give. Now." Leoni held her hand out and Jonathan reluctantly gave it to her. "Stay put," she said and returned to her cruiser. "Damn kids." She ran his license number on her computer to check for suspensions and outstanding citations. There were none. Leoni went back to his window. "Okay, here's the deal. I'm giving you a warning this time, because one more ticket and you have to go to court."

"Thanks." Jonathan's grin faded when he saw the look on Leoni's face.

"You're gonna tell on me."

“Yep. I just saved your daddy a few hundred bucks in court costs, but I expect he’ll be pretty damn mad. Now you get your ass home—after you take her home—and make sure you drive safely. If I hear about you doing this again, I’ll make sure the judge takes your license. Got it?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Jonathan said. His passenger said something, but Leoni didn’t pay attention. She got in her vehicle and waited as Jonathan carefully pulled out of the parking lot. He signaled and merged into traffic perfectly, as if he were taking a driver’s test. She dialed Big John’s number. He wasn’t available, so she left a voice mail. Jonathan wouldn’t be driving like an maniac for a least a few weeks.

The first of spring seemed like rutting season for teenagers. After they’d been cooped up all winter, the warmer weather pulled them from all corners of the reservation to cruise around Cherokee, North Carolina. Some of them enjoyed making fun of the tourists—the main revenue for the area—and some just liked hanging out with friends and getting a cheap meal at one of the many fast food joints.

Leoni didn’t mind the kids as long as they behaved. Her biggest pet peeve was their bad driving habits, so she always kept an eye on them. Cherokee wasn’t a big city, and after a decade on the police force, Leoni Wolf pretty much knew everyone in and out of town.

A few hours later Leoni decided to drive to her favorite quiet spot. On the top of a hill that overlooked part of the reservation was an old camping ground abandoned years ago. On occasion, she’d have to clear out some randy kids, but the place was usually quiet. Tonight, no one was there. She parked the cruiser, walked to the edge of the hill, and leaned against an old silver maple tree.

The sun setting on the horizon splashed red, orange, and yellow colors across the valley below. Leoni sucked in a long breath, inhaling the sweet scent of the maples and the wonderful aroma of the many orchids. The cleanness of the air always refreshed her. As the sun made its final descent, Leoni closed her eyes and remembered one of the happiest days of her life.

The day she had held Tayanita’s hand as they walked to the edge of the hill. They stood beneath the old silver maple tree where Leoni had carved their initials when they were kids. She’d realized at that very moment how much she was in love with Tayanita. Leoni remembered how she’d traced the letters with her finger.

Tayanita spoke with a soft and teasing tone. She placed her hand under Leoni’s chin and turned her face so they were eye to eye. “You were so cute when you carved that.”

“I did it because I was too chicken to look at you. I was afraid you didn’t like me as much as I liked you.”

“Do you still feel that way?”

Leoni answered her with a passionate kiss, letting her hands roam beneath Tayanita’s shirt to discover she wasn’t wearing a bra. Leoni pulled back and gave her what she hoped was her most lecherous grin.

They broke the kiss and Tayanita laughed, the sound warmed Leoni’s heart. “How old were we? Fifteen?”

“Almost sixteen. Got my license that summer.”

“And that hideous yellow Vega.”

“It wasn’t hideous,” Leoni said, trying to sound offended even though the color had been truly hideous.

“It was. And that back seat was so tiny—I thought we’d never get out of it.”

“Yeah, not the best idea.” Leoni slipped her arms around Tayanita’s waist. “We should have just put a blanket on the grass. Much easier there.”

“We were kids. Good thing we learned after that.”

“And what fun we had learning.”

Tayanita’s face took on a serious look, and for a second, it scared Leoni. “There’s something I need to ask you.”

“Okay.”

“It’s pretty serious, so let me get through this before you say anything.”

“Okay.”

Tayanita cleared her throat. “You are the only woman I’ve ever been with and the only person I love with all my heart. I can’t—won’t—imagine my life without you in it. We’ve grown up together, and I hope we can grow old together.” Tayanita dropped to one knee so fast she startled Leoni. She took hold of Leoni’s now shaking left hand and held up a ring.

“Leoni Wolf, will you marry me?”

Leoni’s breath hitched, and she had trouble forming a thought, much less a sentence. Dark brown eyes gazed up at her lovingly, tears sparkling. Leoni cupped Tayanita’s face with her hands and nodded, unable to speak. Tayanita slipped the silver band on Leoni’s finger. A perfect fit, just like their two bodies, their hearts, their souls. The last remnants of the sun’s rays glistened off the single, tiny diamond. Tayanita stood and kissed her sweetly, tenderly, sealing a promise with her touch.

So much time had passed since that tender day, and now, looking across the valley, all she had was memories. Leoni swiped at the tears on her cheeks and looked down at the gold wedding band still on her left finger in front of the silver ring that Tayanita had given her that day. The rings were a weird mismatch, but that was because their gold wedding bands had belonged to Tayanita’s grandparents.

Heading back to her cruiser, Leoni rolled the rings together and let the good memories linger just a bit longer. Eventually the bad ones would take hold again.

Most mornings Leoni was up and energetic, but not today. The light made her squint, and her reflection in the mirror surprised her. She really looked hung over. Her cheeks were pale, eyes puffy, and her long, black hair was rumpled and tangled. The whites of her eyes had enough red lines to draw a map from Cherokee to Gatlinburg.

After a long, hot shower, she felt refreshed. She pulled her hair into a ponytail. Her face looked presentable, but the puffiness around her eyes was still there. Maybe if she’d paid more attention to her mother’s “girly” tips, she’d know how to fix that. Didn’t really matter though. No one would see her eyes behind her sunglasses.

She put on navy blue BDU pants, white tee shirt, and a navy blue, short-sleeved, button-down shirt, which she tucked into her pants. The shirt already had the necessary “gear” attached: badge, name tag, and ink pen in the pocket. The black boots finished her uniform. It never took longer than ten minutes to be dressed and ready to go.

She hooked the duty belt over her regular belt, made some adjustments, and checked her equipment. Handcuffs in the back, two magazines for the Glock 22 nestled snugly in the holster on her left. A pouch at her back held two sets of medical gloves, and she made sure they were always stocked. One last look in the full-length mirror, and she’d be set to go.

Carved from oak by hand, the ornate looking glass was so much a part of the family that no one could remember how old it was. She ran her fingers along the smooth curves of the top. The mirror was six feet tall. The oval glass had just enough room for Leoni to see her full figure. For a

moment she stared at her image. Ripples crossed the glass like waves and she rubbed her eyes. Lack of sleep was messing with her vision. But there it was again. For a split second, she was sure she saw a woman standing behind her.

She spun around. Nothing there. She had to have imagined it. She turned back to the mirror but the woman was still there, only now, behind her were walls of silvery metal. The woman's eyes, blue as a spring sky, caught Leoni's, and she felt the breath leave her body. Something quivered in her stomach as her soul made an instant connection.

A tapping at her window caused her to spin around again, this time with her hand on her weapon. She walked to the window but saw nothing. She was on the second floor. Had she really expected to see someone there?

Just to be certain, she opened the window, stuck her head out, and looked around. To her surprise, a snowy owl flew in. She hastily ducked to get out of its way. The bird made a circle around the room before diving right at Leoni's head. An old legend about owls darted through her mind. Something about a bad omen. She dodged to the left and the owl flew straight at the mirror.

The glass shimmered. The owl disappeared.

"What the fuck!" Leoni inched forward, never taking her eyes off the mirror. The glass looked normal again and no beautiful woman gazed back at her. She had almost convinced herself it'd been some weird hallucination when the owl flew back out of the glass and swooped past her. Leoni flinched, feeling the brush of its wings. The owl banked back around, diving straight at her face. She stumbled backward, tripped, and fell through the mirror.

Chapter Two

Alpha Command, Kalen

Forensia — 4055 (2015 Earth time)

Nicola Daelis sat at the desk in her bedroom and stared at the holo. She'd read her speech so many times she'd memorized it, and yet for this moment, she couldn't recall any of it. Her head felt full enough to explode. She hated speeches. She was about to slam her head onto the metal desktop in frustration when the comm pad next to her hand chimed. She saw the caller ID and a smile came to her face.

The image of her ten-year-old son, Jese, filled the screen. His violet eyes shone with delight. "Greetings, Mom! How are you?"

"Greetings, Jese. I'm okay. Are you getting ready for school?"

"I've been ready. Aunt Zara is grumpy today because Uncle Coby forgot to do something." He glanced to his left, leaned closer to the screen, and whispered, "I think it had something to do with sex."

"Jese." She tried to keep from laughing. "It's none of your business."

"It's hard not to listen. They're really loud." He smirked in a way that told Nicola he was growing up way too fast. "And I don't mean when they talk."

She didn't need that kind of information about her brother and his wife. Ever. "It's not nice to talk about that. It's a private thing. We've been over this before."

He started to protest, but the look on her face stopped him. "Yes, ma'am. Can I come home tomorrow? I miss my friends and want to go to *my* school. This school is boring."

"I know, son. You can't come home just yet, but I'm hoping it'll be soon." She paused to look at her little man, growing up without her next to him. They both felt the hurt of separation. He didn't deserve this and neither did she. "I miss you a lot. I love you. Now get to school and promise to call me when you get home. Got it?"

"I love you, Mom. I promise to call." He blew her a kiss and logged off.

Nicola wiped the tears from her eyes and went back to working on her speech. She gave it another hour before deciding to get dressed.

The First War ended soon after she was born. The speech she'd been working on was aimed at bringing the Second War between her people, the Tsalagi, and the Nadytes to an end. For years, she and Chief Danou Frew of the Nadyte tribe worked tirelessly on a peace accord. As chief of the Tsalagi tribe, Nicola had taken the proposed accord to her council and gotten their approval. Once signed, it would be the first step in uniting their world under a single council. Forensia would be one people again.

The war had raged when Nicola was younger, too. Her parents had fought in the First War and were pivotal in ending it. At that time, the Nadyte and Tsalagi tribes became one community, under separate councils. During her time at the military academy, she'd met Danou, long before he'd become the chief of the Nadytes, and he'd quickly become her friend. But two councils proved to be problematic, and soon their people were at war again.

Worse than losing her friend, who returned to his home to fight alongside his people, was losing her cousin, Angeel, who had fallen in love with Danou and chose to follow him. In the intervening decade, Nicola hadn't spoken to, or seen, Angeel, though she'd had many communications with Danou. Today, however, she'd finally see Angeel, who was now Danou's wife. She looked forward

to the meeting but dreaded the damn speech which constituted the one part of being a leader that she hated.

That, and the politics that came with her position. Specifically, she didn't want to deal with Councilman Bettol. Although Nicola should view him as one of her personal advisors, the bane of her existence was more like it. He didn't agree with anything she did, including making peace with the Nadyte. She kept Bettol close to her so she could keep an eye on him, though she planned to remove him from the council if she could ever manage it. Bettol represented a large section of their world, however, and his removal would cause more problems than solutions.

She went to her closet, pulled out the stark white slacks and jacket of her dress uniform, and brushed off imaginary lint. When she put on the uniform, Nicola felt empowered. Officially, she was General Daelis, chief of the Tsalagi and leader of half the people on her world. She'd worked hard to gain the trust of her people and hoped she would make them all proud.

She stood before the oblong wall mirror and stared at the reflection. Her long blonde hair, braided tightly at the nape of the neck, now showed strands of white around the temples. She ran her fingers over the areas and sighed. When did thirty become old enough for gray hair?

When you took on the role of chief, she thought.

She lightly touched the medal clipped to the left side of her chest. The Supreme Medal of Valor. The gleaming metal gave her chills. The memory of how she received it was seared into her brain. She fought it out of her consciousness. She needed to be clearheaded today.

She took another look at herself to make sure her uniform was in order. Her image blurred. She blinked a few times to clear her vision. But her vision was perfect. The glass rippled like waves of water and stopped as fast as it had begun. The walls of her room were made of *metaline*, with a dull silver surface, but through the mirror she saw a tan wall with an open window. Beyond the window was a blue sky. Then a woman passed by, and Nicola stepped back in alarm. Seeing a person through her looking glass? That wasn't possible. Nicola moved closer to the mirror. Peering in, all she saw was her own reflection staring back.

Then the shimmery figure materialized again. Adrenaline rushed through Nicola's veins as her body prepared to fight, if necessary. A woman with dark skin, round face, and black hair watched her. Eyes the color of the night sky found hers, and Nicola felt something stir deep in her soul, as if she'd finally found her other half.

In a blink, the image was gone again.

Nicola reached toward the glass. At the same moment, a snowy-white bird flew out of the mirror. She ducked and spun away, gasping in surprise. The bird swooped back toward her, staring at her with round eyes as it released an ear-splitting squawk. Before Nicola could react, the bird disappeared over her shoulder and through the glass.

The mirror shimmered again.

Nicola pressed the emergency alert button on her wrist chron. She heard a crash. Shards of glass rained all around. Something slammed into her, taking her to the floor and knocking the breath from her body. She struggled and slammed her right fist into something hard. She rolled away and shot to her feet.

As she staggered back, the other figure rose. Nicola managed to duck one swing but didn't see the next one. A fist slammed into her jaw. She tumbled backward and her head struck the wall.

Hands grabbed her. Before she realized what was going on, she was face down on the floor with her arms wrenched behind her back and something thin and metallic wrapped around her wrists. She struggled to pull away, but her strength waned. The blow to her head made it difficult to focus.

“Stop fighting me,” a woman’s voice said.

Nicola stilled and allowed herself to be dragged into a seated position against the wall. She looked into the woman’s dark eyes, wild with the adrenaline of the fight. Her face was soft and her features gentle, despite the strength she clearly possessed. Her long black hair was tied in a ponytail. Tufts of hair had come loose and framed her round face. Blood trickled from her nose. Nicola hoped she’d broken it.

“I’ve called for help,” Nicola said. “You have about thirty seconds to let me go or risk being shot by my security detail.”

“Shot?” The woman rested a hand on the grip of her sidearm. She was about as tall as Nicola and dressed in a dark-blue uniform. Nicola didn’t recognize the insignia patches on her sleeves. An oval, metallic object attached to the woman’s shirt, on the right side of her chest caught her attention. Nicola’s vision was too blurred to read it.

The woman, who, unlike Nicola, wasn’t out of breath from the fight, spoke again. “Listen, I have no idea what’s going on around here, but y’all need to call off the security. I’m a cop.”

“A cop?” Nicola asked. “What’s a cop?”

“What’s a—huh? I’m a cop. Police.” The woman shook her head. “Okay, I’ll let you up, but don’t start fighting with me. I’ll have to take you down again. Deal?”

“Of course,” Nicola said. “But I don’t think I can stand.”

“Why not?”

“You slammed my head against the wall. You probably gave me a concussion.” Nicola saw the woman’s expression change to something like fear or shame. “How did you get in here?” Nicola asked.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you. I’ll get you an ambulance.” The woman looked around, confusion evident on her features.

“How did you get in here?”

“The mirror—an owl—I fell into it. I mean, I thought I fell through the mirror.” She pointed to the mirror. It hung on the wall as it had for years. Perhaps a half meter in diameter, the glass was not large enough for a person to come through. And the glass was intact. How was that even possible? Nicola remembered the feel of tiny shards cutting her skin moments ago.

“That’s not—you can’t—”

“I’m pretty sure I did. I was in my house, fell, and now I’m here,” the woman said.

Dark eyes tracked to Nicola’s face. A familiar feeling swept over her, as if she knew this woman. Though she was certain she didn’t. “Who are you?”

“Leoni Wolf. You?”

“Nicola Daelis.”

“Nice to meet you.” Leoni held out her hand then stopped. “I’ll take the cuffs off if you promise not to fight me.”

“I won’t.” Nicola leaned forward and Leoni removed the restraints. Nicola put her head in her hands, the pain as intense as if someone were slamming a rock against her head.

“Where the hell am I?” Leoni asked.

Leoni had a weird lilt in her voice, and Nicola couldn’t place the accent. She wanted to look up, but the movement made her dizzy again. “You’re in my bedroom.”

“Kinda figured that. Whereabouts is it? Am I still in Cherokee?”

“Cherokee?”

“Yeah. Cherokee, North Carolina.”

“Never heard of it. You’re in our capital city of Kalen.”

“And where is Kalen?”

“I don’t understand the question.” Nicola noticed Leoni’s black boots as she walked past her. She closed her eyes.

“I’ve never heard of Kalen. What country am I in? What state?”

“You’re in Kalen, territory of Gerhad, on the planet of Forensia. Are you satisfied now?” Leoni’s questions made no sense to Nicola. Of course they were on Forensia. Where else would they be?

“I’m on—did you say—”

“There’s a sentence in there just dying to come out.”

Leoni said, “I am *not* on another planet. Don’t fuck with me. I asked you a simple question.”

“And I answered you.”

“It’s not possible.”

“I don’t know where you came from, Leoni, but I’m telling you where you are.”

“You’re lying.”

“Seriously? Then you tell me what planet we’re on, since you’re the one who came through the mirror.” She looked up at Leoni, tired of the game she was playing.

“Earth,” Leoni said, as if it should have been obvious.

Nicola felt her breath catch and vertigo overtook her. She closed her eyes against it and tried hard to process what was happening. “That’s not possible. You can’t be from Earth.”

“And why is that?”

“Because Earth’s a myth.”

“This conversation is going nowhere.” Leoni walked to the mirror. She touched the surface with the fingers of her right hand and made a squeaking noise as she did. “It’s just a piece of glass.”

“*Adatiya*.” Nicola could hardly believe she’d said the word, much less entertained the incredible possibility of the legend being true.

“What did you just say?” Leoni spun to face her.

“*Adatiya*. You’re the *adatiya*.”

“I’m no guardian. And if you’ve never heard of the Cherokee, then how are you speaking my language?”

“It’s the ancient language of the Tsalagi. That’s the name of my people.”

Leoni’s dark features paled. “*Tsalagi* is the name of *my* people. It literally means ‘the people.’”

“I know.” Nicola briefly wondered if the blow to her head was causing her to hallucinate.

“This—this is amazing. Our *Etsi* needs to know about this. I have to contact her.”

“You have to call your mother? Do you think she can explain all this?”

“*Etsi* isn’t my mother.”

“You just said *etsi*. That’s Cherokee for mother.”

“This would be so much easier if I didn’t have a headache.”

“I’m with ya there.”

The concussion of an explosion flung Leoni and Nicola to the floor. Nicola’s head swam, and for a moment, she thought she might pass out. The explosion blew open her secured door, which now lay partially on top of Leoni. Nicola managed to scramble to her feet as four soldiers burst in. Their gray uniforms were instantly recognizable to Nicola. They were Nadyte.

Nicola said, “Who sent you?”

“Doesn’t matter,” the first man said. “You’re coming with us.”

“And if I refuse?” She tried to focus on his eyes, but a sudden stab of pain blurred her vision.

“You think the four of you are enough to take me out?”

Nicola enjoyed the flicker of doubt that crossed his features.

The first man said, "Yes. We're armed. You're not." He leveled his blaster at her head and motioned to his comrades, two of whom moved to flank Nicola. "Don't make this more difficult than it needs to be, General."

"That's exactly what I plan on doing." She lashed out at the Nadyte on her right, the edge of her hand connecting with the soft tissue of his windpipe. He went down, gasping for breath.

Another soldier was on her instantly and pinned her arms behind her back despite Nicola struggling against him. She managed to slam the heel of her boot into his shin. He stumbled but kept his grip on her.

"Restrain her so we can get out of here," the one with the blaster said. He stepped over Leoni's prone form to look out the window. "We've got two minutes left."

"You're not getting out of here alive," Nicola said.

"That's where you come in," he said. "If we miss our ride, I'm very sure we can get another one. No one wants to risk losing the great Chief Nicola Daelis."

"You're very cocky for a man that's about to die."

"And how—" His eyes rolled back in his head and he fell forward, a knife sticking out of his back. Leoni pulled it free, grabbed the third soldier, and snapped his neck before he could react.

The man holding Nicola kept her in front of him like a shield. Nicola felt him shaking.

Leoni stalked toward them, and for an instant, Nicola wasn't sure who Leoni was about to attack.

"Let her go and I'll let you live." Leoni's cold voice sent chills down Nicola's spine. "You have two seconds to decide." She held the knife in a tight grip and pointed it toward him, blood dripping down the blade and onto her arm.

The soldier pressed the barrel of his blaster against Nicola's temple. "Back off."

"No."

"I will kill her."

"Not if I kill you first."

"Stop it," Nicola said. "Leoni, stand down." She caught Leoni's gaze. "Just let him take me. I don't want anyone else to die."

Leoni held her hands away from her body and dropped the knife. "Fine." She stepped aside and he maneuvered Nicola toward the door. "You hurt her and I will find you and kill you. Ya got that?"

He visibly shook, but his grip was firm as they shuffled around Leoni. He said, "I got her and that's enough." He aimed his blaster at Leoni.

Leoni lunged forward. She grabbed and twisted his wrist so the weapon was pointed at his head. She pulled the trigger. The blast seared a hole in his forehead.

Leoni pulled Nicola away as the soldier fell to the floor. How could Leoni move so fast?

"You okay?" Leoni asked her.

"Fine." She looked at the carnage and back to Leoni, whose dark eyes had softened as she looked upon Nicola with concern. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. Guess your security detail isn't coming."

"No, and I have to assume they've been taken out, along with anyone else in the area. I've also got to assume there are more Nadyte soldiers close by. We have to leave." Nicola stumbled to her closet and opened the door. She took down the locked box she'd hoped to never see again. She opened it and removed the single item it held. Once in her hand, the soft handle of her blaster molded to fit her grip and she felt a familiar rush at its weight. She clipped the holster to her belt,

double-checked the charge, grabbed an extra bolt, and turned to Leoni. “There’s a passage through this closet.”

“We just killed the guys after you.”

“And there are probably more. You can wait here and find out.”

“No, thank you.”

Nicola pressed her thumb on the scanner built into the side wall of the closet. A hidden door in the back slid open. She pushed clothing aside and stepped through. Leoni followed and the door closed behind her. Nicola waited a moment to make sure no one was coming after them. Then she touched a button and started down the tunnel, which was well lit with lights that ran along the ceiling, spaced out every ten meters. Her footing was unsteady, and Leoni rushed to assist her.

The tunnel, built during The First War when her father was the general of the military, was made with reinforced-metaline walls. Her father had seen to its installation when he was general of the military, in the event the family needed to evacuate. Thankfully, the escape route was never used.

Nicola knew the tunnel would end somewhere in the woods north of the city. Exactly where was a guess.

After a few minutes, Leoni said, “Kinda handy to have this in your house.”

“It is. Never thought I’d use it.” She stopped long enough to listen for anyone else in the tunnel. The silence was deafening. “I need to contact my brother.” She removed her comm pad from her trouser pocket. No signal. “Dammit. Why am I not surprised?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Signal’s blocked.”

“Now what?”

Nicola said, “We keep going.”

The tunnel was five kilometers long, and it took over two hours to reach the end, prolonged by Nicola’s need to rest every few minutes. The pain in her head had increased, but she pushed on. Once out of the tunnel, she’d be able to contact Coby.

She figured they had to be deep in the woodlands by now. Maybe close enough to Coby’s place that she and Leoni would be able to reach it by foot. Or perhaps Coby could come get them.

Adatiya. How could that even be possible? This strange woman appeared out of nowhere, in Nicola’s bedroom, claimed to speak their ancient language and to be from the mythical world of Earth. Nicola had strong faith in the ancient ways, but this was a mix of crazy, impossible, and implausible. And yet, here they were. Leoni had stopped the Nadytes when Nicola could not. Clearly, Leoni was strong, fast, and well skilled at fighting. Weren’t those the qualities of the adatiya?

Nicola had no choice but to push those issues from her mind. Most important was getting out of the tunnel and to safety. Her head felt fuzzy and she wasn’t sure how good she’d be in a fight. For now she’d have to rely on Leoni’s help. She breathed a sigh of relief when they reached the end of the tunnel. The door, also made of metaline, was two meters wide. Until now, she and Leoni had walked side by side comfortably, but only one of them could go out at a time.

Nicola pressed her thumb on the comm pad, and the computer holo popped up. It displayed a real-time image of the area outside. She switched to infrared. Nothing but a few animals within a kilometer of their location. The entire area was wooded, and they could use that to their advantage.

She turned the holo off.

“Let’s go.” She opened the door and stepped out ahead of Leoni. The entrance, once the door closed behind Leoni, was camouflaged to match the landscape. Her father was a genius. As long as the Nadytes didn’t find the tunnel, they would be fine. They could get under the canopy of the trees, where the morning sunlight wouldn’t find them for a few hours. She just had to contact Coby.

Her wrist chron had a communications function built into it. Nicola tried. No signal. She retrieved her comm pad, but the signal was blocked. She had to wonder if the Nadytes were close by.

She looked to Leoni who held her weapon at the ready. Nicola had never seen a hand blaster with a square barrel, but it wasn’t the time to ask about it. They needed to get moving.

“Which way?” Leoni asked.

“North.” Nicola steadied herself and started into the forest, keeping to the thick undergrowth for cover. She stumbled and Leoni stopped her.

“You need to rest. Why don’t you tell me where to find some help?”

“We have to keep going.” Nicola wanted to push away from Leoni, but she didn’t have the strength. “It won’t take them long to track us now that we’re out of the tunnel.”

“Then you get back into the tunnel where it’s safe. I’ll get help.” Leoni was already turning her toward the entrance.

“This is ridiculous,” Nicola grumbled, but she located the locking mech that was hidden beneath a rock and opened the door. “At least take my comm pad.” She gave the device to Leoni, who looked at it like it would jump out of her hand and bite her.

“What do I do with this?”

“Just put it in your pocket. By now my brother, Coby, is trying to get a lock on the signal. Start heading north. If you can get out of range of whatever is blocking the signal, he’ll find you.”

“You sure? How does he know you left? Maybe those guys in the gray jumpsuits got him.” Leoni didn’t look convinced.

“He knew the minute I hit the security alert on my chron. Now get moving before the Nadytes find us.”

“What do I tell him when I find him? I’ve got your comm pad. He might think I’m with the bad guys.”

“Tell him Nic gave it to you.”

“That’s it?”

“Yeah. He and our friend Ved are the only ones who call me that. He’ll know it’s me.”

“I sure as hell hope so.”

Leoni helped her sit down, and Nicola leaned against the cool tunnel wall.

“How do I get back in? I didn’t see how you opened the door.”

“There’s a locking mech beneath a brownish-gray rock. Press it three times, wait two seconds, and press it twice more.”

“Hiding the key under a rock. Original. Put that weapon of yours in your hand and shoot anything that ain’t me or your brother. Got it?”

Nicola was stunned by the protectiveness of Leoni’s statement. “Good luck.”

“Don’t need luck.” Leoni stepped into the forest, and the door shut quietly behind her.

“What the fuck?” Leoni cursed for the tenth time. Wandering through the woods, trying to

backtrack her own trail to find an invisible door on an alien planet seemed impossible. What kind of dream was this? It had to be a dream, right? No way in hell had she travelled to another planet through an old mirror. Or had she?

Leoni was giving herself a headache. She'd been running the events over and over in her mind since starting on this woodland trek. She was getting ready for work, making sure her equipment was ready, just like every other day of her life. Then a snowy owl flew into the room—and into the mirror. If that hadn't been bad enough, the damn thing flew back out and next thing she knew, Leoni was wrestling with some woman who didn't even know what a cop was.

At least the woman was pretty. Leoni smirked at that particular thought. Actually, Nicola was downright beautiful. And sitting in some high tech tunnel, behind an invisible door on another planet. Oh, and of course the concussion Leoni had given her when they fought.

Leoni stopped to get her bearings. Her path went in a straight line, going north, assuming that an alien planet's sun was similar to the one Earth orbited. At least an hour had passed, though, and she'd found nothing. If this Coby guy was coming, he was a long way off.

Twigs snapped behind her and Leoni drew her Glock. She crouched and slowed her breathing. Footsteps—maybe four or five people—drew closer to her location, but she couldn't see them.

Their conversation floated toward her.

“We've gone too far. There's no way they could have made it here already.” The man spoke with a raspy voice, like he had laryngitis. “They wouldn't have had time.”

The next voice was female. “Have you picked up any life signs?”

“No, Captain,” Raspy Voice said. “We're not out of range of the signal block.”

Someone called for the group to stop. Leoni now wondered if there might be more like a dozen people.

The captain spoke again. “Split up. I want Team One to continue north. Team Two double back. I'm going to the trans to update General Morijan.”

“Yes, ma'am,” Raspy Voice said.

Leoni waited until their voices faded before heading back in the direction she'd come. Whoever these people were, real or dreamed, she wouldn't let them get to Nicola. She ran faster than ever, hoping she'd find the damn invisible door in time.

Nicola closed her eyes and tried to relax. She knew better than to allow herself the sleep she so desperately wanted. Nausea came and went more than once, and if she opened her eyes, her vision swam. The grip on her blaster slackened as she sat there, wondering how much time had passed since Leoni left. She wanted to get up and check the holo to see if anyone was in the area, but she didn't dare move and bring on the vertigo again.

What if Leoni was taken by the Nadytes? What if she was a Nadyte? Had Nicola made a grave mistake by taking her through the tunnel? But if she was one of them, Leoni would never have released her or killed the other soldiers. Nicola dismissed her crazy thoughts.

Then where had Leoni come from? Could she really have come through the mirror?

All these questions made Nicola's head swim even more, and she tried to push them from her mind.

But her brain would not shut down, and suddenly she thought of her son, Jese. Nicola didn't know what she'd do if something happened to him.

The door to the tunnel opened, and Nicola gripped her weapon, aiming it in the area where a person's head would be. The blaster wavered in her grip, but she figured she'd get a few good shots off anyway.

"Don't move!" Nicola said, her finger taking up the slack on the trigger.

"It's me, Leoni." Leoni stepped inside and closed the door. Nicola relaxed.

"Where's Coby?"

"Don't know." Leoni squatted beside her and pried the blaster from Nicola's numb grip. "I didn't get far before I saw more of those soldiers. I doubled back but made sure they couldn't track me."

"They tracked you," Nicole said.

"No way. I know how to cover my—"

"My comm pad. I was hoping Coby would pick up the signal, but if you saw the Nadytes, they probably got it, too."

"Nope. I heard one of them say the signals were still blocked. I don't think anyone is coming for us. Not your brother and not those assholes in gray."

"Then we wait."

"For what?"

"For my brother. I told you he'd know we used the tunnel. If he doesn't get a signal, he'll come right here."

"Wrong answer. Even if this is some weird dream, no way I'm sitting here doing nothing when there's a bunch of soldiers out there who want to kill us."

"I appreciate that, but I can't get to my feet without getting sick."

Leoni ran a hand over her face as she walked back and forth in front of Nicola. "What the hell is going on?"

"You managed to show up on the day I planned to sign a peace accord with the Nadyte tribe."

"Don't look like peace to me."

"Clearly. I'm sure by now my brother is looking for me. He'll figure out we're in here." Nicola closed her eyes for what felt like a few seconds. She opened them when Leoni tapped her cheek. "What?"

"No falling asleep. If you really have a concussion, you might not wake up."

"I fell asleep?"

"Yeah." Leoni looked her over, and there was something comforting about the way she did it.

Nicola said, "Why don't we talk? Conversation will help keep me awake."

"Sure." Leoni settled beside her. "Might start by asking where we are. And I don't mean in some weird-ass tunnel."

"I thought we went over this already. You're on the planet Forensia."

Leoni rolled her eyes. "Yeah. Still having trouble buying that. What's the city name again?"

"Kalen is the city. It's our capital, and my quarters are in the center of Alpha Command, our main military base."

"We were in the middle of a military base, and those guys in the gray uniforms just marched right up to your front door? No offense, but your security sucks."

"Someone helped them get in, and when we're out of here, I'll find out who." Nicola took a deep breath, slowly letting the air out as she said, "Our world has been in our second civil war for more than ten years. I'm not surprised the Nadytes have spies in our military. I guess I was naïve to think they wouldn't try to stop me from signing the peace accord."

"Damn." Leoni leaned forward, put her hands over her face, and rested her elbows on her bent

knees. “This is some kind of nightmare.”

“I wish it were.” Nicola placed her hand on Leoni’s back. Leoni was trembling. “I’m sorry you got thrown into all this.”

Leoni sighed. “Fate is a bitch.”

“Indeed. Do you believe me now? That you’re on another world?”

“Do you believe me that I’m from Earth?”

“I think I do,” Nicola said.

“Now that’s progress,” Leoni said. “I really went to another world through an old mirror.”

“Not just old. Ancient. Our legends say the mirror goes back more than a millennia.”

Leoni drew her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around her legs. “I don’t think the mirror on my end is that old, but I’d say it’s been around for centuries at least. Been in our family for longer than my *elisi* could remember, and she remembered everything.”

“*Elisi?*”

“Grandmother. I thought you spoke Cherokee?”

“I know a few words in the old language, but just a few.”

“*Elisi* once told me that the mirror was a precious gift and to care for it as I would my own child.” Leoni’s voice quieted as she lost herself in a memory. “I guess I see why.”

“I don’t think you do,” Nicola said. “Neither of us does. The mirror was a legend—some story you tell your children. I never believed it had an ounce of truth in it.”

“And yet I’m here.”

“And yet you’re here.”

They fell silent for a few moments.

Leoni said, “How is it that you’re speaking English? I mean, you know a few Cherokee words and that’s weird enough, but you speak English and you think Earth is a myth. That doesn’t make any sense to me.”

“You’re not making sense. I don’t know what English is. You’ve been speaking *Futra* since you showed up.”

“I think I have a headache now,” Leoni grumbled.

“There must be some magic involved. You did travel through a mirror.”

“And the idea of that makes my headache worse,” Leoni said with a smile. “Tell me what you know about the *adatiya*. Other than the translation of the word.”

Nicola took a moment to recall the story. She’d heard it from Etsi Patra years ago. “The legend is that a woman once came through the mirror. She was a great warrior from a planet called Earth. Her name was Awinita.”

“That’s a Cherokee name.”

“She said she was Tsalagi and the spirits had sent her on a journey. Her duty was to protect whomever she found on the other side of the mirror. That person happened to be one of our chiefs, a woman named Vesta.”

“How long ago was this?”

“Centuries, though no one’s really sure how many. I suspect Etsi knows more about it than she lets on.”

“Why? Who is Etsi?”

“She’s our spiritual leader. Etsi Patra. She is our *ghigau*.”

“Beloved Woman. That’s what *ghigau* means.”

“I know. She’s the most important person in our culture. My cousin, Angeel, is the *ghigau* for the Nadyte tribe and Danou’s wife.”

“Danou?”

“The leader of the Nadyte.”

Leoni appeared to be in complete shock. “I—so what did Awinita do?” she finally asked.

“I can’t remember. I know that she saved Vesta’s life and they called her the adatiya. I wish I could tell you more. Besides, I think that’s the only part of the legend anyone ever really remembers. This woman saved Vesta, so she was a hero. A great warrior for our people.”

“I wonder if she’s my ancestor. Is Vesta your ancestor? Is that how you became chief?”

“No. Well, I don’t know if Vesta is an ancestor or not. Never looked that up. I was elected.”

“You seem really young to be in charge.”

Nicola laughed. “I get that a lot. Especially during the election. I’m also the youngest general our military has ever had.”

“General? You can’t be thirty yet. What, you guys start in the army when you’re toddlers?”

“No, and I became thirty this year. I entered the military at sixteen, like most kids. I wanted to follow my dad and brother. My dad was a hero during the First War.” Nicola allowed a brief memory of her father to put a smile on her face. “He was an engineer and designed and built this tunnel.”

“What does he do now?”

Nicola drew in a deep breath and forced her tears away. “He died putting an end to that war. He was our general and was assassinated a few months after the peace accord was signed. It nearly caused the war to erupt again.”

“What stopped it?”

“Etsi Patra. She’d helped to bring the sides together, and she was the only one the chiefs would listen to. But ultimately, it didn’t matter. War started up nine years later. A year after I entered the military.”

“Bad timing.”

“It wasn’t pleasant.” Nicola paused. She wished the headache would stop so she could think. “But it’s part of who I am today, I guess.”

They fell silent for a few minutes. Exhaustion pulled at Nicola, and she fought to keep her eyes open.

Leoni asked, “Why were those guys trying to kidnap you?”

“To prevent the peace accord. Not everyone wants the war to be over. We’ve got a tenuous cease-fire right now. And it’s not the first time someone’s come after me.”

“Would it really be over if you had managed to sign that thing today?”

Nicola considered that. “It would have made a good start. Danou, the chief of the Nadyte, and I agree on one major point. We’re both tired of all the killing.”

“Have you ever killed anyone before?”

Nicola nodded. “Many. Too many.”

“It’s crazy.”

“It’s war.”

Leoni looked up at her with hollow eyes. “I’ve never drawn my weapon in fifteen years as a cop, and today I killed three men. How do I explain that? How could I have done that?”

“You were protecting me.” Nicola reached for Leoni’s hand and covered it with her own. “You’re the adatiya. You came in time to save my life. If they’d taken me I would have been killed, or worse.”

“I promise to do my best to keep that from happening.” Leoni’s eyes took on new strength. She squeezed Nicola’s hand. “I don’t have a clue if those Nadytes have ray guns that can blast a hole

in me from a mile away or not, but there's no way in hell I'll sit back and let you get hurt. I don't know you, and yet I feel this incredible protectiveness over you."

"You're the adatiya. And I'm glad you came. *Sgi*."

"You're welcome."

"It's your turn. Tell me what a cop is. Is that a Cherokee word?"

"No. I'm a police officer, *didaniyisgi* in my language. I make sure the people of Cherokee obey the law."

"And do they?"

"Some do, some don't. Guess that's what makes it interesting. I like the job, though. I like being around all the people. After so many years, I pretty much know everyone."

"You protect them as well?"

"Yeah. But not from an enemy like we're at war. Most of the time I'm protecting them from themselves."

"You must be very good at it. You certainly did well protecting me."

"I've never fought like that before. It's like I was watching someone else. The only hand-to-hand I've ever done was either in training or wrestling some drunk, and usually I had help."

"You looked like a trained soldier. Like you've done that hundreds of times."

"Yes." Leoni looked away from Nicola. "So what's next? Are we really just gonna sit here?"

"Yes. We need to remain in one position. If the Nadytes didn't pick up your signal, we'll be fine. It's just a matter of waiting for my brother to come to us."

"Will he bring an army with him?"

Nicola smiled, though she wasn't sure if Leoni was joking. "He's pretty much an army by himself."

"Oh, good. Rambo to the rescue."

"Rambo?"

Leoni shook her head. "Never mind." She got to her feet and moved to the door. "Can they hear us out there?"

"I don't think so. Why?"

"Because I can hear them." Leoni leaned closer to the door. "They can't figure out why they lost the signal. Something about...detecting metaline? What's that?"

Nicola levered against the wall to stand up. "Get away from the door. They found us."

"How do you know?" Leoni asked, even as she moved to Nicola's side.

"Because this tunnel is made of metaline."

"We best get moving then. Let's go back down the tunnel."

"You go. You're faster than I am and you can alert the—"

"No." Leoni held her weapon in one hand and stood in front of Nicola. "I'm not leaving you."

"They'll kill you this time." Nicola touched Leoni's arm, but the woman wouldn't budge, her weapon pointed at the door. "Please. I don't want th—"

The door exploded open. Several men shouted as they rushed the tunnel. Leoni shot two of them before a third slammed her against the wall. She smashed the heel of her left hand into his face, and he dropped to the ground and didn't move.

Two more soldiers barreled in, but Leoni shot them. At her side, Nicola hooked one soldier around the neck with her arm, squeezing until he passed out. She let his body slide to the ground and waited for more soldiers to burst in. None came.

Silence greeted them, but Nicola had a sinking feeling. "Watch yourself. They're waiting for us to make a move."

“I know. We should start back toward your room. I’ve got a bad feeling,” Leoni said.

Nicola strained to hear any movement outside the tunnel. The sunlight streamed in, making it hard to see. An instant later, an explosion deafened Nicola. A white-hot light followed and blinded her. She collapsed to the ground, fighting to maintain consciousness.

The last thing she remembered was the sound of boots clanking along the floor.

Chapter Three

The ringing in Leoni's ears wouldn't stop. She vaguely sensed movement, but her body refused to obey her commands. Her fingers recognized the cool metal of the tunnel, but she found nothing she could get a grip on. Through the noise in her ears, she thought she heard people talking.

"General...Morijan Frew...not much time..."

The voices faded. Through slitted eyes, Leoni thought she saw the soldiers taking Nicola out of the tunnel.

Leoni slowly got to her feet, but her head spun and she slid back to the ground. "Dammit."

Ages seemed to pass before she felt she could try again. This time she managed to get halfway up. She reached for her gun, but her holster was empty. Her vision wasn't yet clear enough to find her own feet, much less her Glock. She propelled herself forward on her hands and knees. A smoky haze that smelled of old, dirty socks wafted around her. She could only assume it emanated from whatever had exploded. It made her want to gag.

After a few moments of searching, she came across the familiar form of her weapon and tucked it into her holster. Using the wall to keep her balance, she got to her feet and stumbled to the open door.

Bright light slammed her like a brick, blinding her as she exited the tunnel. She brought her hand up to block the glare and staggered forward into the forest. A feeling nudged her to go north again, even though she could not be certain which tracks belonged to who.

She'd trained herself to never doubt her instincts. She stumbled through the thick undergrowth of the forest, using trees to keep her balance. As her vision returned, she spotted more tracks in the soft earth. These went in one direction and were fresh.

While she could now see, her balance was still off. Her hearing was dull, like her ears were stuffed with cotton. Which meant she couldn't tell if she made too much noise as she moved.

After what felt like miles of walking, she needed to stop. She sagged against a tree. She could make out some noises around her. Nothing as subtle as the rustling of leaves, but it was enough for now.

She caught sight of a group of soldiers less than twenty yards ahead of her. She dropped to her knees and pressed into the tree trunk. She counted five of them. She drew her gun and noted the blood on her hands. For a split second she wondered how many more of these Nadytes she would kill before this nightmare ended.

A deafening sound interrupted her thoughts. The noise filled the air around her, like an engine roaring overhead. Leoni looked up and into the underbelly of what could only be a spaceship as it slowly descended. An honest-to-God spaceship. If she had doubts about being on another planet, they disappeared in that moment.

Though her legs felt rooted to the spot Leoni realized she needed to get moving—and fast. She made it to a thicket of trees seconds before the thing landed. She'd never been a big fan of science fiction, but that ship looked a lot like something out of *Star Trek*. The shape reminded her of one of the RVs she'd seen the tourists driving around Cherokee every summer. The kind that was almost as big as a trailer home. Except this thing was ten times bigger than any RV or trailer she'd ever seen. It had to be sixty feet long and at least twenty feet wide. There were no wings, and she wondered how the thing managed to fly.

Beneath the ship jutted a half-dozen tripod stands she assumed would keep it upright as it landed.

She watched it settle where she'd been standing, flattening small trees and underbrush as it did. She wasn't sure which end would be considered the front, but it didn't matter as the center area opened up and more of those Nadyte soldiers poured out. How the hell many of these bastards were there?

Two groups of soldiers met up with them, and they headed back to the ship. Blind fury consumed Leoni when she realized the soldiers carried an unconscious Nicola in the center of their formation.

It no longer mattered how many aliens she'd already killed. All that mattered was getting to Nicola.

Leoni moved stealthily through the trees and grabbed the first man she came to. She snapped his neck. He was still falling to the ground when she slammed her fist into another, thrilled to feel the crush of his windpipe beneath her hand.

Two soldiers wheeled around. Leoni lashed out with a side kick. It connected with the ribs of one soldier and knocked him against the side of the ship. The second got his arm around her neck. He tried to pull her away, but she nailed him in the gut with her elbow. She head-butted him and he let go.

The men who had Nicola hurried into the ship. Leoni jumped through the doorway seconds before it closed. One man charged her. She used his own momentum to flip him into the closed door. His body slid to the floor in a heap. She drew her Glock. She got three shots off, hitting one soldier. The clip was empty and she did a well-practiced reload.

A weird popping sound filled the air. An instant later, Leoni felt white-hot pain in her right bicep followed by the distinct odor of burned flesh. Her Glock fell from her grip.

Two soldiers charged her. Leoni sidestepped the one on the left and tackled the other. Their bodies hit the ground hard. She slammed her fist into his crotch. He didn't move after that. She jumped to her feet, whirled on his partner, and came face-to-face with a hand weapon very similar to the one Nicola had.

"Stop!" a woman's voice shouted, "Do not kill her."

"Captain Mare," the soldier said through gritted teeth, "she's killed most of my squad. She deserves to die."

"I agree. But not before we find out who she is." Mare was of average height and had a regal bearing. Her short-cropped hair was as red as any sunset Leoni had ever seen. But her eyes were what drew Leoni in. Dark purple irises glared at her as the woman told the remaining soldiers. Leoni blinked to make sure she wasn't seeing things.

Mare told the remaining soldiers, "Restrain her."

Leoni resisted, taking down both men that tried to grab her wrists. The soldier with the gun fired at her, but she ducked in time. The blast seared a hole in the wall behind her.

"Enough!" Mare yelled. Leoni froze when she realized Nicola's prone form lay in front of the chick, who had a weapon pointed at Nicola's head.

The remaining soldiers regrouped. Two of them grabbed Leoni's wrists and pinned her arms behind her. She wasn't about to do anything that risked Nicola's life.

She gazed around the space they were in. The ship was roomier on the inside than she expected. They stood in an area that must have been the main entrance. Behind Mare was a bank of lights, mostly red and yellow, and levers that went right along with what Leoni expected to see in a spaceship. To her right and left were entrances to hallways. She wondered if one of them led to the cockpit. If that's what they called it.

Along the wall on her left were a dozen or more weapons lined up with military precision.

They looked like rifles, in that they were long, but that's where any similarity ended.

Fingers squeezed her upper arms tighter when Mare moved closer to Leoni. Leoni tensed, tamping down the urge to try to break free.

The haughty chick stopped in front of Leoni and carefully looked her over. "Who are you? You're not Tsalagi."

Leoni considered how to answer that. She *was* Tsalagi. But not according to Nicola's definition. "Not to you, I'm not," she finally said. "I'm the adatiya." The shock on the woman's pale face made Leoni laugh. "Guess you speak Cherokee, too."

"You're lying," she said weakly.

"About what? Speaking Cherokee or being the adatiya?"

Mare's hand flashed out and slammed into Leoni's face. "How dare you make such a claim? I should not be surprised the Tsalagi would think so little of our ancient ways. Get her out of my sight before I kill her. Put her in the cell with the general. She can pretend to be her guardian until Morijan arrives."

"Yes, Captain Mare," the man on Leoni's right said. He marched Leoni to a doorway that she figured was near one end of the ship. The door slid open and he shoved her inside. Seconds later, Nicola landed heavily beside Leoni and the door closed. She heard a deep rumble, and the floor shifted slightly beneath her. She guessed the ship was in the air again.

The place was illuminated by a single, round, dull light in the ceiling that cast enough light for Leoni to see that Nicola was still breathing. She sat beside her cross-legged and carefully placed Nicola's head in her lap. Leoni brushed back soft strands of blonde hair from her eyes. Her face was kind and strong. Leoni had an urge to smooth the hair off her forehead. What was it about this woman that drew Leoni to her? It went beyond a physical attraction. Several times now she'd killed for her—been willing to die for her. What the hell was it about this woman that made Leoni want to die to protect her? She'd never felt that way about anyone. Not with this much intensity.

Tayanita was her first real love, and while Leoni loved her deeply, she'd never had such an urgency to protect her. Perhaps she was overcompensating because she'd been too late to save Tayanita.

She took in their surroundings. The walls of the room were made of shiny metal, as was the floor. It reminded Leoni of the metal in the weird tunnel. The room was maybe ten feet square and absent of furniture. The ceiling was probably also ten feet high. The door was made of the same metallic material and sounded very solid when it closed behind her. If they were to escape, Leoni reckoned they'd have to do it while the door was open.

Nicola stirred and Leoni bent close enough to whisper, "Lie still. I don't know if you're injured or not."

"I don't think I am," she said but didn't open her eyes. "Damn displacement grenade. I should have known."

"Damn is right. I still don't hear so good." Leoni touched the soft skin of Nicola's cheek. Something happened in that instant that terrified her. It would be easy to fall in love with Nicola. Leoni pulled her hand back, surprised at where her thoughts had gone. "How's your head?"

"Throbbing, but I don't feel sick to my stomach at the moment."

"Good to know."

"Are you hurt?"

Leoni looked at her right bicep. At the time, it felt like her skin was ripped open. But now, only an angry red mark underneath a hole in her shirt. She didn't see any blood, either. "I got winged, but I'm fine."

“Where are we? All I remember is the explosion.” Nicola finally opened her eyes and squinted up at Leoni.

“We’re on some kind of spaceship with a bunch of those Nadytes on board. Some chick named Rea is in charge. I saw her when I jumped on board.”

“When you jumped on board?”

“Yeah. They took you and I chased after their asses,” Leoni said. “Managed to take out more of them before I got to you. Maybe if I’d been faster—”

“Wait. You got hit with that grenade, same as me. Then you left the tunnel and took out how many soldiers?”

“Five. Maybe. I don’t know.”

“That’s amazing.”

“Maybe,” Leoni said. “Let’s just figure out how to get out of here, okay?”

“We’ll have to fight our way out.”

“Not a problem. So, on the off-chance they come in here before we land, can you fly this spaceship?”

“It’s not a spaceship. It’s a transport. Not meant to go out of the atmosphere.”

“Whatever. So can you fly it?”

“Yes.”

“Perfect.” Leoni got to her feet and went to the door. “How about I stir them up? Get them to come to us? I’d rather not end up wherever General Frew is. I don’t want to meet him.”

“Morijan Frew?” Nicola’s face blanched. “They said her name?”

“Yup. They said General Morijan Frew would be coming here.”

“I should have been more prepared.” Nicola stood and Leoni caught her before she hit the deck again.

“Whoa. Take it easy.”

“We have to get out.” Nicola shoved Leoni away and fell down. “You don’t understand.”

“No, I don’t, but you’re on your ass because you can’t stand up straight. Let me handle this, okay?”

“Morijan isn’t just after me to stop the peace accord.” Nicola glared at her and Leoni realized tears brimmed in her eyes. “She’s after *me*.”

Leoni wanted to ask why, but the look on Nicola’s face stopped her. She was terrified of this woman. “Let me—”

The door clanged open and Leoni turned toward it as a woman entered the cell. As tall as Leoni, she wore a tight uniform that accented her muscular form. Her light brown hair was shaved above the ears, the top short and spiked. Light blue eyes pierced into Leoni. Five armed soldiers stood behind her.

“So, is it true?” The woman spoke over top of Leoni. “You’ve found the *ayonegv*. Well done, Nicola.”

Leoni rose. “Who the hell are you?”

“Morijan,” Nicola said tightly. She tapped Leoni on the leg and held out a hand. “Help me up, please?”

Leoni pulled Nicola to her feet and kept a hand on her back to steady her.

“You’re wrong, Morijan. This is Leoni Wolf. She’s the *adatiya*. She came to us from Earth. Through the mirror.”

Morijan looked Leoni over. “If you think she’s the *adatiya*, then you haven’t recovered from your head injury.”

“You’re the one with the head issues,” Leoni said. “Obviously I’m not *ayonegv*. My skin’s too dark.”

“What?” Morijan asked as she pinned Leoni with a glare.

“You heard me. I’m not white. I’m Cherokee. The *adatiya*. And if you have any brain cells in that head of yours, you’ll let us go.”

“And if I do not?”

“I will kill as many of you as it takes.”

Morijan shifted her eyes to Nicola and something changed. For an instant, her expression softened.

Nicola stiffened. “You’re going to start the war up again. Is that what you want?”

“I don’t give a damn about the war anymore, Nicola. You know that.” She stepped toward them.

Leoni was itching to wipe the look off the bitch’s face, but the guards kept their weapons pointed at her.

“I don’t want any more killing,” Nicola said. “Neither does your brother, Danou. Please, let us go. Let me sign the accord and stop all this.”

“My real brother died ten years ago. Danou is nothing to me.” Morijan reached out and ripped off the medal that still hung from Nicola’s uniform. “And you got to be the hero because of it.”

“That’s not how it happened, and you know it.” Nicola kept her eyes pinned to Morijan, who was now inches from her face. “Lade tried to kill me and hundreds of innocent—”

Morijan grabbed Nicola by the neck, but before she could do anything, Leoni attacked. An uppercut to Morijan’s chin knocked her backwards. Nicola landed on the floor when Morijan released her.

Leoni rammed her shoulder into Morijan’s gut and tackled her. She delivered several blows to Morijan’s face before two soldiers roughly grabbed her and pulled her away. When her feet hit the ground again, Leoni jerked free and slammed the heel of her hand into the nose of the closest soldier. Blood sprayed everywhere as he fell, but she was already on the next guy. She drove her fist into his face twice before something struck her head. Her vision swam as she hit the ground.

In a heartbeat, Nicola was by her side. “Don’t move,” she whispered.

“I’m gonna kill her.”

“Not right now. Please. Don’t move.”

Leoni wanted to argue, but the tone of Nicola’s voice stopped her. “Fine.”

“Get off me!” Morijan shoved the soldiers away as she crawled to her feet. Blood gushed from her nose, and the entire left side of her face was swollen. “Take the general to my transporter. Then kill the *ayonegv*.”

“No!” Nicola screamed as two burley assholes dragged her toward the door.

Leoni sprang into action. She ripped the weapon from the hands of the closest soldier. She’d seen one of those rifles earlier. Leoni held it like a baseball bat, and struck him in the head. She flipped the weird rifle around, found what she figured was the trigger, and fired on the soldier to Nicola’s left. The blast hit him in the back, burning a hole through his uniform and into his skin. He dropped like a rock and took Nicola with him, his dead hand still gripping her bicep.

Too late, Leoni saw the last soldier. She sidestepped, but he caught her around the waist and body slammed her to the ground. A whoosh of air left her chest. The soldier, who didn’t even look strong enough to break a twig, managed to roll Leoni onto her stomach. He pulled her right arm behind her back.

Leoni used her free arm to lever herself upward. In one swift motion, she reared her head back

and hit him in the face as hard as she could. She felt a sickening crack upon impact, and he released her. She whirled around to face him, but his prone form no longer moved. Leoni got to her feet and looked around for Morijan.

“Looks like the bitch bailed,” Leoni said and helped Nicola to her feet. “You okay?”

“Fine.” Nicola grabbed a weapon from one of the fallen soldiers. “We need to get to the cockpit.”

“There’s no way you’ll make it. You can barely stand,” Leoni said.

“I’ll be fine.”

“No, you won’t.”

Nicola glared at Leoni. “You don’t know me. I’ve had worse injuries and survived. Now let’s get moving.”

“No. Period. You stay here. Just tell me what to do.”

“You don’t get to order me around! Understood?”

“Fuck you. I’m not one of your soldiers.”

“No, you’re not. And you’re not going to do anything without me.”

Leoni said, “You’ll slow me down.”

Nicola shoved Leoni aside. She went to the door, leaned out, and checked left and right. “It’s clear, but I’m sure they’re waiting for us at the main hatch.”

“Is that the door?” Leoni asked.

Nicola ignored her question. “Stick close.”

“How many more of those assholes you reckon are on this thing?”

“It can hold forty people. Maybe more.”

“Oh goodie. So there’s no telling how many more are out there. If you insist on going, I’m taking point.” She moved into the corridor and motioned Nicola to follow. “Stay close.”

Leoni noted they were at the end of the corridor. She counted four doors ahead of them, two on each side, including the one they’d just exited. The walls gleamed with that weird metallic stuff that the tunnel was made of. Twenty yards ahead lay part of the open area where they’d come in. She assumed that was the main hatch.

Problem was, she didn’t see any soldiers. Where the hell could they have gone so fast? And where was that crazy bitch? Leoni kept close to the wall. She didn’t see any doorknobs or she’d have checked the rooms as they passed.

Something was wrong. Gut instinct made Leoni shove Nicola to the ground and fire her rifle seconds before a door, five meters from them, flew open and soldiers rushed out. She hit the first one square in the chest. The second soldier returned fire, but his shot went wide and struck the wall. Leoni took him out, and the door closed behind his dead body. Leoni shot the blinking electronic pad next to the door, hoping it somehow locked the damn thing. She heard shouts and pounding on the door. “Open one of these rooms,” Leoni said. “We need to duck inside before they get out.”

Nicola pushed to her feet and passed her hand over a square that nearly blended in with the color of the wall. It glowed a bluish-green color and the door opened. She shoved Leoni inside and followed.

Leoni yelled, “Close it. Fast!”

Nicola waved her hand over another square. The door closed, and a muffled sound carried into the room. Leoni used the wall to steady herself. “I guess that was one of those displacement grenades?”

“Probably. Lucky for us that’s a metaline door. How’d you know to close the door just now?”

Leoni shrugged. “Followed my gut.” Though that wasn’t entirely correct. How could she explain right then that she knew to close the door but not why.

The transport suddenly jerked to one side, and Leoni and Nicola ended up in a tangle of arms and legs on the floor as it tilted. Another jolt, and they were sliding toward the opposite wall as the craft began a steep descent.

“What the hell?”

“Coby,” Nicola answered. “He found us.”

“Is he trying to crash the damn ship?”

“No. Forcing them to land.” Nicola squirmed from under Leoni. “Get ready to run.”

Leoni retrieved her weapon, which had skittered across the floor. “What’s the fastest way off this thing?”

“Same way we came in.”

The craft shifted again, this time leveling out. Seconds later, Leoni felt a heavy jolt. “Did we just land?”

“Yes.” Nicola went to the door. “We need to get to the main hatch. Coby will be waiting for us.”

“Ready?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“I’ll be right behind you,” Leoni said. She opened the door, saw the corridor was clear, and yelled, “Go!”

Nicola took off at a dead run with Leoni on her heels. Another explosion erupted, rocked the ship and both women down to the floor. Leoni crawled forward enough to see around the corner into the exit area.

A row of weapons hung along one wall. Beneath them lay the entry hatch in a crumpled heap. One man, wearing a white uniform similar to Nicola’s, crouched near it, firing his weapon into the opposite end of the corridor. A group of soldiers rushed him. Two got past his line of fire, but Rambo slammed one into the wall with a lightning-fast side kick. The next soldier landed a punch to Rambo’s face, but it didn’t faze him. He stopped the soldier’s next swing by grabbing a wrist and twisting until the soldier fell to his knees. Rambo rammed his knee into the soldier’s face. Rambo was on a third soldier before the previous one hit the ground. Leoni didn’t see any other troops around.

Nicola and Leoni got to their feet and joined Rambo, who tossed the limp body of the last attacker to the side. He pulled Nicola into a tight embrace, nearly lifting her off the ground. “You okay?”

“Fine. Let’s move.”

“Who’s she?” Coby nodded toward Leoni.

“A friend.”

Coby didn’t argue and led the way through the smoking hole that used to be the hatch. He jumped the six feet to get clear of the transport, and the two women followed. Leoni continued to check behind them as they ran toward an open field to another ship which was more the size of a minivan and not as rounded. She hoped it was faster than the big ship.

They were a few yards away when Leoni sensed something was wrong. She tried to urge Nicola to run faster and was careful to keep between Nicola and their pursuers. She heard the tinny sound of the weapons the Nadytes used, followed by a sizzle as each shot missed them and hit into the trees. She fired a couple wild shots at their pursuers. Coby reached the ship first and yanked the door open.

Nicola tripped and landed on her stomach, breathing hard, and unable to get to her feet. Leoni nearly fell over her and landed hard on her side. Their faces were a breath apart.

Leoni scooped her up and ran the rest of the way to the ship. Nicola held on to her for dear life. Leoni clambered in and Coby shut the door. In seconds they were in the air.

Leoni fell to her knees and lowered Nicola to the floor. Coby yelled, "You two all right back there?"

"We're good," Nicola said. She stared at Leoni, her face reflecting amazement. "I can't believe you did that."

"Me either." Leoni was panting and felt boneless as the adrenaline left her system. "That was not something I want to ever repeat."

"I second that." Coby joined them and helped Nicola to her feet to hug her again. This time the gesture was tender and sweet. "I was terrified I wouldn't get to you in time."

"You did." Nicola pulled back.

"Are you hit?" he asked, pointing at her uniform. "You've got blood all over you."

Nicola looked down, but before she could reply, Leoni said, "I think it's mine," and promptly passed out.

Chapter Four

Nicola paced the hallway in front of the trauma bay. Ten steps forward, turn, ten steps back. Not much space to walk in as this trauma bay was located in a cramped, but secure, area. This section of the base hospital was off-limits to all but a few personnel.

The area was lined with metaline, and the overhead lights bounced off the surface. The glare only intensified her headache. Coby stood by the bay door like a guard to make sure she didn't barge in.

Her mother, Prime Medic Beryl Daelis was in charge of Leoni's care, and she barred Nicola from the room. It infuriated her, even though she realized she'd only be in the way. She'd already impatiently endured an exam from another medic, who cleaned her wounds and wanted to keep her overnight for observation. Nicola refused.

She had a concussion but no longer felt its nauseating effects. According to her chron, the injury to her head happened over twenty-four hours ago. She'd be fine once she got some rest—and found out that Leoni was okay.

A memory intruded into her thoughts. Years ago, Nicola was brought to this bay, unconscious and clinging to life.

But her injuries weren't the result of the war. Morijan hurt her in unimaginable ways.

Nicola looked around, momentarily confused. The stench of burning flesh was distinguishable above any other smell. Pungent, strong and sickening, the odor assaulted her senses. The last thing she remembered was running with her squad toward the evac point.

Her lieutenant, Chaz Lesston, was behind her. She recalled him yelling out something before he tackled her to the ground. Now she lay on a cold, metal floor assaulted by the smell of death. She must have been knocked unconscious when Chaz took her down. The room she lay in was maybe three meters square, and if she stood up, she'd probably hit her head. She recognized the place as a prison cell. Possibly on a Nadyte ship. She felt a slight vibration beneath her.

The door slid open and a woman walked in. Nicola couldn't make out the face until she knelt beside her. "Morijan?"

"I see you remember me." Morijan's eyes narrowed and Nicola sensed her anger. "I'm going to make sure you suffer for what you did."

"What I did? What are you talking about?"

Morijan loomed over her, closer and closer, until their faces nearly touched. "You murdered my brother."

"Lade killed himself."

The blow struck the left side of Nicola's head, and for a moment, her vision swam. She fought the urge to pass out. With one eye she glared at Morijan. Nicola started to speak, but Morijan raised a hand to strike her and Nicola blocked the punch. She rolled away from Morijan. In the cramped space, she could only roll once before hitting the wall. She levered herself to her feet. Her head brushed the ceiling.

Morijan methodically stood. A bit taller than Nicola, she needed to hunch slightly. She didn't speak. Her eyes never left Nicola. In her hand was a familiar device. Oblong and slightly longer than Morijan's hand, the restraint stick was active. The yellow light at the top turned red. The restraining bolt hit Nicola's shoulder and paralyzed her, and she went down hard. She could do nothing when Morijan straddled her. Fists slammed into her face from both sides.

Blood splattered from her nose and mouth. She felt the blood go down her throat and nearly choked on it. Morijan wanted to kill her. Nicola knew that for certain. It angered her that she couldn't stop the assault. It took all her energy to stay awake.

After an impossibly long time, Morijan stopped. She wrapped one hand around Nicola's neck and started to squeeze. Darkness crowded Nicola's vision. Unwanted tears ran down the sides of her face.

Morijan said, "I intend to kill you slowly. You'll regret the day you ever met me."

Nicola shoved the memory away. Indeed, she regretted the day she'd met Morijan. More than that, she regretted not killing her when she had the chance.

She brought her thoughts back into focus when Coby stepped into her path.

He said, "The council still needs to see you. I just got another message from Reem. Now."

Nicola tilted her head back to look into his gray eyes. So much like their father's. "Not until I see Leoni."

"You can see her after you meet with the council. Nicola, this is urgent. Danou contacted Bettol when you didn't show up. He was worried and ended up in an argument with Bettol. Bettol accused Danou of sabotaging the accord."

Nicola contained her ire, speaking low so no one could overhear. "Bettol is an ass. He shouldn't have accused Danou of anything. Why was Bettol talking to Danou? It should have been Reem. He's head council."

"Bettol initiated the call when he found out you were missing."

"How did he find that out?"

Coby shrugged. "I'm working on that. But for the time being, you'll have to handle the situation. He's demanding you meet with him and the others."

"I don't need Bettol or the council. I'll call Danou and straighten this out myself."

"Where are you going to call him from? There are no secure communication points here. You'll have to get to the command center to do that."

Nicola glanced at the door to the trauma bay, then at her brother. "Soon as I know she's okay."

"What's so important about this woman, Nic? You don't even know her. And you refuse to tell me where she came from or how she got involved in all this."

Coby was right. Nicola hadn't told him where Leoni came from, and she certainly couldn't tell him she was the adatiya. Not yet. Not until she spoke to Etsi.

Nicola said, "I wish—"

Nicola's mother stepped through the door of the trauma bay, effectively ending the conversation. "You're needed in the council chamber, Nicola Daelis. Now move it. I'll call when she wakes up. For once, your brother is right."

"Thanks, I think," Coby said. He held his hand out to Nicola. "Come on."

"I'm not leaving until I see Leoni."

Beryl propped the door open. "Do you see her?"

Nicola was never rude to her mother, but the need was so strong to see Leoni that she pushed past her and walked to Leoni's bedside. Coby, she noted, stayed put. Nicola had enough medical training to read the monitors and understand that Leoni was in no danger. She let out a long breath.

"The wound wasn't as serious as it looked," Beryl said.

Nicola noticed that her brother hadn't followed her in. "She was exhausted, and I was worried that, combined with the blood loss—"

"Speaking of which." Beryl handed her a med pad. "I ran a test in case she needed a blood

transfusion. Interesting blood type.”

Nicola read the results, confirming what she already knew. “She’s from Earth.”

“I figured that part out.” Beryl took the med pad and set it aside. “Coby’s never seen her before today, yet she risked her life to save yours.”

“Adatiya.”

At this, Leoni opened her eyes and looked up at Nicola. “Where am I?” Her voice sounded weak.

“Trauma bay.” Nicola leaned down and took Leoni’s hand in hers. “How do you feel?”

“Tired, sore, but okay. How’s your head?”

“Better.”

“You injured your head?” Beryl asked sharply. Nicola didn’t need to turn around to see the scowl on her mother’s face.

“I’m fine. First Medic Regen checked me over.”

“Who are you?” Leoni asked.

“My mother—your doctor. Doctor Beryl Daelis.”

“And as your doctor, I’m prescribing you a few days of rest,” Beryl said. “And if you follow my orders, you’ll be on your feet in no time.”

“I’m very good at orders, ma’am.” Leoni gave a halfhearted smile.

“Good. Maybe you could tell my daughter how to do that,” Beryl said. She frowned at Nicola. “Ever since she became chief she’s been insufferable. You’d think a military brat like her could follow orders, but no. She’s as stubborn as her father.”

“Mother, please,” Nicola said. “Can I have a minute alone with her? I promise to get to the command center to contact Danou and the council.”

“Finally,” Beryl said and left the room.

“Danou’s the Nadyte leader, right?” Leoni asked

“Yes. We have to work on fixing the mess Morijan just created.”

Leoni squeezed her hand. “Go take care of things. Apparently, I’m not going anywhere.”

“We’ll talk later. I promise.”

Coby ordered transportation and flew Nicola to the command center. He stuck by her side as she hurried to her office. It took all her strength to hide the range of emotions roiling through her. Morijan was her single greatest weakness. No one knew that, and she couldn’t afford to let any of the people she passed see it in her mannerisms or her facial expression. Regardless of the terror she felt at seeing Morijan again, she was the chief of her tribe. She had a job to do. She could deal with everything else later.

On the way to the command center, she’d made a cursory call to Head Council Reem. As far as Nicola was concerned, nothing had changed. The merger would continue. Reem wasn’t convinced that was the best course of action, but ultimately the call wasn’t his. Once Nicola set up a meeting with the council for the next day, she disconnected with Reem. The entire conversation increased the pain in her head.

When they reached the command center, she and Coby went directly to her office. They spoke to no one as they walked through the center. Once inside the office, Coby shut the door. Nicola sank into her chair. She crossed her arms on the desk and dropped her head on them.

“Hey, you okay?”

“Not really. My head is killing me and I just want to go to bed.”

Coby put his hand on her shoulder. “Want me to take you home?”

“After I call Danou. If I didn’t need a secure channel, I’d call him from there.” Nicola met his worried gaze, straightened, and made the call. Moments later, Danou’s gentle features filled her vid screen. “Greetings, Danou.”

“Greetings, Nicola. What’s going on?” His face held a mixture of anger and apprehension.

Without preamble, Nicola said, “Morijan tried to kidnap me.”

Danou leaned forward and Nicola could tell he was examining her face. She imagined there were cuts and bruises, and she was probably pale. He’d see the exhaustion in her features as well.

“Morijan is supposed to be on the Third Moon while we work out the accord. I sent her there myself.”

“I know, but she still has people loyal to her. I got that message loud and clear. At least a dozen were killed in the process. Danou, you know that she did this out of revenge. She doesn’t care if we have peace or not.”

“I do and I’m sorry. I’ll have her tracked down and placed in a holding cell. Once we have finalized our accord, we can deal with her.”

“Good luck.” Nicola leaned back in her chair, daring to relax for a moment. “Danou, I’m going to have to delay my trip to see you. I’m afraid I’ll need a few days to recuperate.”

“I can see that, my friend. I’ll come to you. Send me the clearance and I’ll be there in two days.”

“Done. Thanks.” Nicola ended the call and turned to Coby. “I’ll call Jese from the trans. Let’s go.”

Leoni awoke sometime later to find herself under the watchful eyes of her doctor. Beryl smiled, and Leoni could immediately see the resemblance between her and Nicola. The only major difference, aside from the short-cropped, gray hair, was her eyes. They were nearly purple in color, and Leoni saw in them a hardness she hadn’t expected.

“How do you feel?” Beryl asked.

“Better. How long have I been asleep?”

“Twenty hours,” Beryl said in that flat, doctor tone. “We’ll find you quarters later today so you can be discharged.”

“She can stay with me.” Nicola walked into the room with an air of someone very much in charge. Leoni caught the instant displeasure on Beryl’s face.

“No, she can’t.” Beryl stood and crossed her arms over her chest. “Nicola, you don’t know this woman. You can’t just have her staying with you. She could still be a security risk.”

“After all she’s been through to save my life? I hardly think so, Mother.”

“Nicola, it’s okay.” Leoni sat up and gasped as pain flared in her abdomen. “I appreciate the offer, but your mother’s right. I should stay in my own place. At least until we figure things out.”

“What’s to—”

Leoni held up her hand to stop Nicola’s argument. “Trust me. It’ll be fine.”

“I do trust you,” she said pointedly. She glared at Beryl and it made Leoni uncomfortable. “When can she leave?”

“As soon as we find her somewhere to stay.”

“May I come in?” A tall, slender woman stood in the doorway. Dark hair flowed over her shoulders and nearly touched her waist. Streaks of white in her hair made Leoni wonder about her age, because her face was smooth and youthful.

“*Etsi* Patra, please come in.” Nicola hugged her. “Thanks for coming. Did you have a good journey?”

“I did, thank you.” Patra exchanged glances with Beryl, who promptly left the room. Leoni didn’t have to be told those two didn’t get along.

“*Etsi* Patra, please meet Leoni.”

Patra extended her hand toward her, and Leoni grasped her thin fingers. “*Osiyo*.”

“*Osiyo*,” Leoni repeated the greeting. “You speak Cherokee, too?”

“*Yv*,” Patra said. “I know the ancient language. I was taught by my mother, who learned from her mother. I am honored to meet you, *adatiya*.”

“You think I’m the *adatiya*, too?”

“I know you are. You traveled through the mirror from Earth. You are of the Tsalagi, and you’ve come here to help us and fulfill your own destiny.”

“What exactly is my destiny?”

Patra said, “That I cannot say. But there is much we must do before anything else happens.”

“Wait, you called Cherokee the ancient language. How is that possible? Were my people here on your planet or something? Are you our ancestors?”

“No one is certain how our planet was first populated. That information was lost an eon ago, along with a lot of our stories and beliefs. There are very few who speak the ancient language. Even fewer who know much about our old ways.”

“How is it that you know, Patra?”

“She’s our spiritual guide,” Nicola said. “She keeps our history alive.”

“I’m having trouble believing all this.” The dull throb of a headache pounded behind Leoni’s forehead. “You know my language, call me the guardian, but some of your people think I’m white.”

“It is a lot of information. We will discuss this later.” Patra turned to Nicola. “I would like Leoni to stay with me. I must test her to be certain she is indeed the *adatiya* and not *ayonegv*.”

“She’s not. I’m sure of it,” Nicola said.

“I’m certain you are. But we must prove this so others will believe.”

“Why do y’all keep thinking I’m white? My skin is as brown as the earth, just like all my ancestors before me. You’re the second person to call me *ayonegv*. That means white person in Cherokee.”

“The second?” Patra’s expression showed alarm. “Who was the first?”

“That crazy chick—Morijan.”

“I must begin preparations now, Nicola. If Morijan believes Leoni is *ayonegv*, then she may be planning to kill her.”

“That Morijan has issues,” Leoni said. “First she wants to kidnap Nicola, and now you think she wants to kill me? What the fuck kind of sick-ass nightmare did I get into?”

“One that is very real, I assure you,” Patra said. “We will begin the Seven Trials as soon as you are able.”

“I’ll contact Danou. He’ll be here tomorrow.”

“Wait,” Leoni said. “What trials? Don’t I get a say in this? I mean, is it gonna hurt?”

“It might,” Patra said. “But it will hurt less than death.”

“Come again?”

“If Danou believes you are ayonegv—white—and not the adatiya—the guardian—he will want you put to death immediately. The prophesy says that if the guardian returns, our people will become one. But if the white one comes, we will be torn apart. To prevent this, the white one must be destroyed.”

“This is crazy.” Leoni was having a very hard time wrapping her head around it all. “I have to prove I’m not white? That’s the most ludicrous thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Then I hope you will be able to pass the trials,” Patra said. “Because I believe you’ve come to bring us together. But understand, if I find out you are the white one”—she leaned closer and her kind eyes took on a hardness that shocked Leoni—“I will kill you myself.”

Nicola secured immediate transport for Leoni and Patra while she went to the command center. Located in the middle of Alpha Command, the center was fifteen meters below ground. Nicola passed her thumb over the scan pad on the right side of the entrance and stepped into a room that was two meters by two meters. She stood in the center as a bright, white light surrounded her body. Once the security check was complete, a green light indicated she could proceed.

The first floor was one level above ground. It housed outdated equipment and, from the outside, gave the impression of insignificance. She made her way through a maze of shelves stacked three meters high with aged holos and broken com pads and med pads, before she arrived at the lift. A retinal scan of her right eye opened the doors. She stepped in and descended.

She bypassed the next three levels. The second level housed offices for her intelligence corps, headed up by Coby. Third and fourth levels were for data storage and offices for the personnel who kept the command center running. The lift stopped at the fifth level, and she stepped out into controlled chaos. Techs and officers moved through rows of desks and holos with practiced efficiency.

One lieutenant noticed her and stopped what he was doing. “Attention on deck! General Daelis has command!”

Everyone stood to give her one massive salute. She returned the salute and said, “As you were.”

“Welcome back, General,” the lieutenant said as she strode past. She was not surprised word had gotten out about her ordeal with the Nadytes. Information could spread faster than fire within the command center.

She thanked him and kept a brisk pace until she reached her office. She closed the door and headed for her desk. As Nicola sat, someone knocked at the door. “Enter.”

Ved Nyxi walked in and closed the door behind him. Nicola met him halfway across the room and hugged him tightly. He was a head taller than Nicola, his muscled chest a familiar place of comfort. He kissed the top of her head.

“I should kick Coby’s ass for going off without me. Without even telling me.”

“I would like to see you try to kick Coby’s ass,” she said and pushed him away playfully. “Now report, Commander. How did the Nadytes get into my quarters?”

Ved’s friendly features turned dark. “They had an agent embedded in my security detail. I’m sorry, Nic. If I could, I’d kill the traitor with my bare hands, but he’s already dead. Shot trying to leave the base.”

“I’d have enjoyed the chance to interrogate him.”

“Me, too. Look, I know your security is my job, and I don’t blame you if—”

“Not now, Commander.” She pulled rank again to get Ved’s attention. He was her best friend. But he could be a stubborn pain sometimes. “We had a spy. You found him. He’s gone. That’s it. Are we clear?”

“Of course, General.” He watched as she settled behind her desk again. He didn’t move until she impatiently motioned at the chairs in front of her desk.

“Tell me what you’ve done to fix the situation,” Nicola said.

“I’m working with Intelligence to do a more thorough background check on anyone assigned to you. I increased security on your quarters and, despite his objections, put a guard on Jese. Even in school. He doesn’t think he needs it, of course.”

“Of course.”

“Your nephew can be as stubborn as I can, Ved. You’ve got your work cut out for you.”

Ved smiled. “At least he didn’t get it from our side of the family. That bit I blame on the Daelis side. Nyxis aren’t stubborn.”

Nicola rolled her eyes. “Whatever.”

“And if he got any stubbornness from us, I chose to put the blame on my brother. Kel gave it to him.”

“His father gave him a lot of things,” Nicola said. “I guess I’d have to agree with you on that. Now, unless you have more to report, get out of my office. I’ve got a lot to do.”

“Nic—there’s a rumor going around.”

“Just one?”

“Well, a big one. I heard you were helped by someone from Earth. That the legend of the *adatiya* is true.”

She held his intense gaze. “You have to keep this information to yourself. But yes. The *adatiya* is real and on her way to Etsi’s home. We’ll begin the Seven Trials soon, but as far as I’m concerned, it isn’t necessary. I know she’s the guardian. And she’ll help us bring our people together.”

A flicker of doubt crossed his face. “Do you need me for the Trials?”

“No. I’d rather you be here at command. But until we know for sure—”

“I’ll send guards to Etsi’s house and make sure they follow the—what’s her name?”

“Leoni Wolf.”

“Okay. They’ll follow her until you tell me otherwise.” He stood and gave her a crisp salute.

Nicola returned it. “Dismissed. And thanks, Ved.”

Once the door was closed again, Nicola opened a secure line to Danou. His handsome face filled her view screen, and his yellow eyes revealed apprehension. Her stomach clenched. How would she explain this to him?

Danou said, “Greetings Nicola. I wasn’t expecting to hear from you so soon. I thought you were recuperating.”

“I was.” She hesitated. “Danou, I believe the prophecy of the guardian has come true.”

“The guardian?”

“She appeared in my quarters minutes before Morijan’s men arrived. She’s the one who fought them off. Her name is Leoni Wolf.”

“What has Etsi Patra said?”

“We have to start the Seven Trials as soon as possible. Leoni was wounded in the last fight, but she’s well enough. I need you to bring Angeel so she can be a witness. She and Etsi Patra have to agree on the outcome.” Nicola watched a mixture of emotions cross Danou’s face. “This could bring us all together, Danou. This could be what we need to convince our people—”

“If it’s true. Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

“Because I was fighting the effects of a concussion and exhaustion. And I needed to confer with Etsi Patra first. I didn’t want to tell you if I wasn’t even close to being correct.”

“I understand. Angeel already insisted on coming along. I believe she misses you more than anything.” He paused and a smile crept onto his face. “If you weren’t cousins, I might be jealous.”

His attempt at humor made Nicola mirror his smile. “And you’d be right. If I get more information from Etsi Patra, I’ll let you know.”

“Good. I should tell you...we haven’t found Morijan. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Just keep looking.”

“We will. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Thanks, Danou.” Nicola ended the call and leaned back in her chair. She’d had precious little sleep last night and knew there would be none coming tonight. When Danou mentioned Morijan, Nicola had to hide the fear that crept into her body. Danou might find Morijan and put her into lockdown, but Nicola knew that would never last. Morijan was determined to finish what she started.

The details of the last encounter she’d had with Morijan were known only to Nicola and Morijan. She’d never told Coby, or Angeel. Her thoughts rolled back in time to the moment her life changed.

Morijan loomed over her, and the sardonic smile on her face sickened Nicola. She tried to cover her naked body with the remains of her jumpsuit, but Morijan tore the fabric from her hands.

“You don’t deserve to wear this uniform. You should be dead.”

Nicola didn’t speak. Anything she said would only inflame Morijan’s anger. She swiped at the tears that rolled down her cheeks, hating that Morijan saw them.

Morijan straddled Nicola’s hips, grasped her wrists, and held them tightly at the sides of Nicola’s head. Their faces were close enough that Nicola saw Morijan’s pupils contract. “I hate you with every beat of my heart, Nicola Daelis. I will never forgive you for what you’ve done.” She squeezed Nicola’s wrists so hard Nicola’s fingers went numb. “I will take my time. I will make sure that you suffer.”

Nicola wanted to struggle. She wanted to escape and find Jese.

“You’re not sure if you believe me.” Her words chilled Nicola’s blood. “Your little bastard will be dead if you try to escape. I guarantee you will see it happen before you get two steps out the door.”

“Just—just do whatever you’re planning to do, Morijan. But let my son go. He’s an innocent child who—”

“He’s Kel’s child. He’s not innocent.” Morijan released one of Nicola’s wrists and slid her hand along Nicola’s inner thigh. “But I will do what I want. I can promise you that.”

The chime of her comm pad pulled Nicola out of her waking nightmare. She took a slow, deep breath before answering.

Patra’s image appeared on her screen. “Leoni and I have arrived at my home.”

“Good. I’ll be there in a few hours. I expect Danou and Angeel by morning.”

“Go home and rest. You need your strength.” Patra’s face took on that look that said she knew something was very wrong with Nicola.

“I don’t want to go to my quarters here. I didn’t get much rest there last night. Even though Ved doubled my security detail.”

“Then come to my home.”

“I will. Thanks Etsi.”

Patra’s home was a one-story structure and didn’t look all that much different from most houses Leoni had seen on Earth. It amazed her how much these people had in common with her planet. The front door opened to the living room, if that’s what they called it. The room was furnished with an L-shaped couch, made of a greenish material. Leoni couldn’t recall ever feeling anything like it. Sort of a combination of cotton and leather. She sat on it and found it just as soft and comfy as it looked.

Her tour of the house included the small kitchen—filled with appliances Leoni didn’t recognize—and past two doors Patra didn’t bother to open or explain. They ended at a guest room close to the same size as her bedroom at home. The bed was just large enough for one person and covered with a multicolored blanket. The sole window looked out over a meadow, though there wasn’t enough light for Leoni to see well. Her room featured an attached bathroom. At least the toilets were similar enough she could figure out how to use it. It contained a glass stall that she guessed was a shower. Towels hung from the wall.

“You have a nice home, Etsi Patra.”

“Thank you. There are clothes in the closet that should fit you. Let me know if you need anything.”

“I will.”

Leoni noticed a full-length mirror against one wall. She stood in front of it and lifted her shirt to look at the wound that crossed her abdomen. The line was thin and stretched about six inches. What bothered her was that it now looked more like a scar than a wound. Closed and pink, it looked weeks instead of days, old. How was that even possible?

“You will find that many things have changed.”

“Such as?”

“You will heal faster. You may be stronger, quicker—”

“Yeah. Figured that part out already.”

“Your senses are heightened. You may perceive things differently.”

“Like knowing when something bad is going to happen?”

“For instance.”

“But why?” Leoni spun around to face Patra. She saw no answers in her blank expression. “How is any of this possible?”

“I do not ask questions, Leoni. Nor can I offer you answers. I only know what happened in the past.”

“What do you mean?”

“Come with me.” Patra walked out of the guest room and led Leoni to a larger room down the hall. Sparsely decorated, it had one single portrait hanging on the wall. Leoni stared at it as if seeing into her own past. Sharp, brown eyes gazed at her. The eerie resemblance to Leoni’s grandmother unsettled her. The woman in the portrait even braided her long hair the same way, letting it fall across her left shoulder. Could this woman be her grandmother? Did her grandmother know about the mirror? How many of her ancestors had traveled through it before Leoni?

She found herself drawn to the woman’s eyes again. Could she have known Leoni would be here?

“Awinita was a great warrior.” Patra nodded to the portrait.

“Awinita?” The warrior Nicola had told her about. “Was she my ancestor?”

“It is likely. We know that the *daseti* was left to one family—one clan. The Wolf Clan.”

“My clan.” Leoni pulled her gaze from Awinita. “So we’ve been guarding the *daseti*—the mirror—all this time? No one ever told me about it. Not my grandmother, not my mother.”

“That would be because of the White One. Awinita sent her sister instructions. At the time, there was danger that the White One could come through the *daseti*. She told her sister to always protect it, but tell no one of its power. Not until the White One was gone.”

“I don’t get it. Do you know how long ago Awinita was here?”

Patra didn’t hesitate. “One hundred and twenty Earth years, three months, five days ago.”

The exact answer reminded Leoni of a kid she knew that was a math genius but couldn’t tie his own shoes. She shook the memory away and tried to calculate when that date would have been. “That’s around the turn of the century—nineteenth to twentieth.”

“The Tsalagi of Earth were forced onto a path they were not meant to follow.”

“Yes. That’s right. It’s when the whites forced most of the tribes into schools to teach them to read and write and learn the white man’s ways. My grandmother told me that a lot of children were stolen from their parents and beaten if they tried to speak Cherokee instead of English.”

“The White One must have been strong.”

“It wasn’t just one person. Hundreds of them forced thousands of us to forget our heritage. Our history. It’s only been in the last few decades that we’ve started teaching our children to speak our language again. I wonder if Awinita was afraid a Cherokee who’d been educated by whites would somehow come here and hurt people.”

“Perhaps.”

“I knew nothing about this mirror—the *daseti*— and yet here I am. Why? You haven’t mentioned a white woman coming here. I must be the first person since Awinita. When does it get used? The *daseti*, I mean.”

“It has been used when needed.”

“What do you mean?” Leoni asked. “Have any of you gone through it to get help?”

“No. When the *adatiya* is needed, she comes to us.”

“So the *adatiya* comes and then what?”

“She follows her destiny.”

“And when she’s done?”

Patra didn’t answer right away. “Are you asking if she returns to Earth?”

“Yeah. Did Awinita stay here? Do I have family here?”

Patra touched the edge of the portrait.

“She is still here. She died saving my ancestor, the mother of my grandmother.”

Leoni searched the portrait of Awinita’s face. The strength in her features and the intensity behind her eyes—it became real for Leoni. Of course as a warrior of the Wolf Clan, she would have died to protect another. That’s how Leoni often saw herself when she put on the police uniform before going to work each day.

“Had she lived,” Patra continued, “Awinita would have been able to return to Earth.”

“How do you know?”

“The mirror will be active when you are finished here. At that moment, you must choose.”

“Hardly a choice,” Leoni said. “I’m going home. Hell, the whole police department is probably searching for me. I’ve got friends back there, and I’m sure they’re worried about me.”

Patra remained silent.

“Would Awinita have gone home, if she lived?”

“I do not believe so. Before she died, she married my ancestor, Vesta.”

“Married? That would have been the 1890s. Women didn’t marry each other back then.”

“Of course they did. Why wouldn’t they?”

“It wasn’t legal then. Still isn’t in some parts of my country.”

“Not an evolved society. Pity.”

“I’m glad Awinita was happy here. What a waste that she had to die.”

“She was murdered,” Patra said.

Leoni felt anger stir deep inside her. “By whom?”

“We can only speculate. Vesta was the target. The assassin shot her from a great distance.”

“Awinita saw it coming and moved in front of Vesta,” Leoni said. “She took a bullet for her.” She had no clue how she would know such a thing. She only knew the truth of her words.

“Yes. A Nadyte spy was suspected.”

“The Nadyte have been around a long time?”

“Many generations. No one knows for certain how long ago they left the Tsalagi or why. But it has been the cause of many wars between our people.”

“How many tribes are on Forensia?”

“Two. Nadyte and Tsalagi.”

“So it’s a global war.”

“Yes.”

Leoni couldn’t wrap her mind around a war that was actually global. Even the two largest conflicts on Earth took place in a fraction of the space the world had to offer. What would it have been like if the fighting had encompassed the whole globe?

“It is difficult to imagine,” Patra said. “Both armies tried to keep the fighting to strategic grounds and military targets. Very few settlements were directly affected.”

“But it did happen. There’s always collateral damage.”

“Yes. Always. This is why Nicola’s work is so vital to our people.”

“Do you really think Nicola will make progress with the Nadyte tribe? That crazy bitch Morijan is pretty damn determined to mess things up.”

Patra sighed and motioned to a chair. “Please, have a seat. There is a lot we must discuss.”

“Sure.” Leoni settled into a padded armchair, surprised by the comfort of it.

“I believe Nicola, like Vesta, will do her best to achieve peace. She is a great leader of the Tsalagi. Your job is to protect her, as you have already proven yourself capable.”

“But, Etsi, what the hell am I doing here? I mean, why me? I can hardly believe all this shit is real.”

“Understandable. I assure you, this is all real. I do not know why you, specifically, have been chosen. If you are proven to be the adatiya, then I would say it is because you are of the Wolf Clan.”

“That’s it? I happen to come from the Wolf Clan, so I get to come on this weird-ass adventure. Lucky me.”

“I believe it is more than that, Leoni. You are special. You are meant to be here. Fate has brought you to us for a purpose larger than you can imagine.”

“Fuck fate.”

Patra either didn’t understand her or chose to ignore the curse. “It will not be easy, and there will be much turmoil.”

Leoni almost laughed. “Like what? A bunch of aliens attacking me? Or me killing more of

them than I can count?”

“Yes. And there will be trouble between you and Nicola.”

“We already had some of that. She’s one stubborn woman.”

“As are you.” Patra smiled at Leoni’s expression. “You are her adatiya. This means that you may be called upon to give your life for her. Are you ready for that?”

Leoni wasn’t sure. How could she be? In a few days’ time she’d been tossed into another universe—at least she assumed she was in a different universe. She’d fought aliens that looked like humans, except for the eyes on some of them, and didn’t have a clue if she should stay or run off and find a way back to Earth.

Realistically, she wondered if it even mattered. What was there for her on Earth? Her job as a cop was fulfilling and kept her moving every day. But her life ended when Tayanita was killed. At this point, she was an empty shell. Nothing mattered to her anymore. Nothing felt even remotely important. This circumstance was weird, but this job was no different. She was here to help Nicola. To protect her, as she protected the people of Cherokee, North Carolina.

“I am.”

“Then you must also know that no adatiya has ever returned to Earth.”

“Why not?”

“None has ever lived to make the journey back.”

“They were all killed?”

“Yes. Each died a warrior’s death. There are no records of any leaving Forensia.”

Patra remained quiet for a while, as if to let that sink in.

Leoni understood her words, and while no one wants to face the prospect of dying, Leoni knew she could manage the courage to do it. “I understand. I’ll do my best to protect Nicola, Etsi. I promise.”

“I know. Remember what I have said, Leoni. There will be many difficult choices ahead of you. Take care the path you choose.”

“I will.” Leoni stood. “I need to talk with Nicola and let her know what you’ve told me.”

“Do not.” Patra rose quickly, her expression dark.

“Why not?”

“You may tell her about Awinita. She already knows the basics of her story, but do not tell her that no adatiya has ever returned to Earth. That information will weigh too heavily upon her and may influence her decisions. You must allow fate to guide you both.”

Leoni kept her thoughts about fate to herself. “Okay. I’ll sum it up for her. Thanks for explaining things to me, Etsi. I appreciate it.”

“Go to your room and rest. We begin the Seven Trials tomorrow.”

“Tell me what these trials are.”

The hard look on Patra’s face made it clear she wasn’t about to tell Leoni anything. “You should rest. You will need all your strength.” Patra left the room.

Leoni stood in front of Awinita’s portrait again before she returned to her room. She sighed. “Wish like hell you were here to tell me what I’m supposed to do.”

Chapter Five

Nicola awoke early, surprised she'd managed to sleep at all. She'd gotten to Patra's late in the evening. Most of the night she'd tossed and turned, coming in and out of dreams she'd sooner forget. She'd been left with a foreboding that she couldn't shake.

Once she'd showered and changed into a fresh uniform, she felt better. The dark blue slacks were snug against her legs and moved comfortably. She pulled the matching tunic over her head, tucked it into the slacks, and put on her black belt and boots. She made her way to Patra's kitchen. Smaller in comparison to her own, but still warm and welcoming. It'd been ages since she'd visited her friend. She ran her finger along the rough surface of the old, gray, *granlite* countertop, to the white, *slan* sink. A tiny crack along the edge of the sink where she'd managed to drop a heavy cooking pot onto it.

"You cried when you did that. Even though I told you it was an accident."

Nicola continued to stare at the crack, but she answered Patra. "I was ten and felt so bad that I'd broken your nice sink. Mother always taught me to be very careful with other people's things. I just knew she'd be so angry with me. I don't know why I expected you to be angry." She turned to Patra, who held a warm smile on her face. "I still don't understand why your anger would hurt more than my mother's. I never wanted to disappoint you, Etsi."

"And you have not. Please, sit. I will fix you something to drink."

Nicola settled into one of the tall-backed, wooden chairs that circled the table in the center of the room. She loved the feel of the old-fashioned material and sank into the comfort of it. "How is Leoni? Is she still sleeping?"

"Yes. We had a long discussion last night, but I believe she needed time to process the information. I was surprised she did not know about the mirror."

"Neither did I. I mean, I know of the prophecy, of course, but not that the mirror was the one in my quarters."

Patra placed a steaming cup of *nava* in front of Nicola and sat across from her. "The mirror in your quarters is just a mirror."

"Then how did Leoni come through it? Etsi, is there something you're not telling me?"

Patra paused. "The *daseti* that transported Leoni here is on Earth. It has the ability to send the *adatiya* where she is needed. There will always be a *daseti* for her to come through."

"So it is magical? Not some kind of wormhole?"

"I do not know, Nicola. I only know that the *adatiya* will come through her *daseti* on Earth and arrive at the time and place she is needed." Patra took a sip of her own drink, watching Nicola as she did. "She is your guardian. Her mission is to protect you."

"I can protect myself. If she hadn't come in and fought with me I would have taken out the *Nadytes* that *Morijan* sent."

"You would have tried."

"You don't think I could have?"

"I did not say that. I said you would have tried. I cannot know what would have happened. I am not a seer."

"I wish you were. Then you could tell me what Leoni is supposed to protect me from and how she'll be able to go home. I mean, does she just step through the mirror in my quarters?"

"This will seem simple to you, but there is a way to allow her to go home."

"What?"

“If you release her from her destiny.”

Nicola stared at Patra. “How can I release anyone from their destiny?”

“You are the one she must protect. If you release her from that, Leoni can go home.”

“It’s that simple?”

Patra didn’t respond as she drank from her cup.

“No. It can’t be. Nothing is that easy,” Nicola said. “If I release her, what happens with the prophecy? What about our people?”

“I said it would seem simple. You will have to decide if it is. Or not.”

Nicola held back the impulse to roll her eyes. “Where would she go? Would she just be transported through the nearest mirror?”

“I do not have the answers you seek.” Patra stood. “Leoni will be here in a moment. I’ve made enough *nava* for you both. Drink plenty. It will be a long day.”

Patra left the kitchen, and within a few minutes, Leoni entered. Nicola caught her breath at the sight of her. She wore dark pants and a silver tunic that brought out the deep brown of her skin. Her face was no longer pale, and she wore a bemused expression. Nicola felt her pulse quicken. Leoni was beautiful.

“Etsi told me to come in and drink my breakfast. I don’t think I’ve ever had anyone say that to me before. Is she an alcoholic or something?”

“What’s an alcoholic?”

“Um, someone who drinks for breakfast.” Leoni grinned at her as she sat down. “I’d rather have something to eat.”

“I don’t think I understand.” Nicola placed a mug in front of Leoni. “This is *nava*. It’s what we have for the morning meal. It’s a nutrient drink. If you have a couple of mugs, you’ll feel a lot better.”

“She was being literal?” Leoni was clearly confused as she looked into her mug. “What’s in it?”

“*Stobon* and *drees*. Just try it. You may find you like it.”

“Okay.” Leoni stretched the word out, obviously not trusting Nicola. She put the mug to her lips. “It smells like oranges.”

Nicola was focused on Leoni’s soft features, wishing suddenly that she was the mug.

Leoni took a full swallow and sighed. “Wow. I don’t know what it is, but I like it. Reminds me of a fruit smoothie.”

“We call it *nava*. We have a few flavors you can try, but Etsi always uses *toud*. It’s the only one made of bio materials.”

“Do I want to know what bio materials are?”

Nicola laughed. “Plants grown in the ground rather than in a processing station.”

“Ah. I can live with that. So, how’s your head? You look a lot better than the last time I saw you.”

“Doesn’t hurt as much. How’s your stomach?”

Leoni shrugged. “Nearly healed.”

“How can that be? You were shot—”

“I wish I knew.” Leoni stood and lifted her shirt. The wound, deep red and closed, didn’t present as the fresher wound she knew it to be. She stood and touched the soft skin. Leoni flinched.

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’m ticklish.”

Nicola touched it again, this time palpating the area. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Me either.” Nicola removed her hand, and Leoni put her shirt down.

For one long moment, they gazed at each other. Nicola wanted to speak but couldn’t find the right words. Her eyes moved to Leoni’s lips, and she felt a strong desire to kiss her senseless.

Leoni turned her gaze to the floor and stepped back. Nicola thought, for a second, that perhaps Leoni was feeling the same. She must have been wrong.

“So explain to me what happens after the trials are over. Etsi told me I had to do them, and I’m pretty damn sure I’ll be fine. But what about after? Do I start following you everywhere? Like a bodyguard?”

Nicola shrugged. All good questions, none of which she had answers to. “I have a security detail that’s never far. They’re outside the house at the moment.”

Leoni’s expression became serious. “They didn’t do you much good the last time.”

“That was different. Ved, the commander of my security, discovered an enemy agent on the detail. The agent killed my guards so the Nadytes could gain access to my quarters.”

“How’d he let a spy get that close to you?”

“He didn’t let him. And Ved is working to figure it out. Problem is, the man was killed trying to escape.”

“Nic. Look, I’m sure Ved and his guys are good at their job, but if I’m here to protect you, then I think I ought to be with you as much as possible. Agreed?”

Nicola had a brief vision of Leoni beside her in bed. She would very much like her as close as possible. “Agreed. I’ll set up a meeting with you and Ved.”

“He gonna be mad about me being around?”

“I don’t think so. He’s like me—very traditional. I’ve already told him about you.”

“Good. What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Are you okay with me hovering close to you all the time? I mean, it’s not like you know me or anything.”

“I know enough.” Nicola touched Leoni’s arm, and her fingers tingled from the contact. “And I’m sure we’ll get to know each other as we go. Once this part is over and we announce your arrival to the Nadyte and Tsalagi, we’ll have more time on our hands.”

“You think it’ll go that well?”

“No, but I know bringing our people together will help.”

“Leoni.” Patra appeared behind Nicola. “It’s time to begin. Danou and Angeel have arrived.”

Danou Frew was a head taller than Leoni and built like a linebacker. His eyes remained on her through their introductions, as if he was trying to assess her. His wife, Angeel, on the other hand was blonde, bubbly, and excited as she hugged Nicola. They were the same height with nearly identical features. More like sisters than cousins. Both women laughed, despite the seriousness of the situation. Leoni watched Nicola, enjoying how the smile reached her eyes.

Patra broke up the happy greetings and guided them into a room Leoni hadn’t yet seen. Perfectly round and built from wood and reminded Leoni of a sweat lodge. Only this room was at least twenty feet in diameter and perhaps ten feet floor to ceiling. In the center was a fire pit. A table next to it held several jars of varying colors. Patra pointed to the wooden planks along the wall. “Please be seated.”

Danou and Angeel sat on one side, while Leoni and Nicola sat opposite them. Patra moved to the middle, pressed a button on the table, and an image floated in the air. Like the one Nicola had produced in the tunnel that showed them the area outside. This one had text written in the ancient symbols of the Cherokee Syllabary. Patra pushed another button, and a fire roared to life in the pit. The warmth was instant.

She motioned to Angeel. "Will you join me please?"

Angeel moved to Patra's side and said, "Leoni, on the holo screen we have the words of Awinita. She left us the information we need to find out if you are truly the adatiya. The Seven Trials must be completed in succession. If you fail any of them, you will be removed immediately."

"Removed?" Leoni asked. "Removed to where?"

Angeel's expression hardened. "Removed from this world—no longer allowed to live."

"You'll kill me? Seriously?" Leoni felt her fight-or-flight instinct kick in. "You can't do that." She got to her feet and regretted it. A jolt of white-hot flames shot through her body, dropping her to the ground. She convulsed for a few seconds before her muscles relaxed and she could breathe again.

Nicola was beside her, one hand on Leoni's shoulder as she yelled something at someone. Leoni couldn't hear very well. She did her best to focus on Nicola, who bent closer, now talking to her softly.

Leoni took hold of the hand that caressed her face. "Help me up."

Nicola put her arm around Leoni's shoulders and helped her back to the bench. Leoni put her head in her hands and waited for the pounding to stop and her hearing to return. It felt like an hour before she could lift her head again. All the while, Nicola kept a protective arm around her back.

"You okay?"

Leoni didn't dare nod. "What the hell was that?" Her arm felt like jelly as she lifted it toward the metallic piece sticking two inches out of her bicep.

"Restraining bolt. Angeel panicked. She thought you were going to hurt Etsi."

"I wasn't." She pulled the bolt free and winced as the barbed end tore her skin. "I guess the possibility that I could be killed for not being Cherokee enough hit me. It's so insane." She threw the bolt to the ground.

"I know." Nicola leaned close enough that Leoni felt her warm breath. "I won't let that happen. Don't worry."

Leoni pulled back to see the determination in Nicola's eyes. She saw something else there, as well, but refused to acknowledge it. "Thanks."

"I'm sorry, but we must continue," Patra said.

Leoni focused on her alone, not daring to look at Angeel. "Fine. What do you want me to do?"

"Read the text before you. I can read it as well, so I will know if you are not correct. So will Angeel."

"Oh, goody." Leoni focused on the characters before her and read the words aloud, in Cherokee.

"At one time, animals and people lived together peaceably and talked with each other. But when mankind began to multiply rapidly, the animals were crowded into forests and deserts.

"Man began to destroy animals wholesale for their skins and furs, not just for needed food. Animals became angry at such treatment by their former friends, resolving they must punish mankind.

"The Bear tribe met in council, presided over by Old White Bear, their chief. After several bears had spoken against mankind for their bloodthirsty ways, war was unanimously agreed upon.

But what kinds of weapons should the bears use?

“Chief Old White Bear suggested that man’s weapon, the bow and arrow, should be turned against him. All of the council agreed. While the bears worked and made bows and arrows, they wondered what to do about bowstrings. One of the bears sacrificed himself to provide the strings, while the others searched for wood for arrows.

“When the first bow was completed and tried, the bear’s claws could not release the strings to shoot the arrow. One bear offered to cut his claws, but Chief Old White Bear would not allow him to do that, because without claws he could not climb trees for food and safety. He might starve.

“The Deer tribe called together its council led by Chief Little Deer. They decided that any hunters who killed deer without asking pardon in a suitable manner should be afflicted with painful rheumatism in their joints.

“After this decision, Chief Little Deer sent a messenger to their nearest neighbors, the Cherokee.

“‘From now on, your hunters must first offer a prayer to the deer before killing him,’ said the messenger. ‘Otherwise, a terrible disease will come to the hunter.’

“When a deer is slain by your tribesman, Chief Little Deer will run to the spot and ask the slain deer’s spirit, ‘Did you hear the hunter’s prayer for pardon.’

“If the reply is yes, then all is well, and Chief Little Deer returns to his cave. But if the answer is no, then the chief tracks the hunter to his lodge and strikes him with the terrible disease of rheumatism, making him a helpless cripple unable to hunt again.

“All the fishes and reptiles then held a council and decided they would haunt those Cherokee who tormented them by telling them hideous dreams of serpents twining around them and eating them alive. These snake and fish dreams occurred often among the Cherokee. To great relief, the Cherokee pleaded with their Shaman to banish their frightening dreams if they no longer tormented the snakes and fish.

“Now when the friendly plants heard what the animals had decided against mankind, they planned a countermove of their own. Each tree, shrub, herb, grass, and moss agreed to furnish a cure for one of the diseases named by the animals and insects.

“Thereafter, when the Cherokee visited their Shaman about their ailments and if the medicine man was in doubt, he communed with the spirits of the plants. They always suggested a proper remedy for mankind’s diseases.

“This is the beginning of plant medicine from nature among the Cherokee Nation a long, long time ago.”

“Correct,” Angeel said, meeting Leoni’s gaze. “What is the name of your people?”

“Tsalagi,” Leoni answered. She saw something pass over Angeel’s features and added, “or *aniyvwiyá*. The Principal People.”

“Correct.”

Angeel almost looked relieved. Patra took up the next question.

“Who brought back the first fire?”

Leoni shook her head, shocked they knew so much of her people. Had Awinita been here long enough to teach this to them? Or had they found a way to watch her family through the mirror? She answered, “Water spider.”

“Correct.” Patra continued. “What is *ukténa*?”

“Something my cousin, Long Beak, tried to scare me with. A great snake as large around as a tree trunk with horns on its head and a bright, blazing crest like a diamond upon its forehead, and scales glittering like sparks of fire.”

“Correct. What clan do you belong to?”

Hadn't she told Patra this already? Leoni answered, “Wolf Clan.”

“Come here.” Patra motioned Leoni to the table.

Leoni joined her, staying clear of Angeel.

“In one of these jars is the man who climbs the mountain. You must tell us which one it is.”

“You have ginseng here?” Leoni asked, though she realized the question sounded stupid. If they didn't have ginseng, then they wouldn't be asking her to find the man who climbs the mountain. That's how the Cherokee described the herb.

She carefully looked into each jar, eventually choosing the one with a yellowish tint. “Here.”

“Correct,” Angeel said and turned to Patra. “The first six trials are complete.”

“What's next?” Nicola asked.

“She must go through the purification ceremony.”

“Right now?” Nicola looked like she was about to argue.

Leoni placed a hand on Nicola's arm. “It's okay. I'll do it. I'll be fine.”

“You're still recovering from being shot, not to mention the restraining bolt.”

“Leoni heals faster than we do, Nicola,” Patra said. “She is well enough to do this. It's the last trial. Once completed, we can announce her to our people. You know what that will mean.”

Nicola looked conflicted until Leoni placed her palm on Nicola's cheek and turned her head so they were facing each other. Leoni didn't really have adequate words for the moment, but something passed between them in that instant and Nicola simply nodded. Patra lead Leoni to the fire pit.

“I'm ready.”

Patra poured a hot, black liquid into a crystal goblet. She handed it to Leoni. “Drink. So we may begin.”

Leoni carefully drank, forcing the foul liquid past her lips. Patra told her to kneel. Etsi chanted in Cherokee as she poured the liquid around Leoni, enclosing her in a circle.

Patra then picked up a silver dagger and knelt in front of Leoni. She removed Leoni's shirt, exposing her naked chest. It left her feeling vulnerable, and Leoni resisted the urge to cover herself. She accepted this to be essential to the ceremony. Though unlike any ceremony she'd ever been part of.

Patra's chants continued as she first carved a circle in the center of Leoni's chest, the diameter about three inches. Blood trickled down Leoni's skin, but she kept still. She could take the pain if it meant proving to these people who she really was.

Patra's chanting faded out of Leoni's awareness as Patra made several intricate curves inside the circle. The pain of the chest carving moved beyond intense when Patra poured some of the black liquid over the fresh wounds. Leoni pushed the burning pain aside, saving her energy for whatever else was going to happen. When the carving was done, Patra stood and lit the ring of liquid around Leoni.

The flames burned close enough to Leoni's body that she felt her skin heating up. Sweat rolled down her face, and she fought the urge to wipe it away. Her head felt fuzzy, as if it were larger than normal. Her vision was fading, and even the heat of the flames felt like a distant memory.

Nicola's soft voice reached Leoni.

“You didn't tell me she'd be hurt. Patra, we should stop this.”

“We cannot. The *radawalle* she drank will soon take effect. Leoni must complete the ceremony. Have faith, Nicola.”

“You know that's hard for me...” Nicola's voice faded. Leoni could not hear the sound of the

flames. The heat no longer affected her as her sight returned—inward to her soul...

The odor assaulted Leoni's nose as she stepped up to the mangled car. Human blood mixed with an alcoholic beverage is both distinct and pungent. And not a surprise to a seasoned cop. Leoni dipped her head into the open driver's side door of the pickup to check on the lone occupant.

He groaned and tried to unlatch his seatbelt, except he wasn't wearing one. Glassy, dazed eyes stared into Leoni's. "What the fu-fuck happened?" His speech was slurred.

"You hurt?" She saw the red burns on the insides of his arms from where the air bag deployed.

"Dunno." He rested his head against the back of his seat.

Leoni tried to open the door, but the damage made that impossible. "Stay put. The fire department'll be here in a minute." She could hear the sirens in the distance and trotted to the vehicle that was upside down in the ditch, a couple hundred feet away.

The vehicle's engine was still running, tottering sideways on its top and straddled the ditch. The smell of gasoline lay heavy in the air. Leoni slid down the muddy embankment. When she reached the passenger window, her heart skipped a beat.

A woman's arm protruded at an odd angle. The ring on her middle finger that drew Leoni's gaze. The ring she'd placed on Tayanita's finger at their wedding three years ago.

"God is punishing you," her mother said. Her voice was harsh and the sound hurt Leoni's ears. Brenda Wolf stood before her, shaking her finger in Leoni's face. "I told you it wasn't right to be with a woman. It's not natural."

"Mother, Tayanita wasn't the only one killed in that crash. Aunt Susan was there, too."

"And she deserved to die for accepting you two. She knew better than to believe that nonsense about you being a two-spirit. It's wrong and this is proof. Now you can go on with your life the way it should be."

"I can't believe you're saying this to me." Leoni was crying. She didn't want to cry. She wanted to punch the woman in front of her. She couldn't understand how her mother, whom she'd always loved, could be so cruel. "Why do you hate me?"

"I don't hate you. I hate the path you've chosen." Brenda shook her head, the shame clear in her words and her expression. "You should leave. When you decide to be normal again, you're welcome to come back. Until then, don't call me. Don't have any contact with me."

"What? Why? I came to you because I need you. I just lost two of the most important people in my life!"

"Maybe you should have died with them." Brenda held the door open and used her free hand to push Leoni toward the porch. She said nothing as Leoni backed out of the house she'd been born and raised in.

Leoni jumped when the screen door slammed shut, followed by the heavy oak door a second later. She stared at the crumbling white paint of the doorframe and remembered when she and her dad had last painted it. She must have been ten years old. She worshiped him and missed him more than ever in that moment.

She turned to leave and was greeted by Tayanita and Aunt Susan. They smiled broadly at her and both opened their arms to welcome her to them.

Leoni ran across the dusty yard and through the apparitions. She spun around and saw her mother on the porch, a shotgun in her hands. "Mother, what—"

"I changed my mind. You cared so much about them, you should join them." She cocked the weapon. "Join them in hell!"

The shot struck Leoni square in the chest, lifting her off her feet and slamming her flat onto her back. She couldn't breathe. Tears leaked down the sides of her face and around her ears. Her

body was paralyzed and she wondered if this was how death felt.

The sweet face of her beloved father floated above her. He was speaking, but she couldn't hear him. She wanted to touch him, be with him, but his image faded away.

A voice eventually reached her brain. Soft, soothing, and gentle. Leoni's heart beat faster as the voice continued to speak to her. So familiar, yet so distant. She heard her name and a peaceful calm came over her.

Her eyes opened and Leoni found herself back in the room at Patra's, looking into Nicola's worried eyes. She had one hand on the side of Leoni's face, wiping away the tears. "Hey. You okay?"

Patra was standing behind Nicola, clearly not happy. Leoni said. "Yeah. Are you supposed to be here?"

Nicola nodded in Patra's direction. "No, but you were crying and—I couldn't stay away."

Leoni gave her what she hoped was a grateful smile. "Thanks." She looked around to orient herself and saw the flames were gone, leaving a weird smell behind. With strength she didn't think she had, Leoni staggered upright and walked out of the circle.

Patra greeted her. "How do you feel?"

"Tired." Leoni swayed unsteadily.

Patra gently touched the carving on her chest. "You have proven yourself, Leoni Wolf. You completed your vision quest. This is the end of the Seven Trials. Angeel and I have agreed. You are indeed the adatiya."

"I am honored by your acceptance, Etsi Patra."

"Excellent." Angeel said. She smiled and Leoni felt herself drawn to her. Angeel continued, "Danou and I want to make the announcement as soon as possible. Do you agree, Nicola?"

Nicola's gaze was fixed on Leoni. "I do. First we should take care of Leoni's wound." She moved forward and handed Leoni a new shirt. "Are you really feeling okay?"

Leoni swallowed a sudden lump in her throat. The wound had closed up, and she no longer felt it. The only thing she felt in that moment was the weakness in her knees at the expression on Nicola's face. She wanted to hold her and kiss her. When Leoni slipped her shirt on and looked again at Nicola, the expression she'd seen was gone. Her shoulders sagged. Perhaps she'd only imagined it. Fresh from the vision, Leoni's heart was still aching and she figured she must have projected that onto Nicola.

"I believe Leoni needs time to rest." Patra's gentle touch on her arm startled her. "We will confer on our announcement while you sleep. Would you like to be present when we tell our people?"

"I don't know. Should I?"

Angeel still smiled, her kind eyes holding Leoni's. "Yes. It will be good for everyone to see the adatiya. Leoni, I realize you don't know the true importance of this, but understand that your presence will save thousands of lives. This will help us create a new government so we can finally put all the warring behind us."

"But what about people like Morijan? She was pretty damned convinced I wasn't the adatiya." Leoni noticed Nicola physically moved a step backward at her mention of the crazy bitch.

"We're looking for Morijan," Danou said. "It won't be easy. Others won't accept you, and we'll have to deal with it. But this will start us on the right path. You'll have to trust me on that."

"I don't trust easily, Danou." Except for Nicola. Leoni, for reasons she couldn't comprehend, trusted her implicitly.

“That’s understandable.” He motioned her toward the door. “Please rest. Let us figure everything out. We won’t make the announcement until you’re ready.”

“Thanks.”

Chapter Six

The touch was feather light and spread a warm feeling through Leoni's chest. Was it possible for her to be more at peace? A finger gently traced the lines of the figure that Patra had carved into her skin. Leoni felt warm and loved. She slowly opened her eyes to find Nicola sitting beside her. She smiled and her cheeks flushed. Had Leoni dreamed the touch?

"Hi," she said, blinking to clear her eyes.

"How do you feel?"

"Pretty good. Like I slept for days."

"You almost did." Nicola glanced at a device on her wrist. "Twenty-eight hours. I believe your body needed it."

"Guess so." Leoni sat up. No sheet covered her and she wore a white shirt and matching pants that reminded her of medical scrubs. The cloth was soft and warm. She yawned. "I've never slept that long in my life." As she stretched, her shirt rode up her body, revealing a lot of skin. She pulled it down and noticed Nicola staring at her, the color in her cheeks growing redder as she did. Leoni found it cute.

"Um, what?" Nicola asked.

"I said I've never slept that long in my life. Well, maybe after that ice storm we had a few years back, but not for more than a whole day."

Nicola hesitated and looked away from Leoni. "The only time I ever slept that long I was in a coma."

"Well, that wouldn't really count as sleeping. You know, I think I could drink a gallon of *nava* right now. I'm starved."

"Good. I'll get you some."

Leoni touched Nicola's arm as she started to leave. "How long have you been here? You don't look like you've slept."

Nicola shrugged. "I've been here awhile. I'll be right back."

Leoni watched her leave. The white uniform Nicola wore was formfitting, and Leoni enjoyed the view.

"I see you are feeling better."

Patra's voice startled her. How had the woman gotten into the room?

"I am, thanks."

"Good. I brought you some clothes." She placed them on the bed at Leoni's side. "Nicola has been worried about you."

"Why?"

Patra didn't respond right away, and it unnerved Leoni. She got the impression she never voiced everything that was on her mind.

"Nicola is fond of you, Leoni. I caution you to be careful."

"Fond of me?" She was certainly attracted to Nicola, and by now, Leoni was pretty sure that the attraction was mutual. Was she ready for that? "I'm always careful, Etsi."

"That is not what I refer to. You must be careful that you do not lose focus. I know that you are feeling fondness for her as well. Do not forget your purpose."

"I won't. I know what I'm here to do."

"Good. Nicola is like a daughter to me. Please keep her safe."

For the first time, Leoni saw softness in Patra's eyes. "I promise."

“Thank you. Once you are dressed and have some nava, I believe we should meet with Danou and Angeel. Today is a good day to announce your arrival.”

Leoni was given a white uniform to match the ones that Nicola and Coby wore. Unlike theirs, hers had no medals or pins, but Nicola told her she now held the rank of captain. The uniform fit like a glove, and it gave Leoni a certain sense of pride as she followed them into a special media room at the command center. She briefly met Ved Nyxi, and her first impression of him told her he had very strong feelings for Nicola. The way he watched her made Leoni nervous, and she decided to speak to Nicola about him after all the excitement died down. If he and Nicola had a thing going, it could affect his work and Nicola’s safety.

Leoni returned her attention to the media room as they entered. It reminded her of the press corps for the White House. A dozen people got to their feet, and several devices were pointed at Nicola. Leoni was pretty sure they were cameras, though much smaller than any they had on Earth. She let her gaze sweep over the people and moved to the podium where Nicola now stood.

Coby was on her left and Lieutenant Ved Nyxi on her right. Patra entered behind Leoni and stood beside her. Nicola paused at the podium as Danou and Angeel entered the room. The press corps stopped their quiet chatter.

Nicola spoke first. “Thank you all for gathering here today. Please be seated.” She waited as everyone sat. “You all know that Chief Danou and I have come to an accord to end the war between our peoples. In front of me is that accord, and in a moment, we will both sign it.” The audience stirred, but Nicola stilled them with her hand. “Before we do that, we must make a special announcement.” She motioned for Etsi to join them at the podium.

“Our spiritual leaders, Patra and Angeel, are present to attest to the truth of what I am about to say. You all know the legend of the adatiya. We know that Awinita once came to us from Earth to save our greatest chief, Vesta. No adatiya has found us since Awinita—until now. Four days ago, the adatiya arrived in time to save me from an attack by Nadyte radicals. I am here because of her. I am here to present Leoni Wolf to both the Tsalagi and Nadyte. My adatiya, who legend says will bring our people together again.”

She waved her hand at Leoni, who cautiously walked forward. Everyone’s attention was on her now. Nicola moved to her side and whispered, “Don’t look so scared. They can smell fear.”

Leoni almost laughed.

Patra and Angeel stepped up to the podium. Patra spoke. “Leoni Wolf has passed the Seven Trials left here by her ancestor, Awinita. Angeel was present, as were Danou and Nicola.”

Nicola said, “Danou and I will now sign the peace accord and begin the process of bringing our governments together. Our people will be one.”

Everyone was silent as Danou and Nicola simultaneously placed their hands on the podium. Leoni couldn’t see what they were doing, but a 3-D display shimmered above their hands. The image of two palms merging into one settled over the words before them. Leoni understood something great was happening, but the impact of it hadn’t hit her yet. She figured it would later. Was she really the reason this accord was being signed? Had her presence brought the warring factions together?

Patra was at her side again. “Our world will have peace again, Leoni Wolf. But you are not finished. You must still protect Nicola. This begins a new phase for our people, but it will take

time.”

“I’m here as long as I’m needed, Etsi. I promise.”

Patra patted her arm. Nicola and Danou stepped away from the podium, and a lot more picture-taking took place. Then they opened things up to questions. Leoni couldn’t believe the civility of how it all worked out. Rather than people shouting and hoping to be heard, Nicola went from one person to the next—literally going down the row—to speak to them. She and Danou fielded questions with practiced ease. They were a great team, and Leoni understood how they were able to bring their people together.

She didn’t understand the subject of most questions, but she got one very important thing out of the entire session. Something great had just happened, marking an historic moment in the lives of these people, and she’d been a small part of it.

After an hour of questions, Nicola announced the end of the press conference and Leoni followed her out of the room and back to her office. Only she, Ved, and Nicola went in. The others headed for another room where Danou planned to contact his council.

Nicola settled behind a desk that looked to be made of stainless steel and shined to perfection. Once seated, she sat up straight, obviously in charge and in her element.

“Sit. Relax,” Nicola said.

Leoni sat in the chair beside Ved.

Ved said, “I have a comm pad for you. I’ve loaded it with all our security practices and information on each member of our team.”

He handed the device to Leoni. It reminded Leoni of a tablet, which she never really liked using, always feeling more comfortable with an old-fashioned keyboard and mouse. “Thanks, but I have to ask—why are you trusting me with all this stuff? You don’t know anything about me.”

Ved glanced at Nicola before speaking. “You’re the adatiya. That’s all I need to know.”

“Wow.” Leoni watched as his purple eyes narrowed at her. “I’m not being difficult or anything, it’s just hard for me to accept that y’all are so easily trusting.”

“It’s not necessarily an easy trust,” Ved said. “I trust that Patra speaks for you and that you are Nicola’s guardian. I trust in the stories, and I trust in the proof I’ve seen. I trust that you’ll do what you can for Nicola, but until I see what you can do, I’ll put my full trust in what I know.”

“So you don’t yet fully trust me. You have no idea how good I am or am not. Being the guardian doesn’t mean I’m some sort of Navy Seal that can kick ass like nobody’s business.”

Nicola said, “I don’t know what a Navy Seal is, but I can guarantee you, Ved, that Leoni is more than capable of doing her job.” Nicola held his gaze for a moment. “I’ve seen her. She’s fast, instinctive, and for the first time—for the first time ever—I saw fear in Morijan’s eyes.”

A hardness crossed Ved’s features at the mention of the crazy chick. Leoni really had to find out the whole story. Clearly, everyone around Nicola already knew it.

“Does she realize that Leoni is the adatiya?” he asked.

“She found out that Leoni came through the mirror, and she believes she is the White One.”

“I need to find out where she’s getting her information. Unless…”

“Unless she’s got Nicola’s room bugged,” Leoni said. She recognized the confusion on their faces and said, “It means that she’s got video and maybe audio setups hidden so she can spy on Nicola.”

Nicola looked like she might get sick. Ved spoke up, “I’ll have a tech team sent to your quarters within the hour. If there’s anything there, we’ll find it.”

“Thanks.” Nicola let out a long breath. “Let me know what you find.”

“I’d like to know as well,” Leoni said. “I don’t expect you to trust me, Ved, but I’m here and

I'll do everything I can to protect Nicola. You can count on that."

"I'm going to."

"Good." She extended her hand to him, and he looked at it questioningly.

She wiggled her fingers. "On Earth, we shake hands when we agree with someone. I'd like to shake your hand."

He grasped her hand and smiled. "You and I need to work out a solid security plan for Nic."

His easy use of Nicola's nickname did not escape Leoni. She ignored it and said, "I think the best thing to do is for me to be with her twenty-four-seven. She said you have a security detail that's always around, right?"

"Twenty-four-seven?"

"Every day, all day. Period."

"Okay. Yes. Four agents at all times. They aren't always visible, but they're present."

"Sounds like you've got a handle on it already. If she has to go make a speech, or somewhere public, then we need to talk. Anytime that's going to happen, I want to see the area first."

"I can arrange that."

Leoni finally looked at Nicola, who stared at her. "My next question is where will I stay? I don't want to sound out of line, but I think I shouldn't be farther away than the next room from you. I want to be able to get to you in an instant if necessary."

Nicola looked away. "I have a guest room. You can stay there, regardless of what my mother and Patra have to say. Will that work for you?"

Their eyes met and Leoni felt a familiar tingle in her belly. "Yes." It so worked for her.

"Then we've got a plan," she said.

"We do indeed."

Ved stood. "Leoni and I need to get to the armory. I've got two people on the door here and another two at the end of the corridor. They go with you, but if you plan to leave command, contact me first. Okay?"

Nicola narrowed her gaze at Ved, but saluted him. "Yes, sir!"

"Good girl." He motioned Leoni to the door. "Come on."

She followed him down a series of corridors, quickly disoriented to the point of feeling lost. She made two strides to his one and felt relieved when he stopped. They were in front of a solid metal door and he turned to her with a grin. "This is my favorite place."

His purple eyes lit up with childlike delight. His smile was infectious and Leoni mirrored it.

"I have to say that the armory was always a cool place to be in. I never complained about qualifying with my weapon," Leoni said, "I go shooting once a week."

He pressed his palm to a chest-high square that glowed green. The door opened with a swoosh. They entered a room that was barely large enough for three people and reminded Leoni of those little elevators some older buildings still used, square, maybe four by four feet. Another inch or two and the tall man beside her would have to duck to get in. The area was lit with clear, white lights that highlighted the white walls. Leoni squinted from the glare.

She heard a swish and a thud, the lights dimmed, and a door opened in front of them. Ved exited and she hurried to keep up. "What was that?"

"Security scan. Everyone has to do it—even Nic—before coming into the armory."

"What's it scanning for? Weapons?"

"I'll tell you later." He looked over his shoulder at Leoni. This time he placed his head near a blue light that moved across his eyes. He stepped back and another door opened.

Leoni wondered if this was what Fort Knox was like.

Finally, they entered a room that was obviously the armory. The walls were similar to those in the escape tunnel at Nicola's home. Leoni touched one, surprised by how warm it felt. Her eyes followed the wall approximately forty feet up to an A-frame roof. The first ten feet of the walls were covered with so many weapons that Leoni wondered if this was their entire military stash. Why did they need such a huge building? She couldn't see the end of the room but it looked wide enough to park a few airliners in side by side.

"Wow."

"I know," Ved said proudly. "Let's get you a hand blaster first." He led her to one of the walls with multiple styles and types of weapons.

Leoni recognized the one she'd used against the Nadytes and picked it up. "What's this one?"

"Ah, the S-45b. Best hand blaster you can get. Holds a charge for three hundred rounds, if you have a bolt large enough."

"I used it when Nicola and I were captured. It fired pretty good."

"It's light and straight shooting." He handed her four cylinders, each one oblong, four inches in length and about an inch wide with one end round and the other flat. "These are the clips for the S-45b. I'll get you an ammo belt with a holster for the blaster."

"Thanks. Do you guys have any kind of body armor?"

"Body armor?"

"Yeah. As a cop I always wore ballistic armor. To protect me against bullets."

Ved paused a beat. "No. We don't have anything like that. I don't think anything has ever been developed to do that. We do have jump suits that are resistant to heat, and when you're hit with a blaster bolt, it does significantly less damage."

"So blasters are like lasers?"

"No. Lasers are used for cutting. A blaster bolt isn't as hot but will burn through flesh as it enters the body, cools quickly, and leaves a lot of damage behind."

Leoni touched the area she'd been shot. "And it hurts like hell. Can I have one of those?"

He smiled again. "Of course. We all wear them when we're not dressed up to impress the media."

"Cool."

He paused again and Leoni realized he was assessing her.

"Before we go any further, I want to tell you something. I love that stubborn woman you've sworn to protect. Don't let anything happen to her. Got it?"

So she'd been right. They must be a couple then. The idea that Nicola wasn't available hit Leoni unexpectedly hard. What the hell? She was supposed to protect her, not fall in love with her. "I got it."

"Good. Now, I need to get you some uniforms, but I think I'll give you the full tour before that."

"Cool. I'd really like to see one of those ships that the Nadytes had us in. Nicola called it a trans-something."

"Transporter. Sure. We've got ten military transporters in this storage area. They're the same size as the one Morijan's people used, but ours are outfitted with weapons systems." Ved started down a corridor to their left. A few feet in, he came to a door and pressed his thumb to the pad. It slid open and Leoni stood at the threshold and stared.

Like it or not, she was now certain she'd stepped into a sci-fi movie. Immediately to her right, several of those transporters lined the wall. She couldn't see the end of them because of the immensity of the area they were in. The last section was maybe half the size of the one they'd just

been in. This place was underground, and she wondered if it eventually ended at the center of their world.

Ved nudged her shoulder. "You can go in if you'd like." He had a quirky smile on his face, and Leoni wondered if he was teasing her a little.

She stepped into the cavernous room and tried to take it all in. The transporters lined the right wall, but the opposite wall had something altogether different. The spaceships there reminded her of crabs. Pod-like centers with arms that curled around in front and ended with pincers. Totally crab looking. The pods weren't especially big, and she reckoned they'd hold a couple of people at most. She wandered toward the ships, fascinated by their unusual shape. Not that she really knew what a "usual" shape should be.

"Xend Class fighters," Ved told her. "Versatile, fast, maneuverable in atmosphere or space, they're our best defense."

"What do they do? Grab the enemy ships in their claws?"

Ved laughed. "Not exactly, although they can be used to grasp objects if necessary. These ships carry ten *brewst* missiles, a crew of two, and have four plasma cannons, two that are self-tracking."

"Wow. Pretty damn bad-ass."

"Do you have ships like these on Earth?"

"Not that I know of, but last week I'd have said hell, no." She glanced sideways at him. "Then again, I'd have said no way could another planet full of humans exist outside our own."

"There are millions of planets, Leoni, and a lot of them are inhabited by one life-form or another."

"Yeah." Leoni touched a black panel on the side of the fighter, surprised by how rough it felt, despite the shine. Most of the fighter was covered with similar panels.

"Those are heat-shields to protect the ship going in and out of the planet's atmosphere."

"Think I could go for a ride sometime?"

"Sure. But you might find one you like better." Ved pointed over his shoulder. "We've got four light cruisers, two heavy cruisers, and one battleship in this area."

Leoni tore her gaze from the fighter to the rest of the facility. The assortment of spaceships that stood before her left her speechless. Three very different shapes and sizes took up room for as far as she could see. The battleship loomed behind them all, and Leoni figured she could put a dozen baseball stadiums inside the hangar and still have room for a football field or two.

"Ved, I—it's almost too much to comprehend."

"Maybe we should just take a walk then. Once you get more acclimated to being here, I'll take you up in one of the ships. Maybe I'll even give you flying lessons."

That snapped Leoni out of her shock. "Seriously? We can go into space?"

"Of course. We just have to clear it with the general."

"You mean Nicola?"

"Yes."

"She'll have to come with us. I want to go up in one of these ships, but I'd rather she go with us."

Ved slapped her on the back hard enough to jolt Leoni. "I think I'm going to like you, Leoni. So, want to get your uniforms now?"

"And food. I'm starving."

"Done and done. Follow me."

Nicola stood in front of the entrance to the council chambers. For the first time, her confidence wavered. She should be able to do this. She'd just made the first step toward the one thing her world needed most of all—a merger of their tribes. It'd been a long, hard decade of fighting, and this would help to not only put a stop to this war but end any other warring among their people. Together, they could make Forensia a better place to live.

She took a long, deep breath, slowly let it out, and opened the door. Nicola ignored the shouting and walked with a purpose to her platform. She stepped up, folded her hands in front of her, and waited. Most of the council noticed her there, but two men were too focused on each other to stop their argument. Nicola patiently waited for them to finish.

Gree Bettol, who had always been her largest and loudest opponent, was trying to stare down Jac Reem, her Head Council. Reem was not backing down.

Bettol screeched, “She’s signed our death sentence. They aren’t bringing us peace. They’ll come in here and slaughter us all in our beds. Doesn’t anyone remember the First War?”

“We all do,” Reem said in a calm voice, “but this is a new age. Danou Frew is not his grandfather. He wants peace. He was raised here, in Kelan, with our values.”

“Then why has he been killing our people all these years?”

“He hasn’t.” Nicola raised her voice. “Danou Frew never fired a weapon during the war. He worked as a medic in the field hospitals and saved hundreds of lives, Tsalagi and Nadyte. He’s a man of peace.”

“And you believe him?” Bettol turned his venom on her. “How do you know he never killed any of us? I know for a fact that your husband killed Frew’s brother minutes before he was murdered. Are you telling me Frew isn’t angry about that? He’s not seeking vengeance on us?”

“I don’t know how you got that information, Bettol, as I sealed that report myself. I’ll look into that later. Right now you all need to know that I signed the accord to begin the process of combining our governments. We need to draft a resolution on how we want this to proceed. The Nadyte use a council, much as we do, but some of their laws are different. I need a committee formed to study their laws and decide which ones we can agree to and which ones we cannot. Danou is doing the same with his council.”

She kept her gaze on Bettol, who was now seated and quiet.

The other council members started discussing the merger and all the issues that it would encompass. Nicola allowed herself to relax and settle into the conversation, finally feeling as though real progress was being made.

Darkness had fallen long before Nicola was finished at the command center. Ved set Leoni up with an office next to Nicola’s. A private door connected the two rooms. A silver-colored metal desk was in the center of Leoni’s office. Two plain metallic chairs were situated in front of the desk. Spartan was hardly the word for it.

Leoni settled in quickly and used most of that time to go over the notes Ved had given her. Their military structure was similar to the American military, and she wondered whether it was a coincidence, or had the Tsalagi been influenced by someone other than her Tsalagi ancestors?

She stared at the computer system on the center of the desk. The monitor, if she could call it

that, reminded her of the old projection screens used in schools. The surface was slate gray and the size of a wide screen TV. It hung from the ceiling and aside from those wires, she saw nothing else connected to it.

Leoni considered herself tech-savvy, but at the very least, she required a keyboard and a button to turn the damn thing on. She found neither.

“This sucks.”

“What does that mean?”

Leoni looked at the open door and saw a boy standing there. His purple eyes looked familiar. He had a friendly expression as he patiently waited for her to reply.

“It means I’m frustrated.”

“About what?”

Who was this kid? Leoni guessed him to be about ten years old. He was skinny, had short-cropped blond hair, violet eyes, and she couldn’t shake the feeling she’d seen him before.

She waved him over to the desk. “I’m new around here, and I haven’t used a computer like this before.”

“You’re the adatiya.”

“I am.”

“You have to turn it on.”

“What?”

“The holo. You have to turn it on.” He passed his hand over a spot on the desk, and a holographic image appeared in front of the gray screen. The image was a logo that Leoni now recognized as the military symbol of the Tsalagi.

“You’ve never seen one before?”

“Once.” She thought back to the tunnel when Nicola had used a similar device. “But we were in a hurry, so I didn’t learn how to use it.”

“It’s easy. Want me to show you?” He looked excited and his grin warmed Leoni’s heart. How could she say no to such a sweet kid?

“Tell me your name first.”

“Jese.”

“Okay, Jese. I’m Leoni.”

“I know.”

“Of course you do.” She pulled another chair over and made room for him. “I want to do some research on a woman named Morijan. I don’t know her last name, just that she’s a Nadyte.”

He took on a serious expression. “Never heard of her, but if you have the right access you can find out stuff on anybody.”

“That so?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have the right access, Jese?”

“I don’t, but my mom does.”

“You know your mom’s access information?”

He gave her a conspiratorial grin. “Don’t tell her.”

“I don’t know who she is, so how can I tell her?”

Jese narrowed his eyes. “Yes you do. She’s the chief.”

“The chief? As in Nicola?” Now it made sense. She was seeing Nicola’s features mirrored in his little face.

“You didn’t know she had a son?”

“No. She never mentioned you. Where’s your father?”

“He was killed in the war.”

“Sorry.” She should have asked Nicola that question, not the boy. “You want to show me how to use this holo?”

“Sure, you touch here and the image moves so you can go to the search option.” Jese launched into his lessons, with Leoni paying attention to his every word.

Nicola left the council chamber feeling completely drained. Nothing got resolved, and a lot of it had to do with Bettol. The man simply would not let go of the past. If she couldn’t get him to move forward, she would lose the battle. No matter what anyone offered, Bettol found something wrong with it.

They were giving too much to the Nadyte people.

They could not give amnesty to any military leaders.

They could not allow Danou to have too much power.

They could not bring any of the Nadyte council members into power.

They could not...

Nicola could not stand another moment of his negativity and closed the meeting. The only resolution was to find a way to merge the two governments without either one losing too much. Bettol did not want to lose anything, which was clearly not an option. He had a lot of other members of the council behind him. If he wanted to, he could put a stop to everything.

Tomorrow they would go at it again, and Nicola hoped she could manage some sleep in the meantime.

The real regret of her day was missing time with Jese. Command was the only place she felt safe allowing him to visit, and now she’d missed sharing the evening meal with him. She’d probably find him asleep in her office. Again.

Nicola stopped at the open door to Leoni’s new office, shocked by what she saw. Her son was seated next to Leoni, animatedly showing her something on the holo. Leoni’s eyes twinkled with amusement as she laughed. Nicola stayed in the doorway for a moment, enjoying the scene.

Jese rarely took to strangers. He was more cautious than she was in that area, and it simply amazed her that he was so easily getting on with Leoni. They were bonding and it brought a smile to her face. Nicola suddenly realized that it mattered that her son liked Leoni. It mattered a lot.

Leoni glanced up and met Nicola’s eyes. A familiar feeling came over Nicola, like they’d been in this same place before, and her breath hitched. She wanted to walk over and wrap herself around Leoni. Feel the heat they would create.

“Mom!” Jese was on his feet and had his arms wrapped around her waist in seconds. She hugged him and kissed the top of his head. He looked up at her with a huge grin. “Leoni and I are having a lot of fun. She helped me with my evening work for school, and I showed her how to use the holo.”

“Is that right?” Nicola asked Leoni, who shrugged.

“A lot of give and take. He’s a smart kid.”

“Too smart for his own good sometimes.” Nicola kept her hand on his shoulder as she ushered him back to the desk. “He wasn’t bothering you? Has he been here long?”

Leoni glanced at the chron Ved had given her. “Wow. We’ve been doing this for five hours

now. Damn. But, no. He was really helping me. I need to be able to use the computer so I can do my job.”

“But then we got to playing games,” Jese said, his voice not the least apologetic. “I promise I got my work done first.”

“I believe you, son. I’m only surprised you’re still awake.”

“I don’t have school tomorrow.”

Leoni laughed. “That’s such classic kid-reasoning. I can stay up as long as I want when I don’t have school in the morning.”

“He says that at the end of every week, but he knows that he has to get to bed.” To Jese she said, “Pack your things. Uncle Coby will be here soon.”

Jese did as he was told, quietly gathering his belongings. Once he was packed, he turned to Leoni. “Can I come home with you two?”

Leoni’s eyes widened in surprise as she looked to Nicola. “Uh, I don’t know. You’ll have to ask your mom.”

“You’re the adatiya. You’re in charge.”

“Hold on there—”

Nicola held up her hand to stop Leoni. “Jese, Leoni is my guardian, but she’s not in charge. I am.” She looked down at her little man, realizing once again that he was growing up too fast. “It’s still not safe for you to come home. I wish it were. You know I miss you.”

“I know,” he said, his voice sullen. His shoulders slumped, and he headed to the door. “Thanks Leoni. It was nice to meet you.”

“Sure thing, Jese. I’m sure I’ll see you again.”

He wouldn’t look at her as he left.

Nicola choked back her tears and was surprised when Leoni put a hand on her back.

“You okay?”

“I miss him.”

“I can see that.” She moved in front of Nicola. “He told me he lost his father in the war.”

“Yes, my husband, Kel.”

“Ah, you were married. So what’s Jese’s last name?”

Nicola gave her an odd look. “The same as mine, Daelis.”

“He didn’t take his father’s last name?”

“No, children take their mother’s last name. And a husband takes his wife’s last name. You don’t do that on Earth?”

“Although the Cherokee and other tribes historically are matriarchal societies, it’s just the opposite for most of Earth. Wives and children take the husband’s last name. We’re known as a patriarchal society. Sounds like Forensia is a matriarchal society.”

“I guess you could call it that. It’s all we’ve ever known.”

“Interesting. Anyway, so why can’t Jese come home? I’ll be there.”

“I’m—it’s hard to explain.”

“Try. Nicola, there’s too much I don’t know about you and about why you need a guardian. I need you to give me a hand here. What’s got you so worried you won’t let your son come home? He tells me that he only gets to see you once a week, here, for a few hours after school. What’s up with that?”

Nicola saw the compassion in Leoni’s eyes and lost the hard-fought battle as a tear rolled down her cheek. How could she possibly explain. Most of the time she couldn’t even explain it to herself. “It’s just a gut feeling. I don’t feel like he’s safe there. I can’t let anything happen to him—I’d

sooner die. That's why he's never with anyone very long. He goes to school, but never takes the same route back and forth. He stays with Coby, Ved, or my mother. Never with me. The command center is the most secure building on our planet. That's why he comes here at the end of his school week."

"If it's the most secure building, wouldn't he be safer here?"

"No." Nicola spoke with more force than she intended. "Yes, it's secure, but still the Nadytes have managed to get to me. Until we can be sure who is behind this, Jese is safer away from me. I don't know where he is most of the time, and trust me, that hurts."

Leoni's expression never changed, but Nicola sensed she was putting things together. "You think Morijan will use him against you. Or any number of others that don't want the merger to happen."

"Yes." She couldn't look at her anymore, not wanting Leoni to see the fear in her eyes. Nicola stepped away and looked out the open door. Jese was sitting on the floor in the hallway, leaning against the wall. He looked like the fragile little boy that Nicola knew lay inside that tough façade of his.

"I get that. You mind if I have a quick talk with him?"

"No. I need to settle down so he doesn't see me crying."

Leoni put her hand on Nicola's shoulder as she passed by, and Nicola felt a strange sense of calm flow over her.

Leoni sat on the floor beside Jese and bumped him with her elbow. He bumped her back, and after a couple of turns, he was smiling, though the smile didn't reach his eyes.

Nicola stayed in the office, away from the hallway. She watched them sit together on the floor, unable to hear their conversation. Nicola recognized the change in Jese's posture as he listened to Leoni. After a few minutes, Jese got to his feet, ran into the office, and wrapped his arms around Nicola. He didn't cry, didn't speak for a long time, just held her as tightly as he could.

"I love you, Jese," Nicola said as she rested her cheek against his silky hair. "Let me know when you get to Coby's."

"I will." He stepped back, but not very far. "I love you, Mom. I miss you a lot, but Leoni told me to be strong."

"Good."

Coby's voice boomed from the hallway. "You ready, Jese?" He gave Nicola a questioning look, but she shook her head. They'd have to talk later.

"Yes, sir." Jese hugged Nicola one more time. He surprised everyone by giving Leoni a hug before leading his uncle away, all the while chattering about his evening with Leoni.

"Thank you," Nicola said when Leoni entered the office again. "I can't tell you how much that means to me, what you did for him."

She shrugged. "I just told him I'd handle things. He misses you, but the way he sees it, the longer he's not there the more danger you're in. He knows why he's not at home, and he's as scared something will happen to you as you are about him."

"I've been worried about him since before he was born," she said. "The day I first held him in my arms I realized how special he is. There's nothing I wouldn't do to protect him."

"And the reverse is true for him. You've got one helluva kid there."

"He takes after his father. I wish he'd known him."

"He doesn't know his dad?"

Nicola shook her head, trying hard to not replay Kel's death in her mind again. "He was killed before Jese was born. Killed protecting us."

“I’m sorry, Nicola.”

“Me, too. What did Ved’s team find in my quarters?” Nicola desperately needed to change the subject. “I got a message that he met with you earlier today.”

“He did. The tech team found four listening devices and one camera—in your bedroom.”

Nicola closed her eyes as she tried very hard to remain calm. How long had Morijan been watching her? She felt Leoni’s warm fingers on her arm and opened her eyes. “Could they trace them back to any particular point?”

“Not yet, but Ved thinks it was Morijan, since she knew about me before anyone else. The bigger question is if she’s working with anyone on the Nadyte council or the military.”

“I’ll need to get a message to Danou.”

“Already done.” Leoni smiled at her. “You have enough to deal with. Let us handle these things.”

“I’ll try. Are my quarters clear now? No more devices?”

“Nothing else was found. Ved made them check three times.”

“I’m not surprised. I’d like to go there now so I can get some sleep before starting over tomorrow with the council.”

“Sure.” Leoni motioned to the door. “Lead the way, Chief.”

Chapter Seven

Leoni and Nicola easily fell into a routine during the day. Nicola spent most of her time either in her office or in the council chambers, while Leoni familiarized herself with the layout of the command center and the city of Kalen. In two weeks, she'd memorized enough directions that she moved about as if she'd lived there her entire life.

The city itself was quite another story. Few buildings were two-stories. Leoni did a virtual tour, thanks to her new skills with the holo system. Family homes were single-story and often contained some type of underground storage. They preferred simple dwellings with only enough bedrooms to suit the family, one living area, kitchen/dining area, and a generous yard in front and back of the house.

The buildings were square, plain, of white, gray, or tan color, and had flat roofs. It reminded her of the movie *The Stepford Wives*. Everything identical. Most of the people she'd met so far were military, and she really hoped the people of the city were more diverse. At least Patra's house didn't conform to the design of those in the city.

Only one thing was left on Leoni's current list to learn— how to operate a transport vehicle.

After another evening of tutoring from her new buddy, Jese, Leoni figured out there were several sizes and types of these "trans" as most people referred to them. The one Morijan had used was a typical military-style trans. The average Tsalagi owned a trans that was capable of seating up to six people in the cabin.

She flipped through pictures of various trans one morning, working on memorizing each one. The TSR-1130, the "family trans," reminded her of a pickup truck with a camper on the back. Only without wheels of any sort. And the steering wheel was boxy and made of some kind of matte-black material. The specs showed it could go over 170 *sync* per hour. It sounded fast.

Unlike a camper, there wasn't enough room for anyone to stand up, but the seats looked like those in a regular car. The bulk of the rear was meant for storage. She'd already flipped through information on how to operate it, but none of it made sense to her. She sighed and leaned back in her chair.

"Busy?" Coby said and walked in, not waiting for her reply.

"I need to learn to drive a trans."

"That can be arranged."

"Today." Leoni got up just as he sat down. "I don't like relying on someone else to get us around. I need to be able to fly the damn thing in case something happens."

"Done. We'll go after the midday meal. I'll give you the lessons myself. Now sit down. We need to chat."

"About?" she said and sat.

"Morijan. You've been searching information on her."

Leoni raised an eyebrow, not really surprised he knew that. "You having my activities monitored?"

"No. But searches on specific people set off alarms. Morijan is at the top of that list."

"I haven't found anything. I figure either I don't have the right security access or there's nothing to find, which is hard to believe."

"There's a lot on her, and your clearance is fine. I intentionally pulled any information on Morijan from our systems. No one needs to know about her."

"I need to know."

He considered that. "I'll tell you what I can."

"Coby, holding back information will not help me protect Nicola. I need to know about and understand all possible threats. I found a half dozen other names and read up as much as I could about them. But Morijan—Nicola is terrified of her, and I need to know why."

"Have you asked Nicola?"

"Twice this week. She shuts me down or changes the topic. Clearly, whatever happened is not a discussion Nicola is willing to have. Surely you see my point."

"I do." He leaned forward and settled his forearms on his legs. He kept his gaze on the floor. "Five years ago, Nicola went on a covert mission to a Nadyte base. She and Danou sent messages back and forth—those two were working to gain peace long before then—and she hadn't heard from him in a few weeks. She needed to get vital information to him, and the only way was to go in person."

He looked up and Leoni was shocked by the hollowness in his eyes. "I told her not to go. I outranked her at the time, but she ignored me, put together a team, and took off. She's always been impulsive, so you need to get used to that."

"She found Danou, delivered the data, and was an hour away from the Nadyte base when her group was captured by Morijan and her men. No one from the group was killed, but Nicola was badly injured in the fight. The only thing I know for certain is that when we made our rescue, Nicola was not with the others. The last anyone had seen of her was when her unconscious body was taken away. At the time, we didn't know what happened."

"I stayed behind. It took me four days, but I found her. Barely alive, and I got her out just in time. Morijan had beaten and tortured her." He shook his head as if to clear out the memory. "She was in a coma for two weeks, and when she woke, the first thing she did was ask for Jese. We brought him in, and she held him and cried."

"I asked her what happened, but she would only tell me that Morijan had taken her. My instinct, and the injuries she had, tell me what that bitch did to her."

"What did she do, exactly?"

Coby looked at his hands. "Someone raped her. Nic's body was covered in cuts and bruises, along with the injuries she'd gotten before being captured. But—Nic was naked and bleeding between her legs."

Anger burned deep in Leoni's chest. "How is it that Danou lets that fucking bitch live? I thought he and Nicola were friends."

"No proof." Coby looked her in the eyes, and Leoni saw her own anger and hatred reflected there. "Nic refused to talk about it. She would only say that Morijan had taken her from the group. When I found her, Morijan wasn't there. The Nadytes had bugged out the day before. Morijan left Nicola for dead."

"Is it because Morijan is Danou's sister that she's not in prison right now?"

"It's because she has a huge following—or did. I tried. Trust me, I tried. I put all my resources into finding her. Her followers protected her, and after a year, I was ordered to stop. I was reassigned to another mission."

"I somehow doubt you actually stopped looking."

"I kept going until last year when Nic and Danou called for a cease-fire. I can't have any military ops going on in Nadyte territory. Not until we get the merger settled."

"Why doesn't Danou go after her?"

"He's got people looking for her, but he's also got an unstable government. Danou isn't always sure who's on his side and who isn't."

“Any clue why Morijan is so dead set on getting Nicola? She said she didn’t give a shit about the war. So what the hell is it about?”

For a few seconds, Leoni wasn’t sure Coby would answer.

“Before Nic married Kel, she was with Morijan.”

“They were a couple?”

“They saw each other for a short time. They were young, and when Kel came along, Morijan no longer existed for Nic. Morijan did not take it well. Two years later, we were at war again and Morijan joined her family and fought on the side of the Nadyte.”

“If she’s a Nadyte, how were they even together?”

“The Nadyte and Tsalagi were united for nearly eighteen years after the First War. Nic and Morijan met in the first and only joint military academy. It’s also where Nic met Danou. For a time I thought Nic might be interested in Danou, but our cousin Angeel ended up with him. That was a shock. Those two are such opposites.”

“So Nicola knew Danou before the fighting ever started. That’s how those two managed to get this peace going?”

“Yes. Though at first, Morijan was on Danou’s side. She had this idea that if she helped Nic achieve peace, they could be together again.” He stopped to stare at his hands. “That changed when Morijan’s brother, Lade, was killed by Kel. Morijan hasn’t forgotten that, and since Kel was also killed, she’s focused her vengeance on Nic.”

“And she knows that Jese is Kel’s son, which is why Nicola is terrified to let him come home.”

“It is and she’s right. You’ve seen Morijan. She’s not about to stop until she’s done whatever it is she has in mind. But I’ll tell you this—I will kill her if she comes within a meter of Nic again. I’m not going to let her—”

“You’ll try, Coby. But you weren’t there this last time. No one can be sure when an attack will happen again, so I think our energy needs to be put toward finding Morijan before she finds Nicola. I suggest you, Ved, and I have a meeting to look at our options.”

“Agreed.” He got to his feet. “Now, let’s get something to eat and I’ll teach you to operate a trans.”

“Just one request,” she said and waited in the hallway for him to follow. “I’ve seen the armory, and I have a feeling there’s a trans in there that’s equipped with all kinds of weaponry and various gadgets that could come in handy. How about you hook me up with one?”

Coby’s grin was like that of a little boy with a dirty secret. “I can do better than that. Just you wait and see.”

That evening, Leoni took Nicola home in her new, TSR-910 trans. Coby had done more than give her a souped-up model. The thing had military-grade weaponry and support systems, as well as a protective shield that could withstand small-weapons fire. More amazing than that, to Leoni, was how easy it operated. The trans literally could pilot itself, though the manual operation was a lot like using a joystick for a video game. A light touch and good reflexes were all she needed to guide them to Nicola’s quarters.

Leoni parked the trans, cleared the house, then brought Nicola in. She was glad to be safe inside and finally allowed herself to relax.

Nicola kept unusually quiet the entire ride home and remained so once they got inside. Her

mood unsettled Leoni. She found Nicola sitting on the bed in her room, staring at the wall. A portrait of a man hung there. Leoni assumed he was Kel, but she got the impression Nicola wasn't looking at it or anything else.

"Hey, you okay?"

"No."

Leoni sat beside her and let her shoulder bump Nicola's. Nicola didn't pull away but leaned into her. "Talk to me. Tell me what's wrong."

"It's complicated, but I don't see how the council will ever come to an agreement at this point. We've spent weeks arguing over the same things, and I can't come up with a compromise. And this is only our part of the merger. I don't know that I'll be able to bring anything to Danou at our meeting next month."

"Bettol?"

"Who else?" Nicola flopped backwards onto the bed and sighed. "He's an ass who's so stuck in the old ways that he can't see the future staring him in the face. He wants us to become overseers of the Nadyte, as if they'll be our servants or slaves. He doesn't see them as people."

"How does he see them?"

"Commodities. They have a lot of resources that we're running low on. The Nadyte tribe has a larger portion of the planet than we do. Pockets of what they control are rich in minerals and building materials essential to our lives. We have the same types of areas, but over the last decade, we've had to mine them so much our supply will be gone in the next few decades. Bettol wants what they have, but it's men like him who put us in this conflict in the first place."

"Kick his ass off the council." Leoni almost laughed at Nicola's shocked look. "I'm serious."

"I can see that." She sat up and took Leoni's hand in hers. Leoni was surprised by the warmth of it, and though she felt she should pull away, she couldn't. Nicola was taken. She shouldn't be doing this.

Nicola said, "I would remove him if I could. But he has a great following, and the only chance I have to make this work is if he agrees with my plan."

"Want me to beat him up? Tell him he has to agree or I'll break his knees?" Leoni asked this with a straight face, but Nicola clearly saw her humor and they both laughed.

"I needed that. Thanks, Leoni."

"Sure." Leoni squeezed her hand and suddenly realized their faces were almost touching. She parted her lips and held her breath—and the door chime sounded.

Nicola sighed and stood, but Leoni moved ahead of her. "You stay here until I see who it is."

She left before Nicola could argue. The monitor at the front door showed an image of Ved. Leoni felt relief mixed with disappointment. She called out to Nicola and let him inside.

"Greetings, Leoni and Nic." He had a face-splitting grin on his face and a bouquet of the most vibrant, green flowers Leoni had ever seen. He went right for Nicola. He grabbed her into a bear hug, gave her a kiss on the cheek, and handed her the bouquet. "For you. I heard you had a bad day."

"They're beautiful." A sparkle shone in Nicola's eyes and jealousy overwhelmed Leoni. She slipped by Nicola to head to her own room. She needed space.

"Hey, where you off to?" Ved called out.

She increased her pace.

Nicola went after her, reaching Leoni before she got too far down the hallway. "Something wrong?" she asked, her face full of concern.

Leoni kept her voice low so Ved couldn't hear. "I figured you two would want some privacy."

“Privacy? For what?”

“For whatever you need privacy for. Look, I don’t know what I was thinking a few minutes ago, but I’m not about to come between you two.”

Nicola looked dumbfounded. “Come between who? Me and Ved?”

“Yes. Nicola, he told me he loves you and—”

“Of course he does.” She grabbed Leoni’s hand and maneuvered her back to the front room. “He loves me because he’s my husband’s brother and one of my closest friends.”

“He’s what?” Leoni had heard her, but now she felt like an idiot. Had she been thinking more with her head than her heart? She should have seen the likeness between Ved and Jese. The eyes were very similar, only Jese’s were more narrow, but that weird violet color was just as deep as Jese’s. How the hell had she missed that? “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Nicola squeezed her hand. “The flowers are to cheer me up.”

“It’s good to see a smile on your face, Nic.” Ved winked at her. “Now if you will excuse me, I have a date.”

“A date? Who? I didn’t know you were dating again.”

Ved rolled his eyes. “I don’t tell you everything, Nic.”

“You used to.”

Ved patted her cheek and smiled. “You’re busier than you used to be. Besides, you know him and if things don’t work out it’ll be—awkward.”

“I know him? Ved, please tell me you’re not dating Hearne.”

“My lips are sealed.” He kissed her on the cheek and made a hasty exit.

Nicola was grumpy as she took the flowers and shoved them into a vase. “Hearne is such a jackass. He’s hurt Ved twice now, and I can’t believe Ved would even consider going back to him.”

Leoni was listening, but her brain was still stuck on one detail. “Ved’s gay?”

“What?”

“Gay. Ved’s gay.”

“I don’t know that word. You’ll have to translate for me.”

“Really?” Leoni asked. “It means that he’s attracted to other men.”

“Oh, you mean a two-spirit. Yes. He’s always been like that. Only men for him.”

“Why am I not surprised you call him a two-spirit. I gotta ask Etsi just how much of our culture is mixed in with yours.”

“If that helps you, then you should.” Nicola stood in front of Leoni, once again so close that Leoni felt her soft breath. “It bothered you that Ved and I might be together?”

“Yeah. I can hardly believe it, but it did.”

“And why is that?”

“Because I like you, Nicola. I like you a lot.”

Nicola moved closer. Leoni felt a warmth in her belly that hadn’t been there in a long time.

“I like you, too.” She leaned close, her lips a heartbeat from Leoni’s and for one sweet moment, Leoni stopped thinking. Her body reacted, but not to the proximity of Nicola’s lips. To a premonition. She shoved Nicola to the ground and covered her with her own body.

Seconds later, an explosion rocked the house.

Chapter Eight

Nicola couldn't breathe. Something heavy lay on top of her. She was on her belly and tried to move, but the heavy weight kept her pinned. Her ears rang. What happened? She tried desperately to remember. Bright green flowers. Ved's date. Leoni's kiss. The explosion.

Panic gripped her. She had to find Leoni. She had to know she was okay.

"Easy. Take it easy," Leoni whispered in her ear, her warm breath against Nicola's skin. "Don't move."

Nicola looked over her shoulder and said, "Leoni—"

"Shh." Leoni placed fingers over Nicola's lips. She remained still for a long moment. "I'm going to check outside. Stay here. Don't make a sound. Got it?"

Nicola nodded and the weight lifted off her body. She lay there, trying to get her breathing to a normal level.

The explosion was close. Too close. Ved just left. Could it have been him? She was on her feet so fast she made herself dizzy, but she stumbled out of the house anyway.

Outside a bright orange blaze was so intense that she had to shield her eyes. Beyond the brightness, Nicola saw the remnants of a trans in the roadway, the remains on fire. "No! Ved!"

"He's alive." Leoni held her back from the fire. "I called for medical help. He's hurt pretty bad."

"Where is he?"

Leoni hesitated a split second and then guided her away from the wreckage. Ved lay on his stomach with his right arm twisted behind his back at an unnatural angle. Nicola dropped to her knees at his side, afraid to touch him. "Are you sure he's not—he's not—"

"Yes." Leoni knelt beside her and put an arm around Nicola. "Talk to him. Let him know you're here. But don't try to move him."

"Ved? Can you hear me?" Nicola leaned close to his ear and gently stroked his cheek. "I'm with you, sweetie. Hang in there. Please. I don't want to lose you."

Leoni entered the hospital in the midst of chaos. She and Nicola arrived with the medical unit but were quickly ushered into what Leoni assumed was a waiting room that could hold a perhaps dozen people, with seats built into the walls. Four windows would probably let light in during the day. Currently, a circular illumination disk provided light. An oblong table was situated in the center, and Leoni recognized three control pads for holos.

Nicola paced like a caged lioness. Leoni didn't dare stop her.

Coby was first to arrive. "Nic—"

"What the hell happened? Where was my security detail?"

"They were talking to Ved, and one of them saw movement around Ved's trans. All three of them started toward the trans when Ved was shot. He ordered them to give chase. The explosion happened a moment later. They lost the guy and came back to find Leoni with Ved. Leoni told them to get medical help."

"Who did this?"

"I don't know yet."

Nicola shoved her finger into his chest, and the big man backed up a step. “You find out, Colonel. Now.”

Coby snapped to attention, saluted, and left.

Nicola watched him leave, her jaw clenched and her hands balled into fists at her sides.

Leoni said, “Nic, maybe—”

“Corporal! Here. Now,” she barked at a young woman walking past her. “Get Prime Medic Beryl Daelis down here immediately. I want her on Commander Nyxi’s case.”

“Yes, General.” The woman hurried off.

Nicola stepped up to a semicircular counter. The uniformed man behind it jumped to his feet. “Report on Commander Nyxi’s condition.”

“General, the doctors have not reported yet. They’re still with the commander.”

“Find out,” she said through clenched teeth, seething. “Now.”

The man ran off and nearly into the closed doors to his destination. He fumbled with the thumb pad and shoved his way through.

Leoni joined Nicola at the counter. “Calm down.”

“What? I’m calm. I’m doing my job. I should have protected him by going to the secure base. If I had, Ved would be fine.”

“You don’t know that. He might have been the target. No one knows anything at this point.”

“I should. I’m the chief. It’s my responsibility.”

“Bullshit. You can’t be everywhere all the time, and you can’t possibly protect every person on the planet. You give yourself an impossible task.”

“What do you know?”

“I know that a good leader doesn’t go scaring the shit out of every subordinate she comes across. She doesn’t order her brother around like he’s just another soldier, and she sure as hell doesn’t act all crazed. You think you’re calm, but you’re not. You need to stop and think. You won’t get anywhere this way.”

Leoni was sure more venom was about to spew forth. She met Nicola’s glare and stared her down. Nicola went back to pacing.

Three hours later, Leoni found herself needing to stretch her tired muscles and walk around, but she didn’t want to leave Nicola’s side. Friends and family had come and gone, either staying in this room or moving on to another the hospital had set up. Ved was a very popular man.

Hearne, a handsome guy dressed in a pale blue tunic and dark pants, paced until Nicola ordered him to sit. He reluctantly obeyed. He perched on the edge of his chair, his hands folded and his eyes on the floor. The man didn’t dare look at Nicola.

As the time ticked by, Nicola’s adrenaline rush faded and she leaned against Leoni’s shoulder. Leoni put her arm around Nicola. It didn’t take long for Nicola to nod off, and Leoni was glad for it. Despite the uncomfortable position, at least Nicola was resting and not biting the heads off the soldiers around her.

Beryl had arrived when Ved first went into surgery, and she inserted herself into the team of doctors working on him. As if on cue, Beryl entered the room but motioned Leoni to let Nicola sleep. She sat beside Leoni and kept her voice low.

“He’s out of surgery.”

“How bad?”

“Bad. If he survives tonight, he has a chance.” Beryl glanced around the room, as if assessing who was there. “I’ve set up a room where you and Nicola can sleep. It’s not safe for her to go home yet, and she wouldn’t even if she could.”

“I know. I’ll wake her and get her settled for the night. Can she see him?”

Beryl nodded, stood, and stretched. “I’ve asked a colleague to push out everyone who’s waiting around.”

“What about you? Are you gonna get some sleep?”

“I’m as stubborn as my daughter. And since Ved is family, I won’t be going anywhere. I’ll be in my office.”

“Good to know. Thanks.”

“Get her to drink this.” She handed Leoni something similar to a small bottle of water. “I put a sedative in there. Otherwise she’ll just nap and won’t get any real sleep. She’ll be angry if she figures it out.”

“I’m not telling her.”

“Good. Take care of her.” Beryl walked away, pulling Hearne with her. Leoni was pretty sure she heard Beryl telling him to go home.

“Hey,” Leoni said softly, giving Nicola a little shake. “Wake up.”

“Ved?” Nicola mumbled and scrubbed at her face with her hands. “I thought I heard Mother talking. Is he out of surgery?”

“Yes. Your mom was just here.” Leoni took her hand and waited for Nicola to look at her. “He’s not doing all that well. She said if he makes it until morning he has a chance. I’m sorry.”

“Can I see him?” she asked.

“Sure. Here, take a drink of this first. You need to keep hydrated.” Leoni winced at not being completely truthful, but was happy Nicola emptied the bottle. “Soon as you’ve seen him, we’re going into a room nearby that your mom set up so we can get some sleep. Deal?”

“Deal.”

Leoni kissed her forehead and pulled her to her feet. “Let’s go check on Ved.”

They walked hand in hand to the surgery bay. Any time Leoni’d seen someone fresh out of surgery, wires and tubes and all kinds of equipment surrounded the bed. Instead, Ved lay there as if at home asleep. There were no wires or tubes. No monitors. A holo hovered behind his head with several graphics and numbers displayed. Leoni assumed it tracked his progress. He didn’t even have a blanket over him. He was dressed in a white shirt and slacks. His face was bruised and cut, A particularly nasty gash ran from his left eye to the tip of his ear.

Leoni stood back as Nicola went to his side. She put his hand in hers and held it to her lips. She was talking to him, but Leoni couldn’t hear her words. She didn’t need to. After a few minutes, she whispered, “C’mon.”

Nicola didn’t argue as Leoni guided her to a room across from Ved’s. Two beds were set up and ready, and all Leoni needed to do was get Nicola in one. She managed that well enough, but when she turned to lay down in the second bed, Nicola grabbed her hand.

“Stay with me. Please?”

Leoni’s heart melted at the pain in Nicola’s eyes. The bed wasn’t really wide enough for two, but Leoni curled up beside Nicola, wrapped an arm around her, and allowed herself some much-needed sleep.

The sound of the door opening wasn't loud, but it woke Leoni. She quickly adjusted herself to pull away from Nicola enough that she could draw her weapon. Where the hell was the security detail? She pointed her blaster toward the doorway. Someone entered and Leoni said, "Stop or I'll shoot."

He held his hands up, and though she couldn't see him clearly in the dark, she recognized his voice. "It's me, Coby. We need to talk."

"Sec." Leoni carefully extricated herself, even though Nicola was dead to the world. She moved into the hallway with Coby. The security guards were still there, and she nodded to them as they walked away. "What's up?"

"We found explosives timed to go off within five minutes of being set. The evidence points to Ved as the target. I suspect he came out of Nic's quarters too early or the bomber might have succeeded in killing him. There's a good chance that person is hurt, too. I'm waiting for reports from all medical centers, but nothing so far."

"Is this something Morijan would do?"

He shook his head. "She wouldn't waste her time. She's only after Nic. We think the Brothers of Seven are involved."

"Who are they?"

"A group of fanatics that claim to be the only 'pure' Forensians. The group was started by seven men who claimed to have traced their ancestry back to the first people to live here. They're so strong in their claim that they go so far as to say the Tsalagi and Nadyte are intruders and should be forcefully removed or eradicated. They've been responsible for thousands of deaths."

"Sound like terrorists to me."

"The unfortunate thing is they've existed for centuries and no one is sure how many of them there are. They blend in with society—basically hiding in plain sight."

"So you think they attacked Ved? Why him?"

"He's close to Nic. He's head of her security. There are lots of reasons."

"Fuck."

"They could even be trying to stop the merger."

"How does killing Ved do that?"

"Ved is her best friend," Coby said. "If he dies, it could significantly delay the merger."

"I don't see how. Nicola is stronger than that. She'd move on."

"I agree, but not everyone knows Nic that well. It's logical this would hurt her enough to stop her work."

Leoni leaned against a wall and sighed. "What are we going to do? You know damn well we can't put Nicola into hiding, which would be my suggestion."

"I thought about that, too. You're right. We'd have to force her, and I don't want to do that. She's not leaving this building until she knows Ved is all right."

"So that leads me back to my question. What to do next?"

"I'm going to have a talk with Danou. We have to take care of two things. One is to find Morijan, and I want to send a team into Nadyte territory to look for her. I know Nic won't agree, but I'm going over her head this time. Second is that I have another team working to find out who set the explosion and shot Ved."

"And in the meantime," Leoni said, "I think we need more security around your family. Especially Jese. I'm keeping Nicola here at command. We'll set up a sleeping space in the wing

where her office is so she's not moving around too much."

"Agreed. I'll have someone see to it. I've already moved Jese. I can't take the chance on letting him go to school anymore, so I've put him in a safe house."

"Don't tell me where, just tell me he'll be okay."

"He'll be fine. Tell Nic what's going on. I may not be around for a few days. When I think it's okay, I'll bring Jese to see her, but no comms."

"Done." Leoni pushed away from the wall and waited for Coby to disappear around a corner. As soon as he did, the security detail returned. She went back to the room, and Nicola was just coming out the door. Leoni said, "That was Coby."

"I heard. I need to talk to him."

"He's already gone." Leoni led her back inside, closed the door, and pointed to the bed. "Have a seat."

"Tell me what he said."

Leoni gave Nicola the information she had. "I think you should try to go back to sleep."

"I don't know that I can. Ved's gravely injured, I can't talk to my son, and my entire family is in danger. Now, more than ever. I know Coby has a list of people and groups that would like to see the Nadyte leave our planet permanently. Any one of them could be behind this." She leaned against Leoni, her eyes droopy. The sedative was clearly still in her system. "I need to get to my office. There's a lot of work to be done. Plus I've got to alert the council to what's going on."

"That was done by Coby hours ago. You've got an amazing group of people around you, Nicola. Coby contacted Reem and he's handling the council. They all understand that you need to be here."

"Reem can't handle Bettol. He'll run right over him."

"Can the council make any arrangements or agreements without your approval?" Leoni waited while Nicola considered a reply. "Can they go to Danou and seal any deals without you?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Then everything's fine. Nothing's so critical it can't wait a couple of days. Danou will understand. The people of Forensia will understand. Your best friend was nearly killed."

Nicola didn't answer right away. Instead, she kissed Leoni on the cheek.

"What was that for?"

"For being more than my guardian. For being my friend."

"You're welcome. Now, will you please go back to sleep?"

Nicola lay back down and pulled Leoni with her. Leoni acquiesced easily, putting her arm around Nicola and holding her until she snored softly.

Leoni had no idea how she'd do it, but she was more determined than ever to protect Nicola. No matter the cost.

The next morning, Leoni stood in the corner of Ved's room, watching the medics come and go while Nicola sat at Ved's side. She held his hand most of the time. She only left when Leoni insisted she eat.

Leoni was at a loss as to what she should do. She considered using her comm pad to research the Brothers of Seven, but she didn't want to take her eyes off Nicola, or anything going on around her. Not that watching Nicola was all that difficult. Even in her disheveled state, the woman was

beautiful.

“He is Kel’s twin.”

Leoni had her hand on her weapon before she realized Patra had spoken. Again, the woman managed to enter a room without Leoni’s notice. She’d have to find out how she did that.

“I assume you mean Ved?”

“Yes.” Patra kept her voice quiet. “They were always close, and when Kel and Nicola fell in love, the three of them were inseparable.”

“I figured they were close.”

“It is more than that. Ved helps her keep Kel’s memory alive. Nearly as much as Jese does.”

“She must have loved Kel a lot.”

“She loved him enough.” Patra stopped and Leoni waited for her to continue. “When Kel died, he did so to make sure that Nicola and their child were safe. He was her husband and best friend. His death was gruesome, and Nicola witnessed it. Something broke in her that day, and she has not been the same since.”

“I don’t think anyone could be the same after that.” Leoni suddenly recalled the vivid image of Tayanita’s bloody hand and swallowed the lump in her throat.

“Yes. When we lose someone we love, we are forever changed.”

“He’s not going to die, Etsi.”

“That was not my point.” Patra rested her hand on Leoni’s, which Leoni had gripped into a tight fist. Patra gently pried her fingers open and held Leoni’s hand in both of hers. “Those memories make us who we are. We must learn to put them into a place that will allow us to move on with our lives.”

“I have moved on,” Leoni said, despite the tears she felt on her cheeks. “My wife died. I had nothing else to do but keep on living. Why are you bringing this up?”

Patra turned kind eyes on her. “Because you must choose, adatiya.”

“Choose? Choose what?”

“To live in the past or the present.” Patra released her hand and turned her gaze to Nicola. “So must she. If you choose, you can help each other.”

Leoni also watched Nicola, listening to her soft words for Ved. “I understand the choice, Etsi.”

Patra walked over to Nicola and put her hand on Nicola’s back. They spoke quietly for a few moments, then Patra left.

Nicola kissed Ved on the cheek and joined Leoni. “Care to go for a walk with me? I need to move around.”

“Sure. Where would you like to go?”

“The park.” For the first time since Ved was injured, her smile reached her eyes.

“I’m willing to do anything for you, Nicola.” Leoni held Nicola’s hand and placed a soft kiss on her fingers. “Please remember that.”

Their eyes met and Leoni caught her breath. She could fall in love with this woman and that terrified her.

Nicola dropped her gaze to their hands. “I know,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. She gripped her fingers around Leoni’s. “Let’s go.”

The park occupied the center of Alpha Base and connected directly to the command center.

Leoni had memorized the area. As they strolled along a path that circled the lake, she was hyperaware of the guards that flanked them. Three more followed, and another group would be on the opposite side of the lake.

Leoni wasn't especially happy about an evening walk, but Nicola needed to get rid of her pent-up energy. Lights brightened the path, but Nicola chose a darkened area to stop. She glanced back at Leoni before going down a slope that led to the water. She stopped beside a boulder, leaned against it, and motioned Leoni to join her.

Leoni stood beside her, alert to any movement and sounds around them. She really didn't like being outside and vulnerable.

"You can come closer," Nicola said, her voice quiet. "I'd like it if you were closer to me."

"I need—"

"I need you," Nicola said. "Please."

Leoni settled beside Nicola and leaned against her. It felt so natural that Leoni began to relax. She slipped her arm around Nicola's waist. Nicola let her head drop onto Leoni's neck with a deep sigh.

"How did you know the explosion was going to happen?"

"Huh? I'm not following you."

Nicola said, "You were about to kiss me, but we ended up on the ground instead—before the explosion. How did you know?"

"I'm not sure. Patra told me I'd notice changes. That my senses would be heightened. I just know when you're in danger. I've sensed it each time and reacted to it. One thing I learned as a cop was to go with my gut. And my gut is very much in tune with you."

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For being in tune with me."

"You're welcome." Leoni kissed her softly on the lips. "I'm sorry this is happening to you."

"Ved—he doesn't deserve this."

Nicola was pensive and Leoni gave her a gentle nudge. "Tell me what you're thinking."

"That I should leave. There's a base at the far end of our territory. Whoever is coming after me can do it there, away from my family."

"And Coby said you'd never leave." Leoni hugged her. "I think it's a good idea—as soon as we can get people over there to make sure it's secure."

Nicola laughed. "It's secure, Leoni. So secure that it's hidden. Just like that tunnel in my quarters."

"A secret base? Seriously?"

"Yes. It's been there since before the First War in case of an attack on our government. It's never been used that I'm aware of. It's very basic and might need some upgrades, but it could work."

"I'll talk to Coby tonight. We'll see what we can work out."

"Thanks." Nicola straightened and maneuvered so she was standing between Leoni's legs, her hands on Leoni's shoulders. She dipped her head and caught Leoni's cool lips.

Leoni reacted by pulling Nicola closer. She felt the heat from Nicola as her own body responded to her kiss.

The kiss intensified, but when Leoni's hands found their way beneath Nicola's shirt, Nicola pulled away. Leoni immediately regretted her actions. "I'm sorry," she said as her breathing calmed. "I shouldn't have—"

Nicola kissed her lips to quiet her. “Shh. That’s not it. It’s just that I’d rather our first time not be in such public view.”

Leoni felt the burn of passion travel through her body, and she ached for release. Nicola would be the death of her. She tried to tamp her hunger and said, “I understand. Should we head back?”

“No. I’d like to stay here awhile longer.”

Leoni pulled her closer and enjoyed the contact. “As long as you want.”

Chapter Nine

It took three days for Ved to regain consciousness, and Nicola was by his side when he did. She moved to allow the medical team to check him over, patiently waiting for them to finish. Once they were gone, she sat next to his bed and held his hand.

“How are you feeling?”

“Like I did after my first space jump.”

Nicola recalled that day vividly. Ved became violently ill as he tumbled from the shuttle and toward the space station. His suit lost pressure, and he had to stay in an isolation/decompression chamber for a week. “You don’t look as bad as you did then. Your skin was a lot greener.”

Ved tried to laugh, and the face he made showed how much pain it caused. “Thanks. So, has Hearne been here?”

“You would remember him,” Nicola grumbled. “He was here the night you got hurt. Mom sent him home once you were out of surgery. He hasn’t been back.” She squeezed his hand. “You’re better off.”

“Maybe. Now tell me exactly what happened.”

“What do you remember?”

Ved took a moment to reply. “I was talking to the guards at your door and saw someone next to my trans. We went to check it out and that’s it. I woke up here.”

Nicola filled in the missing pieces for him, including all that Coby was doing. “You’ll have round-the-clock guards on your door, including your quarters, and no complaining. I outrank you.”

“I hope you picked some handsome guys so at the very least I can be entertained.”

Nicola patted him on the head. “They’re all women.”

“You’re mean.”

“No, I’m smart. I want you safe. And I handpicked each one of them. Your medics say you’ll be here a minimum of two weeks. Six weeks rest before coming back to active duty. No point arguing since my mother assigned herself as your lead medic.”

“That’s not fair. Beryl’s meaner than you.”

“And she only gets worse if you don’t do what she says,” Beryl said as she entered the room and stood on the opposite side of Ved.

“Can I have something to eat?” Ved asked.

“Are you going to rest?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Then I’ll get you a meal. Nicola, say goodbye. You can visit him for a while longer tomorrow.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Nicola kissed him on the cheek and left. Leoni was waiting for her in the hallway.

“How’s he doing?”

“Weak, but fine. He’ll be bedridden for the next two months.”

“I imagine he’ll be very cranky about that.”

Nicola scoffed. “He’s already cranky. But I told him Hearne hasn’t been to see him, so that might be why.”

“Hearne was just here.”

“He was?”

Leoni grinned. “I told him, in no uncertain terms, to keep his ass away from Ved.”

“You did?”

“Hell yes. You said he wasn’t good enough for Ved, and after talking to him for a couple of minutes, I had to agree. So, I explained to him that if he came around again I’d be inclined to rip his head off.”

Nicola laughed. She was sure that Leoni had delivered the threat with absolute believability. “I would have enjoyed seeing his face.”

“It was priceless.” Leoni grinned, clearly pleased with herself. “When he figured out that I’m the adatiya, his face turned white and he practically ran away. I wouldn’t be surprised if he peed his pants.”

“Thanks for that, Leoni.”

“Ved’s a good man.”

“He is indeed.” Nicola glanced back at the closed door to his room. “And he’s in good hands now, so I think it’s time I get back to work.”

“No problem there. While you were in with Ved, I arranged to have some personal items moved to your emergency quarters at command. Coby took Zara to your quarters, and she gathered up what she figured you’d need, since we won’t be moving into the secret base until tomorrow. At least you’ll have some of your things.”

“Thanks.”

“And Coby gave me this.” Leoni handed her a data disk. “It’s from Jese.”

Nicola took it carefully from her and held it against her heart. “I’ll watch it tonight. Thanks.”

“Shall we go?”

“Please. I need to get cleaned up.”

Leoni sniffed in the air. “Yes. I believe you do.”

“Ha ha.” Nicola playfully slapped her arm and headed down the hallway. “I need a guardian, not a smart-ass.”

“You have no idea how smart my ass is.”

Nicola glanced over her shoulder as Leoni came to walk by her side. “I don’t right now, but I would really like to find out. I’m especially curious about what it looks like.”

The look on Leoni’s face was adorable. Nicola stopped and kissed her sweetly. “Maybe later.”

Leoni walked a bit ahead of her and mumbled. “Maybe.”

Leoni spent most of the day working out details with Lieutenant Pram, Ved’s second in command, to get Nicola to the secret base. The whole thing reminded her of the World War II era bomb shelters the US built. From the schematics she had, this base wasn’t much different. Completely underground, it had only tunnels for entrances. The two main tunnels were over twenty miles each in length.

The complex was at least three miles in diameter with a bay in the center of it that could hold two ships. Similar to the armory at the command center. Spaceships. Leoni was tempted to ask to go for a ride in one and laughed out loud. The idea was so absurd. Even though Ved had shown her the ships, the idea of getting in one and going into outer space was just—crazy.

She shook her head and went back to studying the schematic. She needed to know her way around before they got there the next day. Especially any points of egress.

For some weird reason, she kept going back to the two-ship bay. She really wanted to ride in the damn spaceship. Again, she laughed.

“What’s so funny in here?” Nicola poked her head into Leoni’s office. She was using the door that connected their sleeping area with the room Leoni was using. Room may have been a bit generous since it began its life as a storage room. The desk took up most of the space, at total of about six meters square.

“I’m just looking at the layout of the secret base.”

“And that’s funny?” Nicola walked in and closed the door. Two steps and she was in front of Leoni.

“Um, kinda.” Leoni leaned back in her chair and pointed at the holo in the center of her desk. “I want to take a trip in one of those.”

“Ah. Well, we have a fleet of two thousand ships. Most of them are *Gatsanula* Class and can reach the Third Moon in three hours.”

“You named them *gatsanula*? That means fast.”

“Appropriate.”

“Please tell me you don’t have a class of spaceships called *usaknola*.”

“I don’t know that word.”

“Good. Because it means slow.”

“If that were the case, we’d have lost the war a long time ago.” Nicola leaned close behind Leoni. Her warm breath tickled Leoni’s ear. “Work time is over. Why don’t you join me?”

Leoni felt a familiar warmth in her belly and stood so fast she almost knocked Nicola over. They were standing toe-to-toe between the desk and the wall. Leoni found the close proximity inviting. “What do you have in mind?” She didn’t have to ask. Nicola’s eyes told her all she needed to know. Without another word, Nicola led Leoni to her temporary bedroom.

Once the door was closed and the lights dimmed, Nicola unbuttoned Leoni’s uniform. Leoni was suddenly shaking and as nervous as a teenager on her first date.

“What’s wrong?” Nicola asked. She trailed soft kisses along Leoni’s neck and pushed the shirt over her shoulders and off her arms. “You seem anxious.”

“Me? Why would—why would I be anxious?” God, this woman turned her on.

“I can’t imagine why you would be.” Nicola worked Leoni’s tee shirt loose from her trousers and pulled it swiftly over her head. She stared hungrily at Leoni’s breasts. Her hands were warm when she cupped them, and Leoni nearly screamed for her to take the damn bra off already. “You’re a beautiful woman, Leoni Wolf.” Nicola’s eyes found hers, and the smoldering look was almost too much for Leoni to take. “I’ve wanted you for a long time. From the first time I saw you.”

Leoni didn’t dare move as Nicola unfastened the bra. Nicola held her breasts gently, never taking her eyes off Leoni’s. Leoni swallowed hard. “You wanted to have sex with me when I beat you up and handcuffed you?”

“Well maybe not the moment I met you.”

“That’s what I thought.”

Nicola’s hot mouth was suddenly over one of her taut nipples and speech left her completely.

“So beautiful.”

Leoni leaned into Nicola. She fumbled a bit on the buttons and stopped Nicola for a moment. She pressed her lips to Nicola’s in a passion-filled kiss as she backed her up to the bed. She wanted Nicola naked and under her in the worst way. She wanted to make love to Nicola in ways no one ever had.

“Off,” Leoni said, removing pieces of Nicola’s clothing in rapid succession. Nicola helped her, and once they were both naked, Leoni pushed Nicola onto the bed, straddled her hips, and stared down at her. Leoni’s heart hammered in her chest. The nerves had given way to lust as she leaned

down to kiss Nicola again, letting her hands wander over Nicola's trim body.

Nicola responded to Leoni's touches, arching her back when Leoni's tongue traced circles around her nipples. Leoni trailed kisses down Nicola's abdomen, hovering just above the apex between her legs.

"Don't—don't stop. Please."

"I'm not planning on it," Leoni said as she took Nicola's wrists and lightly held them down on either side of her head. "I'm going to love you, Nicola."

"Please..."

Leoni started her ministrations again, but she paused when Nicola tried to guide her with her hands. She pressed Nicola's wrists down again. "Ah-ah. I got this." Leoni moved so she was nearly nose-to-nose with Nicola. "I'm going to make love to you, Nicola. Just relax and—"

Something changed in Nicola's expression. Her eyes fixed on a spot above Leoni's shoulders. She thrashed around and pulled away from Leoni with such force that she knocked her off the bed.

Leoni landed on her side. Her face smacked the side table. Blood gushed from her nose, and she scrambled to her feet. "What the hell?"

Nicola jumped out of the bed and pushed past Leoni. She stopped when she reached the door and braced her arms between the doorframe and the wall. Her entire body shook.

Leoni ran for the bathroom, and it took ten minutes for the bleeding to stop. Fortunately, her nose wasn't broken and she was able to clean herself up, wondering all the while what had gone wrong. Had she triggered some bad experience from Nicola's past?

She double-checked her face in the mirror before going back into the bedroom. Nicola was still in the corner, the muscles in her shoulders sharply defined.

Leoni approached her carefully. "Nicola?"

She didn't answer. Leoni wasn't sure she'd even been heard.

"Talk to me. What's going on?"

Nicola's shoulders finally sagged.

"Nic, please. Tell me what's wrong."

She started sobbing. Leoni wrapped her arms around Nicola and held her close. The sobbing got worse as Nicola turned in her arms and buried her head in Leoni's neck. "It's okay. I've got you."

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice trembling. "I'm sorry, Leoni."

"Don't be sorry," she soothed. "I should be sorry. I must have done something wrong."

"No." Nicola leaned back so she was looking into Leoni's eyes. "It had nothing to do with you." She caressed Leoni's cheek. "You did everything so right."

Leoni kissed the palm of Nicola's hand. "Talk to me, Nic. Tell me what's going on. Please?"

"I—I can't. I just can't." Her red-rimmed eyes filled with new tears, and Leoni pulled her into a tight embrace.

"It's okay."

"It's not," Nicola said. "It's not."

"It is." Leoni moved back enough to swipe the wetness from Nicola's face. "It is. Why don't we lie down? I think you need to rest."

"Let me go to the bathroom first." Nicola kissed her on the cheek and went to the bathroom. She was back in a few minutes. "Leoni—the blood—"

"No big deal. I heal quick, remember?" She nudged Nicola to the bed, where they both settled in. Nicola lay on her right side, and Leoni snuggled in behind her, spooning her and keeping an arm firmly around Nicola's waist. "Just relax, sweetheart."

“Promise you won’t leave me,” she said.

Leoni hugged her and kissed the back of her neck. She should have been more aware of Nicola’s past. Next time she would be more careful with her. Right now, she only wanted to hold Nicola. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Nicola woke with a headache but was comfortably situated in Leoni’s embrace. She snuggled closer and smiled when Leoni kissed her bare shoulder.

“How are you feeling?” Leoni asked.

“Better. How’s your nose?” Nicola felt Leoni rub her nose against her back.

“Fine.”

“Good to know.” She stretched and turned around so she was facing Leoni. “Thank you.”

Leoni kissed her forehead. “No thanks necessary.”

“Thanks anyway.” Nicola touched Leoni’s face. “Stay with me.”

“I’m right here.”

“No, I mean stay with me. Live with me.”

Leoni smiled with such love in her eyes that Nicola choked up. “Of course. I’m your guardian. I won’t let anyone else near this lovely body of yours.”

Nicola kissed her lips and felt the need to go further, but there wouldn’t be enough time. She sighed heavily. “I wish we could stay right here.”

“You’re the chief and a general. I’m sure you can make it happen.”

“It’s nearly five. Coby will be knocking on the door in an hour. You set it up for us to leave early.”

“Oh, so now it’s my fault?” Leoni lifted one eyebrow, and it made Nicola laugh. “What?”

“You’re adorable, and yes, it’s your fault.” She kissed her again and got out of bed. “Now get your cute ass up and going.”

“You think my ass is cute?”

Nicola rolled her eyes. “I think you need to get out of bed and get dressed before Coby gets here.”

“But you think my ass is cute.”

“And so will Coby when he gets here.” Nicola found a clean uniform and got dressed. She was checking her hair in a mirror when Leoni came up behind her and placed a very wet kiss on the back of her neck. She was still naked, and Nicola had to look away. It would be so tempting to forget the things that waited her on the other side of the door and spend the entire day with Leoni. She shut the thought down. There would be plenty of time to explore their new relationship later. Even if her libido was ready now.

“Are you worried about Coby seeing me nude? Or are you worried that he’ll see me in your quarters?”

“Neither. But if you stand there much longer without any clothes on, he’ll see more than you in here and naked.”

Leoni laughed and got dressed.

Two hours later Nicola and Leoni's trans emerged from one of the tunnels and into the gigantic bay of the hidden base. Her eyes traveled along the dome roof, to the vastness of the empty bay. The far wall was a spec in the distance. Four baseball stadiums could fit side by side and still have room for a parking garage. She took two steps from the trans and tried to take it all in. Nicola bumped her gently as she exited.

"It's roomier than I expected," Nicola said.

"Roomier? We could put half the town of Cherokee in here." Leoni's gaze followed the smooth, metallic walls to a domed ceiling. A seam down the center made her wonder if it opened up. "This place is gargantuan."

"It might not seem so once the ships are here."

"How many ships fit in here?"

"It can hold three Gatsanula Class ships. By tomorrow we'll have three shuttles, two evac ships, and one Gatsanula here. We'll need the battleship to get to the First Moon."

"The First Moon. That's where you're meeting Danou and Angeel, right?"

"Yes. It's their territory, but historically, the Nadyte have always come to the Tsalagi for any negotiations. I think it's time we went to them."

Leoni wasn't so sure that was a good idea, but Nicola had a point. "When do you figure that'll be?"

"Not for another couple of weeks. I still have Bettol to deal with."

"And the Brothers of Seven," Coby said as he joined them. He motioned them to follow and headed for the door that would lead to the corridor that eventually would take them to Nicola's quarters. The place was so large, Leoni wondered how long it would take to walk there.

"Anything new on them?" Nicola asked as they moved along at a steady pace.

"We've linked them to the attack on Ved, but not to anyone specific. I was able to trace the explosives to a financial account we know belongs to a member of the Brothers of Seven, but closed right after the transaction took place."

"So you reached a dead end," Leoni said.

"We know what group was behind it. It's not really a dead end. It's enough that we can legally follow them and monitor all their activities. It's only a matter of time before they do something that will give us enough evidence to shut them down."

"Radicals like them are never easy to stop. They always find a way to come back," Nicola said.

"Cut off the head of the snake, and it grows a new one." Leoni wasn't sure about this new threat. The list of people after Nicola just kept growing. "Is Lieutenant Pram here?" she asked.

"He's got everything set up and ready for us," Coby said. "There's a group of offices just outside the main command area. We're all in those. Nic's quarters are directly behind command, and your quarters—"

"Are with me," Nicola said. Coby stopped and turned to stare at her. The expression on his face made Leoni laugh. "What?"

"You could have told me ahead of time," Coby said. "Would have made things easier."

"Sorry, but we were a little busy last night to stop and make a call."

Leoni saw the blush form on Coby's face and almost felt sorry for him. "Nic, you're being mean."

"He earned it. It's what he gets for not telling me about him and Zara."

"You're still holding that against me?" Coby said as they continued on. "That was eight years ago!"

Nicola huffed. “Yes, and I had to walk in on the two of you to find out you were dating. Not that what you were doing could be called dating.”

Coby walked slightly ahead of them, so Leoni couldn’t see his face, but she could guess he was blushing again. She hip-checked Nicola playfully. “Wow. Remind me not to piss you off.”

“Oh, you don’t want to see me really angry. But I do love embarrassing him.”

“Can I expect to get that treatment one day?”

Nicola bumped her back. “As long as you’re good, no.”

“Oh, I can be good.” Leoni rubbed her hand over Nicola’s ass. “Real good.”

When Coby reached the end of the corridor he turned around and narrowed his gaze at Nicola. “What are you smiling about now?”

“That’s none of your business,” she said matter-of-factly and entered the door to her quarters. Leoni shrugged at Coby and followed.

Chapter Ten

Leoni scheduled a meeting with Coby and Pram the following morning. She'd moved into the office next to Nicola's since it had a connecting door. The holo on her desk showed the outlay of Forensia and the surrounding moons. Five in total, yet only three were habitable. The closest moon was the First Moon, not the most unique name, and where the Nadyte kept their base of operation. They chose the moon to keep their chief and governing body safe from the Tsalagi. The upside being the lush meadows of vegetation. Lots of farmlands, water, and trees made the moon self-sufficient.

The Second Moon, the other one that could sustain life, didn't have much in the way of vegetation. According to the reports she read, it had one purpose—as a penal colony. The facility took up half the moon and looked more like a city than a prison.

The Third Moon was a giant desert with a breathable atmosphere. Damn weird. Five moons for one planet in a galaxy of a dozen other planets she knew nothing about. She could live on a moon. Who the hell lived on a moon?

Leoni changed the holo to bring up a schematic of the ship that would take them to the First Moon. She wanted to memorize the layout before they departed.

"Enough!" Nicola's voice rang out with such force that Leoni was on her feet and through the connecting door in a matter of seconds Nicola was alone in her office. She stood in front of a vid screen that hung on the wall beside the connecting door. Leoni stood on the threshold and watched Nicola. Whoever she was talking to had her totally pissed off.

"We are not here to sling insults or bring up incidents from the past. You are adults and will act like them. Councilman Bettol, you will remember that I am the chief and will address me as such. You will respect my title."

A few murmurs rumbled before Bettol said, "Yes, Chief Daelis. My apologies. May I speak?"

Nicola glared at the vid screen, and Leoni wondered if the heat from her anger was withering the idiot councilman. Nicola was stock still, her hands cupped behind her back. She was waiting him out, and Leoni really wished she could stand beside Nicola and watch him squirm.

"You may."

"Thank you, Chief Daelis. It is my considered opinion that you do not go to the First Moon. I understand your reasoning, but your safety is more important. Going that far into Nadyte territory is not wise."

Leoni watched a host of emotions cross Nicola's face as she considered what Bettol was saying. Nicola's gaze flicked to Leoni and back to the vid screen. "I'll have the best of our troops with me. The adatiya is with me. I'll be fine. My safety is not what we need to discuss. We have a resolution proposed and must vote on it now. The sooner I can take this to Chief Frew and his council the better."

"Chief Daelis, I respectfully disagree." This was a new voice. Leoni leaned against the doorframe to listen.

Nicola said, "Head Council Reem, that is your choice and so noted."

"Thank you, Chief. But I must stress the importance of this issue. I would respectfully request that a new location, one not known to anyone other than you and Chief Frew, be chosen. Only your security details should have the specifics. None of the council should be given—"

Chaos erupted before Reem could finish.

Nicola waited a few seconds before she shouted, "Order!" She gave them no time to calm down

and spoke over the dying chatter. “Head Council Reem has a good suggestion, and I will take it to my security advisors. Councilman Mrez, please call a vote on the resolution.”

Leoni grinned and gave Nicola a wink before going back to her office. She was just getting settled again when Coby and Pram walked in. “Your timing is perfect.”

“As always,” Coby said as he sat down. “What’s going on?”

Leoni told them about the council meeting. “I think Reem has a good idea. We’ll continue to plan for a trip to the First Moon and let everyone think that’s where we’re heading. In the meantime, we need a new spot.”

Pram said, “Colonel, I have a suggestion for an alternate location.”

“Let’s have it,” Coby said.

Pram started up the holo on the wall of Leoni’s office so all three of them could stand in front of it. “The Nadyte have control of the northern section of the Goam Province. We control the south. Our base is staffed with twenty special forces units and seven Drake Class carriers. The Nadyte have some special forces units there, as well, but no carriers or scout ships, according to the latest intelligence on the area. They have two hundred fighter ships, older, Gent Class mostly.”

“Gent Class fighters don’t have a chance against those Drake carriers,” Leoni said. The men looked surprised by her comment. “I’ve been doing a lot of homework. Why would the Nadyte have inferior fighters? They have to know you have those carriers.”

Coby said, “The Nadyte are running out of resources to build weapons, much less fighters and other ships. At this point, without the merger, we’d have them beaten in roughly two years. Problem is, we have some resources that are running low as well. We’d make it through two years, but it’d be damn hard on our citizens.”

“Understood,” Leoni said. The holo showed her a three-dimensional map of the area, denoting the location of both bases. Between them was a mountain range. On the Nadyte side were several bodies of water, all connected by a highway of rivers. Not much in the way of land there. On the Tsalagi side were mostly foothills and rocky terrain. Neither one was the best place for any ground fighting. That might be a good thing, but Leoni wasn’t a soldier. “Am I correct in expecting that any real fighting will be in the air?”

“Usually is,” Coby said. “Both bases have weapons capable of shooting down fighters. The Nadyte have managed to do damage to our ships, but nothing serious enough to keep them out of service.”

“Then why haven’t you taken their base?”

Pram spoke up, “We did it once, but they brought in reinforcements and took it back. It’s been a give-and-take for many years.”

“A stalemate. That’s why you think it makes a good location?”

“Yes,” Pram said. “But the best part is in the actual mountain.” He touched the holo image and brought an area into focus that was near the center of the range and located between two peaks. As the image magnified, Leoni could make out what looked like buildings carved into the rock. It reminded her of the adobe homes in the southwestern mountains in America. The difference here was the buildings were made from a grayish stone and came complete with doors and windows. They looked as though they hadn’t been used in a long time.

“And who made these?” Leoni asked.

“Both sides. After the First War.” Pram moved the image to zoom in on the buildings. “This has always been an area of contention, due to the presence of *brewst*. Mining operations were located there and operated from these buildings. They also housed the workers along with medical facilities, cafeteria, anything they might need. It was, at one time, a great success.”

Coby took up the story. "But a year before the Second War broke out, a major accident occurred. Fifteen men were killed and dozens injured. Both tribes blamed the other. The accident couldn't have been prevented, but that didn't matter to most people, especially those who were there."

Pram said, "People threw blame at each other and half a year later we were at war again. I think it'd be an appropriate place to start the process of permanent peace."

Coby clapped Pram on the shoulder. "Well done."

Pram gave him a curt nod. "Colonel, I suggest we prepare one of the Drake carriers to transport Chief Daelis. We'll need a full crew, but withhold the coordinates until we're ready to leave."

"Good plan. Thanks, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir. With your permission, I'd like to get started."

Coby saluted him. "Dismissed."

Pram saluted and left the office quickly, closing the door behind him.

Leoni continued to stare at the screen. "Coby, I don't have military experience, but don't you think you should send some people to this mining place to check it out? Make sure there's nothing or no one waiting for us?"

"You might not have military experience, Leoni, but you have good instincts. I've already got a plan in mind. I'm going to embed some of my agents there as soon as possible. I want eyes on that place at all times."

"Excellent. I'll tell Nic the change in plans and leave it to her to give the info to Danou. In the meantime, I'd like an emergency contingency. We might be hidden here, but that doesn't mean the Nadyte, or Morijan, or the Brothers of Seven, or whoever, can't still find us. If we need to make a fast exit, how do we do it?"

"I'm bringing in a Gatsanula Class battleship tonight. Anything happens, we get Nic into it and we're gone. We'll leave anyone behind who doesn't get on that ship after she does. I've set it up to have a full crew ready to go. I want to be able to get her off world in a hurry."

"How long will it take?"

"A Gatsanula Class ship can be in space inside ten minutes. It's slow in atmosphere, but once in space, it's faster than anything the Nadytes have."

"I'll study that one as well."

Coby grinned. "I'll give you a tour of it tomorrow."

"Deal. One last thing. Would it be possible to keep the ship in space for a while?"

"How long?"

"Until Nicola is ready to meet Danou. I think it'd be best to keep her moving."

"Agreed. I can prepare coordinates that change daily. We'll have a Drake carrier onboard for emergency evac."

"Good. Now, tell me more about this *Gatsanula* Class battleship."

Three days into their stay at the underground base, Leoni was nervous. Nothing had happened. The council had voted unanimously on their resolution, and Nicola was waiting to hear back from Danou on his council's response.

Nicola had accepted the plans Leoni, Coby, and Pram had made. Now all they had to do was wait. Leoni used the time to familiarize herself with the ship called *Cannati*. The ship was named

after Sala Cannati, a foot soldier who sacrificed her life to save her unit. An appropriate ship for them to use.

The *Cannati* was oblong, much like the trans Morijan's people had used, except a hundred times larger. Leoni didn't have a frame of reference to compare it to. The thing was damn big. The fighter bay held one hundred fighters and included mechanic bays for repairs and maintenance. Five heavy cruisers fit easily into another bay, which also had room for a dozen surface trans and five scout ships.

A crew of one thousand was needed to run the thing, which included the two-hundred exterior weapons, blast cannons mostly, and a number of other gadgets and widgets.

Coby had ordered a full crew. With that many people around, it would be impossible to know if a spy had infiltrated. That worried Leoni most of all. She didn't know these people, and no way was she able to tell the good ones from the bad ones—regardless of what side they were on. Beyond frustrated, she decided to talk to Pram and go over the data on the crew members of the *Cannati* as well as the ones in the Goam base. Someone was on the inside, and no matter how cautious they were, the bad guys were bound to come at Nicola again.

Leoni released a long sigh and stood. She'd been at this for hours and she was hungry. She walked into Nicola's office.

Nicola was seated at her desk, staring intently at the holo. Leoni wrapped her arms around Nicola and rested her head on her shoulder. "What're you doing?"

"Sending a message to Jese. He needs some cheering up."

"Can I add something to that?"

Nicola smiled. "Sure." She swiped her finger across the holo screen. "Go ahead."

"Hey, bud. Cheer up. Whatever is making today a bad day won't matter tomorrow. Besides, soon as this mess is all over, I need you to help me figure out more stuff on this holo thingy. Hope you're up for it. I'll even teach you my favorite game. Football." She stepped back but kept her hand on Nicola's shoulder.

"I love you, son. See you soon." Nicola stopped the recording. "Football? What's that?"

"A great sport to get out your aggressions. I'll teach you both when this is all over."

"Sounds interesting." Nicola sent the recording and stood.

Leoni asked, "You hungry?"

"A little."

"Then it's time to take a break." Leoni wrapped her in a quick hug before leading Nicola to their quarters. "I'll go get you something from the cafeteria. You don't look like you want to be around too many people, and the cafeteria will be crowded right now."

"Just a glass of nava."

"You got it."

Ten minutes later, Leoni and Nicola were seated at a small, wooden worktable enjoying their meal of something that tasted like chicken. It almost made Leoni laugh. Didn't every unknown meat taste like chicken? Leoni looked up at Nicola, who was clearly preoccupied. "Penny for your thoughts."

"What?"

Leoni laughed. "Penny for your thoughts. It's an old saying. Means, what's on your mind?"

"Oh."

"Want to talk?"

Nicola pushed her glass away and met Leoni's gaze. "I'm not sure."

"You look like whatever it is, is really bothering you."

“It is, but it shouldn’t.” Nicola reached across the table and took Leoni’s hand in hers. “Who is Tayanita?”

Leoni nearly let go of her hand, shocked at hearing the name. “How did you—where did you hear that name?”

“From you. Twice. You kept saying the name over and over again in your sleep. You were speaking in Cherokee sometimes. I couldn’t understand everything you said. The one word you repeated was *gugay* something.”

“*Gvgeyui*. It means, I love you.” Leoni stood. “I must have been having the dream again. I had no idea. I usually remember it.”

“What dream?”

Leoni hadn’t spoken to anyone about Tayanita in a long time. She couldn’t even recall the last time she’d spoken her name aloud. “I don’t know if I can talk about it.”

Nicola stood and looked at her with worry in her eyes. “Leoni, I’m here for you.”

“I know. It’s just that—she was my wife.” Leoni wanted so badly to tell Nicola all about Tayanita. But how could she? How could she bring up those painful memories?

Nicola cupped Leoni’s face in her hands and rubbed her thumbs against her cheeks. “You want to go back to her.” Nicola looked ready to cry.

“I do, but that can never happen.” Leoni covered Nicola’s hands with her own. “She died. She was the love of my life, and she died.”

“Oh, Leoni, I’m so sorry.” Nicola slipped her arms around her. “I’m so very sorry.”

“We grew up together. Fell in love when we were kids.” She took a shaky breath and held tight to Nicola. “I never thought I’d ever be without her. Then one day—she was gone.”

“I understand. It’s like the life has been sucked out of you.” Nicola kissed her softly.

“Yes.” Leoni saw her pain reflected in Nicola’s eyes. “I pushed it behind me. It was the only way I could cope. She was all I had.”

“What about your parents? Do you have brothers or sisters?”

“I’m an only child. Daddy used to say I was all he could handle.” She tried to grin but couldn’t do it. “He died ten years ago. My mother, well, she’s a piece of work. She never liked that I’m gay—what you call a two-spirit—and she told me never to come to her house again until I decided to be normal. Tayanita was killed in a car accident that also killed my mother’s sister. When I went to my mother to make funeral arrangements, she threw me out of the house. I never went back.”

“I don’t understand how she could do that. You’re her child. And there’s nothing wrong with being with another woman. Was your mother mentally unstable?”

“Not in the way you’re suggesting. A lot of people on Earth think being gay is a horrible thing. We’re not accepted like you are here.” She stepped back and wiped the wetness from her face. “I used to have nightmares about Tayanita’s death every night. I haven’t had one in a long time. The last one wasn’t really a nightmare, but part of the vision I had during the Seven Trials. Maybe that brought it all back to the surface.”

“Maybe.” Nicola took her hand and led Leoni to the bed, where she sat beside her.

Leoni nervously played with the rings on her left hand. “I thought it would get easier with time. But it hasn’t.”

“The rings on your finger—were they hers?”

“No. On Earth we have a custom of giving rings to symbolize marriage.” Leoni held out her hand to Nicola. “Tayanita gave me the silver one when she asked me to marry her. The gold band is from our wedding. She had one just like it.” A shiver went through Leoni as the image of Tayanita’s bloody hand came to mind.

Nicola's voice was soft as she asked, "How long were you married?"

"Not long. Two years."

"I was married to Kel for three-and-a-half years."

"It's not fair."

"No, it isn't." Nicola squeezed Leoni's hand. "But we're still here."

Leoni swiped a stray tear from her cheek. She brought Nicola's hand up and brushed her lips across her knuckles. "We are."

Nicola said, "Tell me about her. Tell me about Tayanita."

"Only if you tell me about Kel."

Nicola smiled. "Fair enough."

Nicola glanced at the chron beside their bed. Ten minutes past three in the morning. Five minutes since the last time she'd looked at it. She sighed and rolled carefully out of bed. Clearly, she would not be getting any more sleep than she had the night before. Her thoughts were a jumbled mix between Kel and Leoni.

She and Leoni spent most of the evening talking about their spouses, laughing and crying over memories and shared experiences. It brought them closer together, but Nicola worried that it also put some distance between them. She'd told her so much about Kel, but she couldn't bring herself to talk about Morijan. Twice before Leoni had tried to ask her. The compassion in her eyes melted Nicola's heart, but she wasn't able to speak about the days she'd spent under Morijan's control.

She got dressed and quietly left the room. Nicola saluted the four soldiers that fell into step with her as she wandered down the corridor, not entirely sure where she was going.

She walked around most of the base. Her physical energy was low, but her mind was still going at light-speed. Morijan's image and the memories that always went with it wouldn't go away. Several times during her walk, Nicola looked behind her as if she expected Morijan to be there. She had a nagging feeling she was being watched, though the only people she saw were the four men assigned to protect her.

They reached the landing bay, and the hairs on the back of Nicola's neck stood on end.

"General," a man's voice called from across the bay. He was probably ten meters away. She didn't recognize it. Nicola could make out a silhouette near one of the light cruisers.

Her security guards drew their weapons. Two flanked Nicola while the other two stood between her and the threat.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Stand down soldiers," the man said. He strode toward them with an air of casualness that disturbed Nicola.

She tensed. "Come any closer and I will order them to shoot."

He stopped and Nicola saw that he was young, maybe in his twenties, wiry and tall. His brown hair was shaved on the sides of his head. "Don't shoot. No need for violence."

"Identify yourself," Nicola ordered.

"Stove Nasen."

"How did you get in here?"

"Ah, I'm afraid I can't divulge that information, General."

Nicola sensed movement behind them. She opened her mouth to give the order to fire. The

guard on her left fell to the ground. Dead. A hole burned in the center of his back. The two in front of her fired into the darkness. They'd barely gotten off two shots before both guards crumpled to the ground.

She whirled around as the last guard went down. He was dead before his body hit the floor.

Nicola reached for his weapon.

"I wouldn't do that." Stove was now behind her. "It will only create more violence."

Nicola straightened and glared at him. He had a blaster pointed at her stomach. "You're kidding yourself if you think I'm going with you willingly."

Stove shrugged. "That's not a problem. We came prepared."

"We? You bring a squadron with you?"

"He didn't need to." The voice belonged to a woman and was eerily familiar.

Nicola stared as a shapely female form emerged from behind the cruiser closest to them. As she neared, Nicola immediately recognized her haughty gait.

"Captain Rea Mare."

"Greetings, General Daelis." Rea also had a hand blaster. Nicola noted the sound suppression device attached to the barrel. That was why she hadn't heard the shots that killed her soldiers.

Rea continued, "And my name is Rea Frew now."

"Frew?" Nicola asked, confused. Danou and Morijan were the last of their line. They had no living relatives that Nicola knew of. "Did you change your name to get closer to Morijan?"

"You could say that," Rea said as she stepped up to Nicola. She stopped when they were nearly nose to nose. "I changed my name when I became her wife."

That was not something Nicola expected to hear, though she wasn't especially surprised. Rea's ancestors were once royalty on Forensia, in the time when their world was ruled by one king, one family. Being Morijan's wife was the closest Rea would ever get to the leadership of their world. Though it struck her odd that Rea had changed her family name.

"Congratulations. I'm sure you deserve each other."

Rea smirked. "You have no idea. Stove, contact Clav and Brack. We need to get the general out of here."

"They're on the way," Stove said. "I suggest we get her to the shuttle now. Next round of security sweeps is coming through in fifteen minutes."

Rea tapped Nicola on the cheek and said, "Planning to give us trouble?"

"I am."

Rea shoved her blaster into Nicola's stomach. "Good."

"Stop." Stove was behind Rea. "No damage. Your wife wants her alive. Remember?"

"I do," Rea said. She prodded Nicola with the weapon, forcing her a step backwards. "Try anything and you'll arrive in pieces."

Nicola grabbed the blaster in Rea's hand and pulled it to the side as she twisted her body around. Her elbow caught Rea in the head.

The blaster came out of Rea's hand. Nicola spun back around and slammed her knee into Rea's abdomen. Rea fell to her knees, wheezing.

Nicola struck her between the shoulder blades with the grip of her blaster. Rea collapsed to the floor.

In that moment, Nicola could have killed her. The weapon felt good in her grip. She pointed at Rea's head. One pull of the trigger—that's all she needed to do. Nicola couldn't do it. She hated Rea and everything she stood for. Her hand shook. She'd taken so many lives during the war. Rea was down, unable to fight. She couldn't kill her in cold blood.

Nicola turned her attention to Stove. She leveled her blaster at him, but he was already moving away. She supposed the order not to kill her was the only thing that kept him from shooting her. She got off two shots. One hit a bulkhead near his shoulder as a warning. He kept going, so Nicola shot him in the leg. He went down instantly.

She turned back to Rea, and a pair of meaty hands grasped the front of her shirt and hauled her off her feet. Nicola was slammed against the wall, the breath knocked out of her body.

The man threw her to the ground and Nicola landed hard on her side. She started to get up, but the man wrapped his arms around her body, lifted her to her feet, and squeezed until she could barely breathe. She struggled but couldn't break free.

Rea stumbled to her feet. Stove reappeared. Blood flowed from the wound in his leg as he limped toward them. Stove shouted, "Get her in the shuttle. Now!"

The mountain of a man, whose face Nicola couldn't see, hauled her toward the closest shuttle. Rea said something Nicola wasn't able to make out. In a flash, the woman was standing in their path. She rammed her fist into Nicola's face three times. If the man hadn't been holding her, Nicola would have slumped to the ground.

"Better." Rea rubbed her hand and stepped aside. "Restrain her and put her in the cockpit. I want to keep an eye on her."

"Yes, Captain." The man carried Nicola to their destination.

At the shuttle, another man waited for them. He was dressed in the green jumpsuit of a maintenance tech. Once inside, he helped his cohort secure Nicola's hands behind her back. He then forced her into the cockpit and strapped her down in one of four chairs.

Nicola sank back in the seat. She closed her eyes while she worked to reach her wrist chron. She'd just managed to hit the emergency alert when Rea and Stove came in.

Rea slapped Nicola's face before settling into the copilot's chair. "Eyes open. Enjoy the ride."

"As long as it ends with you dead," Nicola said.

"It will definitely end in death." Rea laughed. "Yours."

Chapter Eleven

Leoni awoke with a start. The bed next to her was empty and cool. “Nic?” No answer. Something was wrong. Leoni dressed in seconds, grabbed her blaster, and ran out the door. The four guards that should have been there were gone, and she hoped they were with Nicola.

She slid to a stop in front of Nicola’s office. No one was there.

She took off down the corridor, her legs pumping as fast as she could make them. Instinct took her in the direction of the loading bay.

Leoni’s heart pounded in her chest.

The emergency claxon sounded as she ran past Coby’s quarters. He barreled out behind her.

They entered the bay at a dead run. Leoni didn’t look around. She followed her gut and went directly for one of the shuttles. The engine roared to life, and she sprinted forward, leaving Coby behind. She saw the hatch closing and grasped hold of the edge as it lifted. She lost her weapon in the process.

Leoni swung one leg around, briefly straddled the edge, and dropped down into the shuttle.

The vehicle jerked sideways and tossed her into a wall. She righted herself and headed for the cockpit. Shuttles were designed to hold twenty soldiers in rows of seats in the center, ten sets of two on each side. Weapons caches were on either side of the seats. Leoni grabbed a hand blaster just as a burly man in a green tech jumpsuit came toward her. One shot didn’t stop him.

“Dammit,” she muttered and fired again. This one hit him between the eyes. He fell back with a thud.

Leoni stepped around him and located the door to the cockpit. Locked. She tried to break in by slamming her shoulder into it. All that did was hurt her shoulder. She stepped back and aimed her blaster at the door. Before she hit the trigger, the door opened with startling speed. Fortunately, she was far enough away it didn’t hit her, but it knocked against the blaster. Unfortunately, another big-ass guy in a green tech jumpsuit emerged.

“Fuck! How many of you guys are there?” she said as she brought the blaster up to fire again.

With a swipe of his meaty paw, he knocked the blaster from her grip. “Enough,” he answered. His other hand drove a roundhouse punch that connected with Leoni’s face and flung her backward, over a row of seats.

She scrambled to her feet in time to take a second hit right above her ear that sent her down again. The bruiser grasped the back of her shirt and pulled her up and over the seats. He threw her into the opposite wall.

The shuttle shifted again. He tripped over his fallen buddy and landed on his ass. It gave Leoni enough time to grab a blaster. She scooted around the rows of seats to a better position, aimed, and hit him in the stomach as he stood up.

He went down fast. Blood leaked from the wound in his gut. He moaned in pain but managed to lumber to his feet. Leoni was beginning to wonder if this dude was even human. She shot him in the chest, and this time the big man stayed down.

She didn’t have much time to relax as the shuttle gained sudden speed. It ascended at a sharp angle, and her body tumbled backward. Her motion stopped when she hit the rear bulkhead. Gravity kept her pinned for an impossibly long time. She could only guess that the shuttle was headed out of the planet’s atmosphere. This was not how she wanted to explore outer space. She tried several times to stand, but couldn’t. She had to remain plastered to the bulkhead and wait.

Her wrist chron was making a noise, and she forced her heavy limb to bring it close to her face.

Coby was trying to reach her. She managed to press the Answer key. "I'm on the shuttle," she said.

"You're headed off world."

"Kinda figured that out already."

Coby didn't answer right away. "Is Nic alright?"

"Don't know. I took out two Nadytes, and I guess there's at least two more in the cockpit. Assuming Nic is in one of the four seats in there."

"Standby."

"Like I can do anything else," Leoni grumbled.

"Scanners show three additional life forms."

"Better odds," she said. "Where the hell are we headed?"

"Current trajectory—toward the Third Moon."

Leoni had to think on that a moment. "That's where Danou Frew said he sent Morijan. Isn't that moon abandoned?"

"Officially, yes. We've suspected the Brothers of Seven have a base there, but we've never found it—or Morijan. The moon's environment is too hostile for sustained searches."

"Gotcha. How long before artificial gravity kicks in and I'm not smashed against this damn wall?"

"Ten minutes."

"How long before you catch up to us?"

"Twenty minutes. The other three shuttles are down, and as soon as your shuttle got clear, the bay door closed and now refuses to open. We're going to have to force our way out."

"Sabotage?"

"Yes, and whoever did it had clear access to our systems."

"Okay. Just get here as soon as you can."

"Copy that. We're in the *Cannati* and monitoring any comm traffic from the shuttle."

"Unless you hear something vital for me to know, let's have radio silence. I'll let you know when it's clear." Leoni stopped the transmission before Coby could respond.

Nicola tried again to free her wrists. She knew the commotion in the squad compartment had to be Leoni. Both of the fake techs had gone back there. She heard nothing. The gravitational pull from the takeoff would prevent them from any further fighting. Or Leoni had incapacitated both men. She hoped for the latter.

Stove, who sat in the pilot's seat, switched his comm on. "Keeper One to Base."

A few seconds passed before a response came. "Keeper One, status report." Nicola knew the man's voice. Anger flowed through her in waves.

"Package secure. ETA thirty."

"Copy that."

Nicola asked, "Where are you taking me?"

"I don't want to ruin the surprise," Stove said. He gestured to Rea. "She's the boss. Up to her if she tells you or not." The shuttle cleared the atmosphere, and the artificial grav kicked in. Nicola was able to move a little. Stove switched to auto-nav. He took the time to adjust the cloth he'd wrapped around his thigh to stanch the bleeding.

"So you work for the Nadyte?"

“I work for whoever has the most credits to give me. You’re a major prize, General. Captain Frew’s was the best offer I had.”

“Who else gave you offers?” Nicola asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” Rea said. “You won’t live all that long after we land.”

“We won’t land,” Nicola said. “By now they’ve launched the *Cannati* to chase you down. One shot from her, and this shuttle will be turned into space dust.”

“Your people won’t kill you.” Rea didn’t sound convinced.

“They will. I’ve ordered them to make sure I’m not used as a pawn. The merger will happen whether I’m there or not.”

Rea laughed outright. “I don’t care about the merger. And they won’t shoot us down.”

“Don’t be so sure.”

“We locked down the launch hatch and made sure none of the shuttles or fighters are able to fly. Trust me. They won’t be catching us.”

“So you’re taking me back to Morijan.”

“Correct,” Rea said. “Once she gets you out of her system, we can get back to our real work.”

“Which is?”

“Putting our world right.”

“By starting the war again?”

Rea shrugged. “That’s just one of many possibilities. But this world needs one ruler. One strong ruler to keep everyone in line.”

“Is that ruler you? Or Morijan?”

Rea didn’t answer, but her expression briefly showed anger. “We’ll rule together.”

“Is that why you changed your name? Wouldn’t it have been better if Morijan took your name? I mean, you are the one with distant royalty in her blood.”

“I changed my name as a show of solidarity with my wife.” Rea got out of her chair and squatted beside Nicola. Her eyes raked across Nicola’s body. The gesture sickened Nicola. Rea said, “I don’t know what she ever saw in you.” Her hand rested on Nicola’s thigh. “You’re beautiful, I’ll give you that.” She inched her hand up Nicola’s leg. “I’ll have to ask if you were good in bed.”

Nicola drew in a breath and tried hard not to tense under Rea’s touch. Rea and Morijan were a perfect match. “Morijan raped me. Is that what you want to do as well?”

Rea’s hand stilled and it took a moment before she met Nicola’s gaze.

Nicola saw a hint of doubt in Rea’s eyes.

“You’re lying,” Rea said. “Stove, get to the crew compartment. It’s too quiet now. Make sure the guardian is dead. I don’t want any further complications.”

Stove moved to the door and paused. He cracked it open briefly and yanked it shut. “Our men are down.”

Nicola watched as he removed a displacement grenade from a pack on the floor. “I think I’ll even the odds,” he said. He set the grenade and opened the door just enough to toss it through.

Nicola screamed, “Le—”

Rea slapped a hand over Nicola’s mouth as the door slammed shut. “No fair giving her information ahead of time.”

Nicola tried to bite her, but Rea’s grip was tight.

The grenade went off, and Stove rushed into the squad compartment.

Leoni stationed herself to the left side of the cockpit doorway. She could hear Nicola talking to the other two. She immediately recognized Rea's voice. She was the chick who tried to kidnap Nicola when Leoni first arrived. At least now she knew that this attempt was instigated by Morijan. Maybe this time they could catch the crazy bitch and get her out of the way.

The door opened a few inches, and Leoni crouched low, ready to pounce on whoever came out. No one came out. The door shut almost immediately, and she realized the two bodies were in plain sight. She heard movement and a murmur behind the door, and she crouched again. When it opened, a round, black object hit the ground by her feet. She reacted quickly, grabbed it and flung the grenade toward the back of the shuttle seconds before it exploded.

The distance did some good. She didn't feel as though her brain was going to pour out her ears. She got to her feet, a little wobbly, and leaned against the bulkhead to steady herself.

A blaster bolt burned the edge of her neck. She dove behind a seat. Where had the shot come from? The grenade left her disoriented. The cockpit door was closed.

The damn effects from the grenade made it hard to think. Her ears rang so she couldn't rely on hearing. The space they were in limited movement.

A second shot went through the seat and just missed her head.

Instinct guided her as she leaped to her feet and fired. All three shots hit the target, and the man slumped to the ground. The weapon in his hand hit the floor. Three holes in the center of his chest leaked blood.

Leoni took a deep breath to calm herself. Just that Rea chick was left.

The cockpit door opened. Leoni crouched three rows away and waited.

Nothing happened.

She could make out voices, but she couldn't tell what was being said.

"Just come out here you chickenshit!" Leoni said. She was tired of playing games. "I know you're in there, Rea. Get out here and let's get this over with."

Leoni aimed her blaster, a breath away from firing. But the woman who stepped through wasn't Rea. Nicola was shoved through the doorway. She was bound and gagged. The look on her face could have melted steel. She was beyond pissed.

Rea's hand gripped Nicola's bicep as they moved further into the squad compartment. Rea pressed the barrel of her blaster to Nicola's temple. Rea's mouth moved, but Leoni still couldn't hear much. Though she thought the chick told her to throw her weapon down.

"Nope," Leoni said and leveled her blaster at Rea's head. "Wanna bet that I can put a bolt between your eyes before you even think about pulling that trigger?"

"You won't," Rea said. At least that's what Leoni thought she said.

"Don't be so sure." Leoni pulled the trigger. The bolt seared through the skin of Rea's forehead. The heat melted her flesh.

Nicola pulled free of Rea and dropped to the ground. She rolled clear of Rea's body.

Leoni tossed her hand blaster aside and went to Nicola. She cradled Nicola's face in her hands. Her left eye was swollen. Angry red marks mixed in with black and blue ran from her left temple to the corner of her mouth.

Leoni pulled the wadded cloth from her mouth. "You hurt?" She met Nicola's gaze.

Nicola shook her head.

Leoni pressed her mouth to Nicola's in a soul-crushing kiss. She searched Nicola's mouth with her tongue, hungry to taste her and confirm she was real, present, and safe. After an impossible

amount of time, Leoni pulled back to catch her breath. She cut Nicola's wrists free.

"Ow," Nicola said, touching her mouth.

"Oh, sorry," Leoni said and gave her a more gentle kiss. "Better?"

"Much."

"I'm sorry," Leoni said.

Nicola's eyes held hers, passion replaced by confusion. "For what?"

"You'll have to talk loud. My ears are still ringing."

"What are you sorry for? You just saved my life."

"For not being there. I should have known when you left the bedroom. I should have been with you."

"Don't be sorry. You got here. That's enough." She kissed Leoni in a way that left Leoni's knees weak. "Let's get back to base."

Leoni steadied herself and said, "No need. The *Cannati* is coming to us." She helped Nicola to her feet then spoke into her wrist comm, "We're clear. On our way back."

Coby said, "Copy that."

Nicola and Leoni returned to the cockpit. Nicola switched off the auto-nav and leaned back in the seat. Relief washed over her like a wave of cool water. "That was too close."

"No shit. At least we're rid of Rea. Now we just need to find Morijan."

"Rea was her wife. Morijan will find us."

"Fuck. Now she'll be extra pissed off." Leoni sighed heavily. "But we've got to figure out who the hell they have on the inside. This is twice now, three times counting the incident with Ved. All of these were carefully planned out. The better question is how many spies they have."

"Soon as we get back to the base—"

"Not going back. Coby and I set up plan B. You'll be on the *Cannati* and constantly moving around."

"What? Why? And why didn't you tell me?"

"Coby, Pram, and I are the only ones who know the *Cannati* isn't headed to any particular destination. The crew is on alert status, and all fighters are on standby. We're not taking any chances. The best thing to do right now is keep you moving. It'll make it harder for them to get to you."

"They already have. And I think Pram is one of them."

"Seriously? What makes you think that?"

"I'm sure it was him that Stove spoke to on the comm once we reached space."

"Then we need to get on the *Cannati*. I'll contact Coby—"

"No. If we tell him about Pram, we risk Pram getting away. We need to find out who he's working with. Or for."

"Fine. We'll tell him when we get on the ship."

Nicola said, "We're not going to the ship. Your plan B has been scrubbed."

"What the hell—"

Nicola held her hand out to quiet Leoni and keyed the comm. "General Daelis to *Cannati*."

"*Cannati* here."

"New orders. Return to Alpha Command."

“Uh, copy that, General. Return to Alpha—”

Coby’s voice was in the background and got louder as he neared the comm. “Belay that order! Nic, we’re twenty minutes out. We’re not returning to Alpha Command.”

“Colonel Daelis, you will stand down. That ship gets turned around now. Period. This is not up for debate. Daelis out.” She wanted to slam her fist into the console, but instead she flipped the switch to cut off any reply from Coby. She then set the shuttle to auto-nav, switching back to the last coordinates Stove had inputted.

She stood up and found Leoni scowling at her. “What?”

“What? What are you doing? The *Cannati* is our best bet of getting out of this mess. Or do you suddenly have a death wish?”

“No, but as you didn’t bother to consult me about your plans, I didn’t feel it necessary to consult you about mine.”

“Now you sound like a petulant child.” Leoni followed Nicola into the crew compartment.

“We have to find out who’s behind this operation. If we alert Pram that we know he’s involved, we risk losing our best opportunity to gain information. First step is head to the moon and meet Morijan.”

“And then what? You just gonna go right up to her and ask who she’s been working with? Ask her if Pram is her inside contact?”

Nicola didn’t bother to look at her as she opened a locker in the rear of the shuttle. “If you knew me as well as you think you do, you’d know that I’m smarter than that.” She located two glider suits and tossed one at Leoni. “We’ll jump shortly after clearing the atmosphere of the moon. The shuttle will slow down then, and we’ll be able to keep a visual on it as it lands.”

“Jump? And then what? Fly?” Leoni held the suit away from her body as if it might bite her.

“Glide. Once the shuttle lands, we can proceed on foot, get as close as we can to the area. When we’ve got the information we need, we’ll take the shuttle back and head for Forensia.”

“Just like that?”

“Sounds easier than it will be.” Nicola sat on a bench. The suit’s material, known as *preon*, was thick and pliable. Each section of the suit opened with a slit in the center. Nicola placed her legs against the material and pressed the ends together until it molded to her form. She did the same with the body and arm fittings. She was out of practice, so it took longer than it should.

She flipped the glide mech, and the thin wing blades slid out over her back. She ran a quick diagnostic, found the suit in good working order, and switched everything off. She turned to Leoni, who was staring at her.

Nicola said, “It’s easier than it looks. Trust me. This is safe.”

“Right. You want me to fly—I mean glide—through the air in a suit with those tiny wings and chase a spaceship. Sure. Nothing to it.”

“Stop grumbling.” Nicola took the suit from her and helped Leoni into it. “Now, you just need to follow my lead when we make our jump. Press this switch”—she tapped her finger next to the yellow switch in the center of Leoni’s chest—“and the glide mech is activated.”

“How do I work it after that?”

“Think of yourself as a bird. Arms out to the sides, using your legs to change directions.” Nicola looked into Leoni’s eyes and saw a hint of fear. “You’ll be fine.”

“Sure. Whatever. We need weapons. How will we manage to carry them?”

Nicola went back to the locker and tossed a waist-pack to Leoni. “Put what you can in this. I’ll trust you to deal with the weaponry. I’ll carry survival supplies along with a tracker. Deal?”

“Do I have a choice, General?”

“No.”

Chapter Twelve

Leoni dropped out of the shuttle at an amazing speed. Fast. Too fast. The skin on her face felt like it was being pulled off, despite the helmet that hugged her head. She wore goggles that wrapped around her face and sealed her eyes from any debris. They were tinted orange to protect her from the glare of the golden sand that made up the planet's landscape. The skintight glide suit kept her from feeling the heat of her descent.

She found it dizzying to look at the ground, though she could make out very few details. Several dots appeared on the right, and she figured they might be buildings. The shuttle well below them headed in the direction of the dots. Leoni took a deep breath and released it slowly, calming her nerves. She never liked heights and wondered how she would land.

Nicola was to her left. She was doing something with the tracker attached to her right arm. She wasn't paying any attention to where she was going, as if gliding was the most natural thing in the world to do. Leoni wasn't a damn bird. This whole plan was crazy. She hoped Coby disobeyed Nicola's order and had that battleship zooming toward them.

Leoni's speed of descent increased. She forced herself to concentrate on what she was doing and recalling Nicola's instructions: *Stay as level as possible. Don't point your body downward, or you'll increase your speed. Keep your eyes on me. Watching the ground will cause you to point your body downward...* The list went on.

A deafening explosion forced Leoni into a tailspin. The shuttle had disintegrated. She twirled through bits of debris, some still burning. Falling toward the planet's surface, she twisted her body to try and level out. A chair slammed into her side and threw her into another spin. She tumbled head over ass like some skydiving acrobat. Nothing she did would stop it. Every time she thought she had control, more debris hit her. She was face up—though she couldn't be certain—when part of a human leg floated past.

A hand came close to her face, and she swatted it away. Bad enough she was falling to her death. She didn't need bits and pieces of those idiots in the shuttle smacking against her as she fell.

The hand came back, this time grasping the weapons pack strapped to her waist. Nicola's face was now directly in front of Leoni's.

Nicola yelled, "Hang on!"

Leoni wrapped her arms around Nicola and held on tight. Debris floated above them. A sharp right turn, and they were clear of the shuttle's remnants. Their controlled descent continued until Leoni felt herself lowered to the ground. It took a matter of minutes, but to Leoni it felt like hours. Nicola straddled her hips and removed Leoni's helmet.

"You okay?"

"Think so," Leoni said, happy to be on the ground at last.

Nicola said, "Stay put." She stood, and Leoni discovered they were behind some kind of building. The golden color of the structure blended with the surrounding sand. Camouflage. Its smooth surface didn't shine. A funky smell filled the air, a mixture of rotted meat and raw sewage. She wondered if something or someone had died there recently.

She sat up and removed the pack from her waist. No obvious damage done to it during her trip through the debris field. Good thing, as she suspected they would need every bit of the ammo she'd stuffed in the pack. Her blaster was still strapped to her thigh, and the blaster rifle strap slung across her chest.

She unslung the blaster rifle and crept to the edge of the building, in the direction Nicola had

gone. She couldn't see anything but the golden sand. The area was as flat as a Kansas wheat field. Nicola came up behind her, and Leoni asked, "How did you find this building? I couldn't see a damn thing from up there."

"That's why I have the tracker. It can pick up structures from ten kilometers out." Nicola removed the medkit she'd attached to her waist belt. "Sit. I need to take care of your wounds."

"What wounds?"

"The ones on your back. You might not feel them right now, but part of the bulkhead struck you and sliced through your glide mech. That's why you lost control." She pushed Leoni around to view her back. "And you're still bleeding."

"How'd you manage to get to me and get us both down here?"

Nicola didn't answer right away. "I almost didn't. The blast tossed me several meters in the opposite direction of you. It took forever to get to you. I saw you were free-falling and wasn't sure if you were still alive."

"Going to take more than a piece of a shuttle to take me out, Nic."

"If you'd seen it from my perspective, you'd have thought differently." Nicola squeezed Leoni's shoulder. "You're all patched up, but your glide suit won't work anymore."

"That's okay, right?" Leoni spun around. "We're not jumping out of any more moving vehicles, are we?"

"No, but that's not relevant. The suit also provides protection from the heat here. Unless we get to an atmosphere-controlled building, you'll start suffering the effects soon."

"Then I guess we better get moving. Sooner we find that bitch, the better."

"Shelter first. We can't do anything if you're wasting away from the heat."

Leoni said, "Fine. What the hell is that stench? Is it coming from this building?"

"No. It's how this moon smells. Bad."

"Lovely. Let's duck into this building. Maybe the smell and heat are less in there."

"I just checked. It's only storage, and it's empty. The heat will be worse since there's no atmospheric unit."

"Fuck. Why the hell did they blow the fucking shuttle up anyway? I thought Morijan wanted you alive."

Nicola's expression darkened. "Guess plans have changed."

Leoni said, "Could be to our advantage. For all Morijan knows, you're dead now. Did that tracker of yours figure out where the shot came from? The one that blew up the shuttle?"

"The explosives were on the shuttle."

"Damn good thing we got off when we did."

"It is. But before the explosion I did find a large group of buildings five kilometers south of our current location."

Leoni said, "Then we head there. Right?"

"Shelter first. I can't risk you—"

"Bullshit. I heal fast, and you have no way of knowing how my body will react to the heat."

Leoni got to her feet and grabbed her helmet and waist-pack. "We don't have a lot of time to get to the assholes who did all this. Soon as Morijan, or whoever, figures out you weren't killed, they'll come looking for you."

Nicola stood face-to-face with Leoni and scowled. "You're one damn stubborn woman."

"Takes one to know one."

"Fine. Let's move out. They won't expect us to be traveling during the daylight. We have six hours before nightfall."

“Then we find shelter.”

Nicola said, “Yes. Then we find shelter.”

“Lead on, General.”

Nicola moved off, not bothering to look at Leoni. Leoni could tell she was pissed off by the way she walked—if they’d been on solid ground, Nicola would have been stomping. Instead, she kicked up dust as she stalked on, keeping distance between her and Leoni.

The sun shone brightly off the sand. Nicola had forgotten how blinding it could be. Five years ago she’d been to this moon. Not a time she wanted to remember. But the flat surface, swirling gold dust, and proximity to the sun all brought back memories. She checked the tracker again, trying to focus on the task at hand. The Nadyte base should come into visual distance any moment.

She glanced back at Leoni, who still kept several paces back. The explosion had scared Nicola. For an incredibly long moment, she thought Leoni was dead. Pain grew in her chest with every second it took for her to reach Leoni. She’d sped heedless through the smoldering debris. She’d grasped Leoni in a desperate attempt to control her fall.

Nicola had no idea how she’d managed to get them to the ground. The only thing that mattered was Leoni survived the blast. Now they had to survive this horrible moon, find Morijan, and figure out who set the explosives.

Nicola suspected Pram either put the explosive in the shuttle or had someone do it for him. In the cockpit, when they’d first left Forensia, Nicola recalled that Stove told Pram their ETA was thirty. By her calculations, the shuttle exploded within that time frame. That would mean that Stove knew it would happen. She wondered if he planned to kill them all with blasters or space jump before they hit the moon’s atmosphere.

There were dozens of possibilities, and Nicola would never know what he’d meant to do. But she would be happy to ask Pram all about it.

She stopped several meters from a group of sand dunes. The tracker also functioned as a scanner. No life forms came up, and she figured if they were careful, they could avoid the *daltras*. Nicola didn’t want to go over the sand dunes, but walking around them would add several hours to their journey. She had no intention of testing how well Leoni could take the heat of the moon.

Leoni caught up to her. “What?” Leoni asked.

“Tracker shows a cluster of buildings beyond those dunes. Could be a Nadyte base. We need to go up the hill and take a look.”

“Okay. Lead on.”

“You don’t understand,” Nicola said. “The sand dunes here aren’t always solid, and we don’t have climbing gear. It’s treacherous. And there could be *daltras* there, although I don’t see any life forms at the moment.”

“*Daltras*? What are those?”

“The only carnivorous creature on the planet. At least that we know of.”

“How big is it? How fast is it?”

Nicola pulled up an image on her comm pad and handed it to Leoni. “It’s big and fast. And if we’re careful, we can avoid them.”

“Holy shit! It’s a giant octopus—or a combination of octopus and squid. That damn thing is as big as a family-sized trans.”

“Bigger. It lives in the dunes. That’s why the Nadyte bases are so far away and in a flat area. The daltras only leave their nests to hunt at night. During the day, they sleep. I wish we could go around the dunes, but it would take too long.”

“But it’s the only way to check out those buildings, right?”

“Yes.”

“Guess we’re climbing.” Leoni handed her the comm pad and started forward.

Nicola stopped her. “No. Follow me. I’ve done this before.”

Leoni looked like she wanted to say something, but she held out her arm and stepped back so Nicola could go first.

“Thanks,” Nicola said.

By the time they reached the dunes, darkness was starting to set in. Nicola took a deep breath. Her footsteps were slow and deliberate. “Walk where I’ve walked,” she said to Leoni.

“I’m with you, but if it gets any darker I won’t be able to see your footprints.”

“I know.” Nicola’s heart rate increased. Night was the most dangerous time on the planet. She’d rather face a hundred armed Nadytes than spend a millisecond here in the darkness.

They reached the top, and Nicola’s entire body ached from the climb. She squatted and replaced her goggles with a set of binocs. She adjusted the sights to night vision.

Several small buildings, similar to the one they’d seen earlier, were spread along the perimeter of a utilitarian base. She’d seen this type of base before, generally used for storage. The central building was in a U-shape, either end of it large enough to house one light cruiser. She assumed the other buildings were crew quarters and housing for other essential equipment. If they were lucky, there would be a cruiser in the main building they could use to get off the planet.

Nicola studied each building and detected no movement. Her tracker didn’t indicate any life forms present in or around the immediate area.

She removed the binocs and put her goggles back on. “The place is empty—at least of people. Let’s head down there. Do the same as before and step in my footprints.”

“Lead on, General,” Leoni said.

Nicola began her careful descent. Each step was tested before she put her full weight down. Her limbs shook with exhaustion, but she had no choice. They needed to get into one of those buildings. Full darkness would be on them soon, and Nicola’s pulse raced as the sand slipped beneath her feet. She quickened her pace—a choice she immediately regretted. One foot was sucked into the sand. Nicola landed on her back and tried desperately to pull her leg free. The more she tugged, the deeper her leg became imbedded.

Leoni grabbed Nicola under her arms and kept her from being dragged down any farther. “I can’t get a good foothold to pull you up,” Leoni said.

“You can’t. It’s got hold of me.” Nicola tried hard to remain calm. She felt the tentacle wrap around her leg. The pressure increased while the creature tried to pull her under the sand. She had precious little time.

“What has you?” Leoni’s voice held a note of incredulity.

“The daltra. It’s—it’s not going to let go.”

Leoni kept one arm around Nicola and drew her blaster. “I was hoping they weren’t real. Tell me where to aim.”

Nicola put her hand on Leoni’s arm. “No! You’ll bring more with the sound.” She grabbed Leoni’s arm. The daltra’s grip became more painful. She felt her leg bone crack. “You have to—to cut it off.”

“Cut what off?”

“The tentacle—wrapped around my leg—” Nicola dropped her head against Leoni’s chest. “Hurry—”

Leoni released Nicola long enough to crawl over her torso, pressing her into the dune. Nicola kept hold of Leoni’s waist belt. Leoni had a knife in one hand and used the other to feel her way along Nicola’s leg. She attacked the tentacle.

In a flash, Leoni was pulled into the sand. Her waist belt snapped in two in Nicola’s grip. Nicola’s leg was released and she drew it close. She stared at the place Leoni stood seconds before. The sand was deathly still. “No,” she whispered the word, barely able to comprehend what had just happened. “No!”

Nicola shoved her hands into the sand, searching for Leoni. Nothing. Each time her hands came up empty. She tamped down her panic and continued. Nothing. “This is not happening!”

She was ready to dive into the loose sand to find Leoni when something erupted out of the sand five meters below her. Nicola watched in horror as Leoni’s form, wrapped in a slick, brown tentacle, came into view. She had one arm free and continued to stab her knife into the dense flesh of the *daltra*.

Nicola slid down the dune, heedless of the pain in her leg, until she was within arm’s reach of the creature. She drew her blaster and fired. Two shots hit the tentacle near Leoni’s feet. The bolts cut the tentacle in half, and Leoni dropped to the sand.

Nicola crawled to her side. “Run!”

Leoni was breathing heavy but got to her feet. She started down the dune until she saw Nicola wasn’t following. Nicola’s left leg was useless, and when she tried to stand, it buckled under her weight. She waved for Leoni to continue, but she came back to her instead.

“What’s wrong?”

“My leg’s broken. You have to run. More of them will be here any second.”

“Fuck.”

“Just go!”

Leoni ignored her words, scooped her up, and ran. She was careful at first, but once she had her footing, she ran down the dune. She nearly fell, twice, but never lost her hold on Nicola.

They’d just reached flat ground when Nicola saw it. The same creature, or perhaps a new one, was coming at them. She forced her hands to remain steady and fired into the night. She could make out the shape of the *daltra*, but wasn’t sure if she hit it.

A sound the mixture of a roar and a growl ripped through the darkness. Hit or miss, Nicola had made the thing mad. And it started to gain on them.

“We’ve got to get to a building,” Nicola said, “and hope it’s strong enough to keep the *daltras* out.”

“I’m—working—on it,” Leoni said between labored breaths.

In a second, they were both thrown a dozen meters through the air. Leoni landed on her back. Nicola got the softer landing on top of her. She rolled away from Leoni as the *daltra* got to them. A gritty tentacle reached out toward Leoni. Nicola fired. The blaster cut through the flesh, and the end of the tentacle fell harmlessly to the ground. The creature howled. Nicola fired again.

Silence followed.

“I hope you got that fucker,” Leoni said from behind her.

“Me, too.”

“I can see another of those buildings.” Leoni lifted Nicola again. “Let’s get inside before its buddies show up.”

A few minutes later, Nicola shot the lock pad and opened the door. Leoni put her just inside

and pulled the door closed. She stayed there, listening.

“I don’t hear anything out there,” Leoni said. She waited a bit then fell to the ground at Nicola’s side. “I didn’t think that thing was real. I mean, I saw the picture, but—I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“That’s why I warned you,” Nicola said. “The moon is crawling with them. They live in the sand dunes, but they’ve been known to come above ground to chase down food.”

“Like us.”

“Like us.” Nicola reached for Leoni’s hand and held it tightly. “You hurt?”

“Don’t think so. Just freaked out. How’s your leg?”

“I have a stabilizer in my med-pack, but we need some light, first. You still have your comm pad?”

“Yeah, hang on.” A few moments later, Leoni placed the comm pad on the floor so the light would illuminate the area they were in. “Better?”

“Much.” Nicola opened her med-pack and removed the stabilizer. She handed it to Leoni. “I need you to put this on my leg.”

“Um, it’s no longer than my hand. How will that stabilize your leg? I mean, I took first-aid training back home, but this is way too little.”

Nicola took hold of the tubular device. It rested in the palm of her hand. “You place the center on the top of the lower part of my leg. Press this to activate it.” She pointed to the blue button on one end of the device. “It’ll mold itself around my leg. Once that’s done, it sends medication into my skin to stimulate healing.”

“Damn. We could use these at the police department back home,” Leoni said. She removed the lower leg section of Nicola’s glide suit and placed the stabilizer below her knee as instructed.

Nicola winced when the stabilizer wrapped around her leg. She knew the pain would be temporary, but that didn’t make it easy.

“You okay?” Leoni asked.

“It’ll hurt for a while. I’ll be fine.”

Leoni knelt by Nicola and held her hand until the stabilizer was set. “You’re one tough broad.”

“Thanks.” Nicola leaned her head against the cool metal door and closed her eyes. She touched Leoni’s back and pulled her hand away when she felt something warm and wet. Nicola held her hand toward the light. Blood stained her fingers. “Hand me the medkit. You’re hurt.”

“I don’t feel anything,” Leoni said. She gave her the kit.

“When that thing knocked us over, it cut into your back with the tentacle.”

“Cut? I really don’t feel it.”

“I know.” A gash ran from Leoni’s right shoulder down to her waist in a diagonal pattern. The wound was shallow and about three fingers wide. Had Leoni not been wearing her glide suit, the damage would have been fatal.

“Is it bad?”

“Not as much as it could have been.” Nicola once again patched up Leoni’s back. “You’ll probably feel it later, after the adrenaline wears off.”

“I look forward to it,” she grumbled.

“Just lay on your side and rest. We’re not going anywhere until daylight. The *daltras* don’t come out in the light.”

“Good to know. Is your leg gonna be okay by then?”

Nicola smiled. “No, but I’ll be fine. It’s not the first time I’ve broken it.”

Leoni nestled beside Nicola and leaned against her. “Were you here during the war?”

“Yes. I lost half my squad to those daltras. But we didn’t have much choice. Our shuttle crash-landed, and a dozen Nadyte squads were chasing us.”

“Where’d you run to? I haven’t seen much more than that weird sand since we got here.”

“I know. Pretty much that’s the whole planet. Nothing but sand, *daltras*, and a few other animals, none of which are dangerous like the daltras. It made a good staging ground for the Nadyte. The planet’s never been contested territory—obviously there’s nothing here to benefit anyone. So they built several small bases across it. The sand here isn’t stable enough to hold anything that weighs more than a Gatsanula Class ship. So the Nadyte put up over a hundred buildings like this one, no taller than one story, colored them to match the sand, and hid their lighter, faster vessels here.

“But what they didn’t realize was that Danou and I were in contact then. He told me about the activity here, and I brought a squad to do reconnaissance.”

“Did you get the info you were after?”

“We did, but at too high a cost. We got back to Alpha Command, and I recommended no more missions here.” Nicola sighed. “General Brot didn’t agree, and that was a major turning point for me.”

“How so?”

“I was a commander at the time, so I couldn’t go up against a general, but I could work my way up to take his place. He had no idea what he was doing. He never listened to those under his command, and he made choices that resulted in disaster.”

“And you kicked his ass?”

“I would have if I’d had the chance. No, he was killed during an attack on Alpha Command. He refused to get into the secure bunker underground. He was in an above-ground structure that, at the time, housed our communications center. The Nadytes took it and him and most of our upper command officers out in one blast.

“Chief Laag relied a lot on Brot and his team to run the military. Several of us junior officers immediately formed a command group. We pushed our way forward until we were running all military operations. Chief Laag never blinked an eye.”

“He sounds pretty worthless as a leader.”

“He was. And because I led the command group, it wasn’t hard to beat him in the next election.”

“Is that how you got to be a general? Because you’re the chief?”

Nicola shook her head. “I got to be a general because the others in the command group promoted me. The chief is in charge of the council and the military but doesn’t usually have a military rank.”

“Sounds like our president. I guess the Tsalagi here got lucky to have someone with experience running the government.”

“Let’s hope they still feel that way after the merger is completed.” Nicola let her head rest on Leoni’s shoulder. “I could sleep. You?”

“I’ll take the first watch.”

Several hours later, Nicola sat up and stretched her stiff limbs. Her leg no longer throbbed with pain, but when she stood up, it proved weak and painful. She used the wall to steady herself. Pain

or not, she didn't plan to stay in the storage building.

Daylight peeked through the windows on the roof, giving her enough light to see multiple containers neatly stacked along the back of the building.

Leoni popped her head up from behind one stack. "Feel better?" she asked.

"Much. Did you sleep at all?"

"Nope." She reached into the container and removed a blaster rifle. "Found that most of these crates have weapons in them. Only problem is, there's no ammo." She dropped the weapon back into the container and joined Nicola.

"And we lost your waist-pack with the ammo."

"Exactly. We have what's in our hand blasters, and unless we find more, we're screwed."

Nicola held out her hand. "Let me see one of them." Leoni retrieved a blaster rifle and tossed it to her. She examined every inch of the weapon. "The Nadytes don't have this style of weapon. This was made in Kalen. At Alpha Command."

"They have a storehouse of your guns? How the hell did they manage that?"

"I don't know, but I have a feeling that Pram will."

"You're probably right. Are the Nadytes this desperate for weapons?"

"No, but these are far superior to what they have. It would give them a great advantage against us, should the fighting start up again."

Leoni picked up another blaster rifle and slung it across her chest. "Then we need evidence to track this shipment down and find out how it got here."

"And who sent it. I want to check the other buildings, too."

"Can your tracker give us an idea of the layout of this place?"

"Yes." Nicola held out the tracker and activated a mini-holo. On the display was a three-dimensional view of a five-kilometer range around them. "These bases were all laid out in a similar manner. The largest building houses their command section. Each end is one level taller than the middle because there's a light cruiser stored there. The building we're in is here, on the edge of the base. Twenty meters to the north should be a fighter craft bay—it can hold up to six fighters. The building between the fighters and command houses the soldiers' quarters. Next to it is the bay for the skimmers."

"What's a skimmer?" Leoni asked.

"A one-person anti-grav unit. It's used to transport soldiers. Doesn't work very well here, but a traditional trans ends up with sand inside the drive mech within a few minutes of use. Anti-grav units are faster than going on foot and don't have the sand issue."

"Sounds like they're really dug in here. Not planning to leave anytime soon."

Nicola said, "We don't yet know if the buildings are all stocked, but if they are, then I think the Nadyte are planning an invasion. And I doubt Danou knows about it. Killing me could be the catalyst that Pram wanted to start the war up again."

"Then let's not tell them you survived," Leoni said, a serious expression on her face. "I know you're not going to like this idea, but what if everyone thinks you're dead? What happens then?"

"Define everyone."

"Everyone. Even Coby and Ved. Then what? Who takes over?"

Nicola didn't like where Leoni's thoughts were going, but at the same time she recognized a certain logic to the question. "Reem, as head council, would become chief until an election could be held."

"So he'd be in charge of everything? Including getting the merger done with Danou?"

"Yes."

“Would he do it? Would he take what the council agreed on and merge the two governments?”

Nicola started to say yes but couldn't. She'd never thought of it before, but she wasn't entirely certain Reem would continue her work. “He's good at his job, passionate about protecting our way of life, but I'm not sure what he'd do. He could easily take our agreement back to the council and delay the process.”

“That could work for us.”

“How?”

“If he delays things, then we have time to gather more information. Once we backtrack that shipment of blaster rifles, we can start following the trail until we get to the top. No one would know we're doing it. We'd be under the radar, so to speak.”

“I don't know what that means, exactly, but I don't like the idea of my family thinking I'm dead. Do you know what that would do to Jese?”

“I know what it would do to Jese if you were dead.” Leoni pointed to the holo. “According to this, there are no people on this base but us. We can use that to our advantage. Pram might make a move that will allow us to prove his involvement.”

“What about Morijan? She might already be here.”

“She would have seen the explosion. I'm betting she's going over the wreckage. Even if she figures out we survived, would she think to look for us here?”

Nicola wasn't sure. “We're at least thirty kilometers from the debris field. By now, any tracks we created are long gone. Unless she scans the entire planet, she won't find us.”

“I guess that depends on how much she loved her wife. If it were me, I'd scour every inch of this fucking desert.”

“She might.”

“Then we need to get moving. We've already lost a lot of time.”

Nicola felt Leoni's sense of urgency, but she needed to put a limitation on how long they stayed hidden. Bad enough she was intentionally hurting her family, but the damage that could happen without her to lead the Tsalagi was unimaginable. She said, “Three days.”

“Three days what?”

“Three days we stay, how did you put it, out of the radar?”

Leoni laughed softly. “Under the radar. Three days works for me. Why don't we start by heading to that command center?”

“Good idea, but I'll need some help. My leg won't hold me up.”

Leoni put her arm around Nicola's waist. “I got you. Let's go.”

Leoni stood next to the console and watched Nicola work. Nicola had managed to get into the main computer system and search the databases and files for any information on the weapons shipments. She found none.

Once Nicola had gotten started with that task, Leoni searched all the storage buildings, finding a variety of weapons in all but one of them. None of the buildings contained any ammo, and Leoni suspected the single empty building would eventually be where they stored it. Perhaps they hadn't stolen that shipment yet. Or they had and it hadn't arrived.

She continued her exploration. Just as Nicola had described to her, the other buildings contained fighters, anti-grav units, and a light cruiser on either side of the command center.

“All the weapons you found have Tsalagi serial numbers on them,” Nicola said. “The number sequence suggests they were made at the same time.”

“So Pram managed to steal one giant shipment?”

Nicola shook her head but didn’t look away from the holo. “No. An entire batch of weapons isn’t usually shipped together. We split them up. Some get pulled for quality control checks. Some go to different areas based on need and requests. If he’d stolen a shipment the size of the weapons cached here, someone would have noticed. I think he took smaller lots from larger shipments. It’s not unusual for a shipment to be miscounted on occasion.”

“But those occasions would eventually get noticed.”

Nicola finally looked at her. “Yes. But after he gets what he needs, it won’t matter. Obviously he planned to have me killed, and my death would change everyone’s focus. The shipment issues might be seen on a lower level, but it’ll take time for anyone in command to be made aware of it.”

“No one in the entire command structure is looking into the shipment errors?”

“Not likely. Right now they’re trying to figure out how to keep the peace. Immediate blame will go to the Nadyte tribe. Danou will have to calm his council down as they’ll want to dispute that and probably be angry that I was in their territory—even if the moon is technically neutral. Reem will have to keep people like Bettol from forcing a military strike against the Nadyte. Things will be messy for a while.”

“Enough time for Pram to get what he needs.”

Nicola said, “I think so.”

“If this is neutral territory, why would the Nadyte be upset that we’re here—or rather that we got blown up over the place?”

“The Nadyte have always claimed the moon, and since there’s nothing here, we never disputed it. But we never officially gave it to them, either.”

“Why haven’t we found anyone here? Wouldn’t Pram have people here to receive the shipments? Guard them?”

“I don’t know. But I’ve found files that detail some of the other bases here. All of them are fully stocked but not yet staffed. Pram is probably trying to keep this place a secret. Best way to do that, I think, is to not send anyone here until absolutely necessary.”

“Like after he’s killed you?”

“Yes.”

“I hate to ask you this, but do you think Danou had anything to do with trying to kill you? Could Pram be working for him?”

“No. Absolutely not. I trust Danou. He wants this peace more than I do.”

“Why’s that?”

“His entire family is gone because of the war. What no one knows is that Danou was there when Kel died. He’d followed Lade to stop him. I saw Danou moments before the bombing.”

“So he saw his brother killed. What about Morijan?”

“She blames Danou as much as she blames me for Lade’s death. As far as Danou’s concerned, Angeel and I are his only family.”

Leoni considered that for a moment. She wasn’t entirely sure she could trust Danou, but she had to go with Nicola’s instincts. Unless proven otherwise, she’d put her trust in Nicola. “So we really need to get in contact with him.”

“I agree, but we have to do it face-to-face and without anyone knowing we’re there.”

“We’ve got two cruisers. We could fly to him.”

“They’d see us coming and shoot us down. The cruisers are Tsalagi,” Nicola said and leaned

back in the chair. “We need a Nadyte vessel first. If we can get to—” Nicola stood so fast her chair fell over. Her eyes were glued to the holo. “We’ve got company.”

“What?” Leoni’s eyes were drawn to the holo.

“Two Gent Class ships just landed behind the storage area. At least twenty life signs.”

“Shit. Morijan?”

“Maybe. But definitely Nadytes.”

Leoni kept an eye on the holo. The soldiers moved in groups of four. Each group headed in a different direction. They intended to surround the command building. “So they know we’re in here.”

“They do.” Nicola worked the console, her hands flying over the controls. “If I could just be certain they were Morijan’s people.”

“You don’t want to shoot first and ask questions later?”

“No. I don’t.”

Nicola was quiet for a few seconds. Leoni watched the soldiers close in on the two entrances. Already they guarded the bay doors where the cruisers were stored. “How can you be sure they’re with Morijan?”

“There.” Nicola magnified the image, and Leoni recognized Morijan amidst a group of soldiers. She was leading them to the front entrance.

Leoni drew her blaster. “Nicola, what if we got in one of those cruisers. There’s a corridor connecting this area to the bays on either side of us. We could use the onboard weapons to blast our way out of here.”

“Wait—you just gave me an idea.” Nicola’s hands moved over the console, and the distinct rumbling of a cruiser engine came from bay number one. “The cruisers aren’t fast enough to outrun the Nadyte ships. They’d catch us before we get off world. However, I can remotely operate both of them, but not simultaneously. I can send one of them on a course off planet, and maybe they’ll use one of their ships to chase it. The other one I can use to take out some of the attack group if I keep it low enough to the ground, but the sand could cause problems.”

“Sounds like a plan. What do you need from me?”

“Time.” Nicola pointed to the holo. “Keep them off me for as long as you can.”

“I’ll give you as long as I can.”

Nicola turned to her and Leoni saw something change in Nicola’s expression. It softened as their eyes met. “Leoni—”

Leoni pressed her lips to Nicola’s in a kiss filled with promises. “Let’s kick some ass.”

Nicola leaned back a little and physically shook off the emotions from the kiss. Leoni saw the flush in her face and wished they had more time.

Nicola placed her weapon on the console. “Get ready.”

The cruiser shot out of Bay One and immediately one of the Nadyte ships gave chase. Nicola set it on a course for Forensia. It wouldn’t take long for the Nadytes to get within firing range, but she hoped that shooting it down wasn’t on their agenda. The cruiser in Bay Two roared to life. This time, Nicola eased the vessel out, using its nav screen as if she were sitting in the cockpit. The nav screen filled the holo in front of her, and she mentally put herself in the vessel. Nadyte soldiers opened fire as she nosed out of the bay. One sweep from the cruiser’s belly cannon took them out.

She steered the cruiser farther into the open, shooting down another squad of Nadytes poised to enter through the main base doors.

Nicola glanced at the holo. Two squads were coming around the staff quarters. The cruiser had two missiles, each with a metaline shell and filled with brewst. Brewst was an unstable element that, when mixed with metaline, was highly explosive. Nicola realized that the blast might cause damage to the command center, but with those squads in the area, she didn't see another choice. She armed the missile and fired.

The concussion from the explosion rocked the building and knocked Nicola to the ground. She spotted Leoni leaning against a wall close to the main entrance. The holo flickered twice before disappearing. Nicola tried the nav screen for the cruiser. It shimmered, but she made out the area where the staff quarters once stood.

She armed the second missile and turned the cruiser toward the storage area. She aimed for the building filled with displacement grenades. The larger of the Nadyte ships was ten meters from the building. She double-checked that Leoni was still in front of the blast doors at the front entrance of the control room. She armed the cannon and fired.

Everything went dark.

Nicola wasn't sure how long she was down. Lights were out. No power to the console.

"Leoni?" Nicola called out but got no response. She crawled in the direction of Bay One, where she'd last seen her.

"Leoni!" Nicola shouted, though the sound was dull in her ears.

Lights flickered to her right. Before she could turn, something heavy slammed into her. Nicola was pinned beneath the object. Hands grabbed at her. Her fist connected with something hard. Warm liquid sprayed her face.

She swung again, but her wrist was caught in an iron grip.

Nicola bucked under her attacker. One leg was freed. She swung viciously but failed to connect. Her attacker managed to get hold of both her wrists and pinned them against the floor.

"Get off me!" Nicola stared up into eyes full of rage.

Morijan was speaking, but Nicola couldn't make out the words.

Nicola fought to free herself. Morijan held her down using her own weight. Nicola was sure Morijan would kill her. But she wasn't going without a fight. With the strength she had left, she slammed her head against Morijan's. She was surprised that the blow seemed to stun him, and he let her go. Before Nicola could get up, her vision darkened and she passed out.

Chapter Thirteen

Leoni curled into a fetal position in a corner of the main entrance to the base. She recognized the ringing in her ears was caused by a displacement grenade, but she didn't recall it being that loud. Had she not managed to close the blast doors that protected the entrance, she probably would have been killed. That sixth sense she'd developed had her running to this spot moments before Nicola blew up the storage building. Hundreds, maybe thousands, of secondary explosions echoed against the outside walls.

Whoever was out there had to be dead. No one could have survived.

It felt like hours before the noise in her head subsided. Leoni opened her eyes and carefully got up. Her legs were wobbly at first, but determination kept her going as she went in search of Nicola. She wouldn't have been as insulated as Leoni.

She entered the command area and found the emergency door wide open. Bright light flooded in, and she had to shield her eyes from it, despite the protective goggles she wore.

"Where is she?" A woman's voice screeched. Leoni's hearing was diminished, though she knew the woman was near. "Where is my wife?"

"Get off me!"

That last came from Nicola. Leoni headed for Bay Two.

Nicola was pinned to the ground by a woman in a Nadyte uniform. The woman kept screaming, "Where's my wife? You survived! She must have, too!"

"Hey," Leoni hoped she yelled loud enough to be heard. "Over here!"

The woman slowly tilted her head toward Leoni. Morijan. Her gaze narrowed. "What did you do to her?" Morijan got to her feet. She wasn't any more stable than Leoni.

"I shot the bitch between the eyes," Leoni said. "You can probably find pieces of her with the shuttle."

Morijan's eyes filled with rage. She lunged forward. Leoni crouched low, caught Morijan's body at the waist, and flipped her over her head. Morijan landed on her back.

Leoni whipped around and readied for another attack.

Morijan pushed to her feet and rasped out, "I'm going to kill you."

"Doubt it." Leoni lashed out a foot and caught Morijan in the stomach.

The blow knocked Morijan to the ground. Leoni jumped on her and pummeled her with punch after punch. Blood sprayed from Morijan's face. She tried to protect herself, but Leoni had none of it. The effort caught up to her and Leoni slowed. Morijan's eyes were closed, though her chest rose and fell with ragged breaths.

Leoni rolled to the side. She looked at her bloody hands and wondered if the blood was hers or Morijan's. She didn't care. She hoped the bitch was dead. Leoni's head felt like a lead weight, and she rested it on the cool ground.

Without moving, Leoni called out, "Nic? You there?"

"Yes." Nicola's voice sounded weak. Or maybe Leoni's hearing wasn't totally back yet.

"Thass good." The slurred voice surprised Leoni. Morijan said, "I'm going to kill you both."

Leoni struggled painfully to her hands and knees and caught a glimpse of Morijan. She leaned against the wall, a blaster in her hand. Her arm wavered as she fought to keep a grip on the weapon. Leoni judged the distance between them. Too far for her to charge the bitch.

Morijan leveled the blaster at Leoni's face. "You killed my wife. I want Nicola to see her last lover die in front of her."

Morijan's eyes rolled back and she crumpled to the ground. The back of her head was missing a very important chunk. Nicola was behind Morijan. She lay on the ground, leaning up on one elbow, the blaster still in her hand. She was shaking.

Leoni crawled on all fours to get to her. "Let go, Nic. It's over." Leoni gently tugged the weapon from her stiff fingers and holstered it. She took Nicola's hands in hers. "She's dead, baby. It's over."

"I thought—"

Leoni placed a finger on Nicola's lips. "Don't think."

"I won't. Hurts my head too much."

"Mine, too. Let me get you inside the command area. We have to make sure there aren't any more Nadytes out there."

Leoni spent a full hour searching the base. She found no one alive. She wasn't entirely clear how Morijan had survived. She could only assume that she'd been inside one of the buildings, same as Leoni and Nicola. While she never wished death on anyone, Leoni was glad the bitch was dead. Maybe Nicola would have some peace now.

Leoni made her way to the cruiser that Nicola had used to fight the Nadytes. It'd sustained some damage to the outside, but when Leoni looked inside, everything seemed operable. Maybe their luck had changed. She hurried to the command center where she'd tucked Nicola safely inside a storage room.

Leoni moved the heavy rack she'd used to block the room's entrance. She opened the door and called out, "Don't shoot. I'm one of the good guys."

"You better be. What'd you find out there?"

"Nothing. No survivors—except the cruiser. Looks beat up on the outside, but no visible damage on the inside. Maybe we should move in there. See if it works?"

"If I can get it working, at least we'll have weapons to use and maybe a way off this planet."

"Oh, we have weapons. I just have to go out there and collect them off the dead guys. I'll get you in the ship first, though."

Nicola was still fighting the effects of the displacement grenades, not to mention the pain of her broken leg. She rubbed her temples, wishing at least the headache would abate. It didn't, so she went back to work. She sat in the pilot's seat and ran diagnostics on all the systems. The port side cannon was disabled. Shield generator was at eighty percent. Starboard cannon active. Belly cannon active. Nav screen active.

She leaned back and stretched. The most important functions were online. They could fly off world without issue. Provided no one on the planet noticed them leaving. If anyone was left.

The cockpit door opened, and Nicola looked over her shoulder as Leoni walked in.

Leoni nuzzled her cheek. "So, this thing work?"

"Almost as well as when I first flew it out of Bay Two. Did you find any useable weapons?"

"Two blaster rifles and a dozen bolts. That blast you made did a shitload of damage."

“I know,” Nicola said quietly.

Leoni knelt beside Nicola and placed a hand on her knee. “Hey. You did what was necessary.”

“I’ve started the war again.”

“No way. They were after us. Morijan would have killed you. Nic, we defended ourselves. Plain and simple.”

“It’s never simple. The Nadyte won’t see it as self-defense. Not all of them.”

“What about Danou? What will he think? You told me you trust him.”

Nicola hesitated. Danou would be shocked that Morijan was dead. “Privately, he’ll understand. Publicly…”

“I don’t know him like you do, but he’s a shitty leader if he starts the war again because we defended ourselves against a lunatic with dozens of followers.”

“Deep down, Morijan was still his sister. On some level Danou did care about her.”

“She was a rapist. She deserved what she got.”

“What—what did you call her?”

“A rapist.” Leoni touched the side of Nicola’s face. Anger flared in Leoni’s eyes. “Coby told me what happened to you. Your injuries made it clear that she’d raped you, Nic. I wanted to kill her.”

Nicola could hardly form words. “Coby never said anything to me.”

“He figured you’d tell him when you were ready.”

She struggled to hold them back, but the tears streamed down Nicola’s face. It hurt to remember the details. “Morijan convinced me she’d kidnapped Jese. Said she’d kill him if I fought her. I believed her. I couldn’t take the chance that she wasn’t telling the truth.”

Leoni squeezed her hand. “Is that why you had to see him the minute you woke up in the hospital?”

“Yes.” Nicola’s voice was thick with emotion. “She told me he was in the next room, and if I screamed, he’d hear me. She—she took out her rage on me. It didn’t matter what she did to my body. The only thing I could think of was my son. I know she had me for five days, because Coby told me. I don’t remember everything—she didn’t let me eat or sleep. I blacked out a few times but always woke up with her looming over me.”

“Nic, you don’t have to do to this.”

“I think I do. I wanted her to kill me. I was terrified. She could do whatever she felt like to me. And she did.” She paused to take a deep breath. “I never knew a person could be as violent as Morijan. There was a time—a very short time—that I found her beautiful. But she was unstable. I don’t know how I survived.”

“For Jese,” Leoni said. “You survived for him.” She wiped the wetness from Nicola’s face, while she fought the overwhelming emotions warring inside her. “Nic, I can’t fix what the bitch did to you, but I’m here to help you move past it.”

Nicola cupped Leoni’s face in her hands, leaned forward, and kissed her tenderly. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For listening to me. I’ve never talked about this before, and it feels good to have it out in the open. I don’t know if that will help or not. I just know I feel better.”

Leoni kissed the palm of Nicola’s hand. “That’s enough.” Leoni hugged her tightly. “Why don’t you and I get off this damn planet?”

Nicola released her and pointed to the copilot’s seat. “Strap in. The cruiser works well enough to get out of here, but where are we going?”

“I think we need to find a place to lay low for a while. Your leg needs time to heal, and we

need time to plan.”

“To trap Pram. I really want to nail that bastard.”

“We’ve got to find a way to call him out on what he’s done. We’ve already got a start on the evidence.”

“Stove and his men were mercenaries. We need to tie them to Pram.”

“Good idea. But we have to get out of here and to a place no one will look for us.”

Nicola thought for a moment. “I know just the place.”

Chapter Fourteen

Tlen Province, located on the edge of Tsalagi territory in the southernmost hemisphere of Forensia, stood abandoned after the First War. The Nadytes bombed homes and farmland with the intent of complete destruction. They poisoned the land and burned anything they could. Thousands died. No one returned. In the midst of the carnage stood a Tsalagi military storage facility.

As Nicola flew over the facility, Leoni wondered where they'd land and how they'd hide the cruiser. How would they find shelter for themselves? All she saw were piles of debris amidst empty shells that were once buildings, reminding her of the destructive scenes from the news distant countries at war. She'd never seen anything like it up close.

Nicola maneuvered the ship into the only structure that still stood. A landing bay that was once attached to the crumbling main structure was mostly intact. At least it still had a roof. Once the ship was tucked inside, Nicola leaned back in the pilot seat and closed her eyes.

Leoni said, "How's your leg?"

"Painful." Nicola turned sideways in the seat to stretch out her legs. "I'm not sure if there are any supplies on this base, but if we go underground, we might find someplace to settle in and sleep."

"No one will find us here? You're sure?"

"Positive. I activated the cruiser's track shield. No one saw us come in. And no one comes here."

"Why not?"

"It's a memorial of sorts. We lost too many people in the attack. Honestly, no one can stomach coming back here. Chief Laag sent men in to clean up, gather any equipment that was worth keeping, take care of the dead, and that was it. The site's been unofficially off-limits since then."

"Well, let's see what we can find. You said there's underground space?"

Nicola tried to stand. She didn't make it, and Leoni helped her sit down again. "Most of the storage was underground. The Nadyte didn't know that, and their attack wasn't successful in that regard."

"So they murdered all those people for nothing."

"The incident pushed our chief to retaliate. It was horrific." Again, Nicola tried to stand. "I can't put any weight on my stupid leg."

"Not a problem." Leoni placed one arm under Nicola's knees and the other around her torso and lifted her. She enjoyed how easily the woman fit into her arms.

Nicola grumbled. "I feel ridiculous."

"Don't." Leoni gave Nicola a slow and gentle kiss. When they parted, Leoni was breathless.

Nicola's smile told Leoni how much she'd enjoyed the kiss.

Leoni asked, "Where to?"

"Just put me in one of the crew seats in the back. You'll have to do the exploring on your own."

Leoni helped Nicola to a seat, found a storage box, and dragged it in front of her so she could rest her leg on it for support. "I think I need to contact Coby."

"I thought the plan was to get with Danou?"

"He can't help us right now. Coby can bring us supplies—maybe something for your leg."

"The pain isn't that bad," Nicola said.

"Then why did I carry you out here?" Before Nicola could reply, Leoni said, "I can do a lot on my own, but we really need intelligence. The kind that Coby is good at finding. He can get you

into the computers at Alpha Command.”

“You’re right. We do need more information before going to Danou. Send Coby two words via your comm pad. Blue Side.”

“Blue Side?”

“It’s what our command group called this area. He’ll know what you mean. Even if Pram intercepts his messages, he won’t know the code. Only our group knew it.”

Leoni took out her comm pad and typed in Coby’s number, along with a message:

Blue Side. Tell no one. L

Less than a minute later, he said. “That was fast,” Leoni said. “He’s on the way. How long you reckon for him to get here?”

“If he’s at Alpha Command, two days. If he’s still on the *Cannati*, it could be a matter of hours.”

“Where do you think he is?”

Nicola grimaced as she adjusted the position of her leg. “On the *Cannati* searching for us. I’m willing to bet he ignored my orders and headed straight for the moon. The cruiser was probably already destroyed by the time they got within sensor range, so there’d be no signal for them to follow. If they weren’t detected by the Nadyte and turned away, Coby would have ordered a complete search of the planet.”

“He doesn’t follow orders very well.”

“No. He doesn’t. Not when he thinks the orders are wrong.”

“So we’ll see him soon. In the meantime, I’ll have a look around.”

Nicola said, “Check the storage units in the back of this compartment. There should be some emergency supplies there, food, medkit, flatbeds.”

“Maybe something for your leg,” Leoni said.

“The smaller medkits won’t have that kind of supplies. Just pain pills that I don’t really need.”

Leoni gave her a crisp salute, and it drew a smile from Nicola. “I’m on it, except I meant I’m checking this place out. Call me paranoid, but I want to be sure we’re alone.”

Several hours later, Leoni and Nicola were stretched out on a flatbed. That was actually a misnomer. Once unpacked, the flatbed stretched to about seven feet long by four feet wide and inflated six inches. Weird. A compact, blow-up bed. But Leoni was grateful for it. She was exhausted. So was Nicola, but neither of them was able to sleep. Leoni had spent two hours searching the base. She was satisfied no one else was around.

Now she lay on her side with one arm wrapped around Nicola’s middle. Nicola turned her head to meet Leoni’s gaze.

“Can’t sleep?” Nicola asked.

“Too keyed up. I should be passed out after all the crap we’ve gone through in the last, what? Day? Day and a half?”

“I don’t know.”

Something was off in the way Nicola looked at her. Sadness, anguish, Leoni wasn’t certain. She cupped Nicola’s face with the palm of her hand. Tears sparkled on the edges of Nicola’s eyes.

“Nic, what’s wrong?”

“I killed her, right? I mean, she’s dead and I didn’t imagine it.”

It took Leoni a moment to realize who Nicola meant. “Yeah. Morijan’s dead. You killed her because you’re stronger than she was. After all that happened to you, you took the bitch out. She can’t touch you ever again. You beat her, Nic. It’s over.”

“It’s hard to believe. I can’t seem to wrap my mind around it. I’ve had so many nightmares because of her. I killed dozens of people because of her.”

“She forced your hand. All that blood is on her, not you. I’m damn proud of you, Nicola Daelis.”

“I shot her because I was afraid she’d kill you. I just found you, Leoni. I couldn’t bear it if you died.” She leaned into Leoni and sighed. “I love you.”

Leoni was stunned. She had strong feelings for Nicola but wasn’t sure she was ready for love. If she was, Nicola would be her choice. But could she love someone after Tayanita?

“Nic, I—”

“Don’t. You don’t have to say anything. I wanted you to know. That’s all.”

Leoni wiped a stray tear as it trickled down Nicola’s cheek and kissed her tenderly. She wanted to love her. But Patra’s voice intruded in the moment. *There will be many difficult choices ahead of you. Take care the path you choose.* Was loving Nicola the right path?

Nicola opened her mouth to say something, but Leoni motioned her to stop. She could hear someone outside the cruiser. She eased off the flatbed and drew her hand blaster. She pressed herself against the bulkhead next to the exit hatch and waited. Nicola had her blaster in her hand.

Leoni waited until she could hear whoever was outside reach the hatch. She pressed the switch, and the hatch yawned open.

“Nic!” Coby jumped into the cruiser.

Leoni let out a relieved breath and holstered her weapon.

Coby ran to Nicola and gathered her into a tight hug. “I thought—”

Nicola smiled and lightly patted his cheek. “Take a deep breath. I’m fine. We jumped out as soon as we hit the right distance inside the atmosphere. The shuttle blew up not long after.”

“I saw the explosion on the vid screen. We tried to come after you, but we were called off.” His expression darkened. “The Nadyte decided we were too close. I tried to contact Danou, but the Nadyte ship blocked our communications. I eventually got Reem, and he ordered us to back off.”

“You didn’t back off very far, or you wouldn’t be here so fast,” Nicola said. “What did you do?”

“Stayed on a planetary orbit of Forensia while I had the crew send drones to search the Third Moon. Found what was left of a Nadyte base. I was still fighting with Reem to have search crews sent when I got Leoni’s message.”

Leoni said, “You need to keep fighting with him on that. Don’t tell anyone that Nic is alive. We’ve got a plan, but we need your help.”

Coby looked confused. “Nic?”

She nodded. “I don’t like to deceive everyone, and I can’t imagine what it’s doing to Jese, but she’s right. For once, we need to have the element of surprise.”

“We have to figure out who the hell set that shuttle to blow up,” Leoni added.

“Who were you two fighting on the Third Moon?”

Leoni launched into the tale, giving Coby as much detail as she could. “We don’t know who planted the explosives, but they’re probably still among your crew. The only good part is that Nic killed Morijan.”

A range of emotions crossed Coby's face before he spoke. "Good. She got what she deserved." He squeezed Nicola's hand.

"We need access to Alpha Command's database," Nicola said. She explained to Coby about the stolen weapons and supplies they'd discovered. "Get me access and give us a few days. But stay in contact. I need to know if Reem goes ahead with the merger."

Coby said, "I'll talk to him. I'll get you supplies and equipment tonight." He hugged Nicola and stood up. "How bad is the leg?"

Nicola shrugged. "Don't know."

"I'll bring a full medpack. At least get you a better splint. I'll have Pram get to work on who had access to the shuttles."

Nicola said, "No. Not Pram."

"Nic—" Coby said, but Nicola cut him off.

"I heard his voice on the comm. Stove called someone, and I'm sure the voice was Pram's."

"I'll kill him."

Leoni said, "Not yet. You need to watch him. He thinks Nic is dead. I'm willing to bet he'll make a move soon."

The look on Coby's face made it obvious he didn't agree. Nicola added, "Leoni's right. Put a tracker on him. I want to know where he goes."

"Copy that, General," Coby said. He leaned down to kiss her forehead. "I'll get your supplies. Why don't you set up base in the guards' quarters. Plenty of room there."

He walked to the hatch. "Leoni, I'll signal your comm pad when I'm here. Otherwise, keep this closed."

"Done." Leoni locked the hatch behind him. "How, exactly, does your brother manage to move around without anyone finding out? I mean, he's supposed to be on the *Cannati*. Won't someone notice he's not there?"

"No. It's what Coby's best at." Nicola patted the flatbed beside her. "Join me?"

"Sure." Leoni dropped her weary body next to her.

"He's done a lot of covert ops. He's very good at covering his trail. He'll get what we need, and no one will notice."

Leoni thought about that for a moment. "What if the person who stole those supplies and weapons shipments also worked in covert ops? Stands to reason that person is also good at covering his trail, too."

"Pram was in covert ops before transferring to security."

"There you go," Leoni said. "You heard his voice. It wouldn't be a big leap to think he's involved in both activities. If he's supplying the Nadyte with weapons, then he's likely in the camp that wants to start the fighting up again. And if the Nadyte have better guns, they have a better chance of winning."

"Correct. Danou needs to know what's going on."

"But that would involve telling him you're alive. We can't risk that."

Nicola didn't respond.

"Nic, I'm sure this is hard for you, but we're doing the right thing," Leoni said. She kissed Nicola and felt a calmness wash over her. For an instant, Leoni thought she should tell Nicola she loved her. The kiss deepened, but Leoni pulled back. "I need to get us set up inside the base."

Nicola's expression relayed her disappointment and understanding. Leoni's resolve remained in place. Barely.

Nicola said, "Take my tracker and locate the guards' quarters. We kept a squad here at all times

when in use. It's three levels down, and there's enough room for the equipment Coby is bringing."

"I'll go check it out." Leoni stood, though her libido screamed at her to stay. "I'll be back in twenty minutes."

"I'll be waiting."

Chapter Fifteen

Leoni stood behind Nicola, who sat at the workstation she and Coby had set up. Primitive, according to Nicola, but it worked. Leoni still didn't have a handle on all the technology, but she was damn glad Coby was good at his job. They were now able to connect to the main Tsalagi data center.

Nicola was fast with the commands. In less than an hour, she'd found some of the evidence they needed.

Leoni said, "Let's stop a minute and see where we are. You're so fast with that thing I need to catch up."

"I've tracked the shipments to Alpha Command, as I expected. But when I look for the specific serial numbers of the blaster rifles, I don't find any missing. That batch was sent out two months ago. According to the records, everything was shipped and received in full."

"So he's got someone on the receiving side tampering with the records."

Nicola sat back, her face a mask of concentration. "That would be hard to do. That particular batch was divided among seven bases."

"What are the odds that he's replaced some of the weapons with inferior models?"

"You mean with Nadyte weapons? They'd be spotted right away."

"Not if they were meant to look like the real thing." Leoni picked up the blaster rifle they'd managed to keep from the stash on the Third Moon and set it in front of Nicola. "You're the expert. Check it over. What could be substituted?"

Nicola was clearly skeptical. She hefted the rifle, sighted it, tested its weight, and set it back down. In less than a minute, she fieldstripped it and examined every piece. "I can guess what's probably been done," she said. She held up part of the weapon. It looked to Leoni like a computer chip. "This is the most important piece of this model of blaster rifle. It controls the sight and regulates the firing mech. In the past, these weapons had issues with the mech overheating. It can fire a dozen rounds per second. If the firing mech is working, it detects the temperature and signals coolant into the barrel, so the users don't have to stop shooting.

"The Nadyte are still using the older models with the older chip. This newer chip wouldn't be in a Nadyte weapon. They don't have the technology to create it. Theirs have a mech that will stop when it overheats. It's only a few seconds, but in a fight, it could mean your life."

"And," Leoni said, "those rifles sent to other Tsalagi bases would have old chips that were altered to look like these?"

"Yes. I have a feeling there are thousands of blaster rifles scattered among our bases that now have replica chips in them that aren't worth anything."

"So any soldier using the sabotaged rifle wouldn't be expecting the heating issue. Since the Nadyte then have the superior models, they keep shooting and Tsalagi soldiers start dying. Giving the Nadyte an edge in the war."

"Exactly. I also found two shipments of displacement grenades that show as received, but when I checked the records of the bases that got them, they aren't listed on their inventory."

"Can you prove who did this?"

"Not yet. Pram has access to the systems where the shipments are recorded, but that's not enough. I'm running a program now to check for his ident. If I can find that he logged in and accessed the files, that will help."

"It's circumstantial. We need more proof."

Nicola said, "I heard his voice on the comm. For me, that's enough."

"I know that, but the rest of the world will require more. What about Ved's incident? Any chance we can tie him to that? I mean, with Ved injured, he got the position as your head of security. And not long after that, you were kidnapped. That speaks volumes to me."

"Me, too."

"I have an idea." Leoni gave Nicola a slight grin. "Why don't we get Coby to go back to the Third Moon?"

"What for?"

"To check over the wreckage of that cruiser, if possible. Coby does covert ops, so he should be able to get there without anyone seeing him. Maybe he can find something to trace that back to Pram. Or the Brothers of Seven. Or whoever the hell Pram's working for. What do you think?"

"It's a definite possibility. We need more physical evidence. I'll send Coby a message."

"That will help. So we know what Pram did, but not what he was, or is, planning to do with all the armament or why he hooked up with Morijan."

"He knew Morijan was after me, and he would have known at least some of our history since he'd have access to most of Ved's files. He probably hired Stove and brought Morijan in so he could blame my death on her. Once the cruiser blew up, her wife's remains would be found with mine and I'm sure it wouldn't take much for Danou and his people to trace things back to Morijan."

Leoni said, "He just didn't count on me being on that ship."

"So he now thinks that part of the plan worked, and it's on to his next step."

"Nic, do you think he's working for Nadyte radicals, the Brothers of Seven, or some other group?"

"I'm not sure what to think, but I doubt he's working alone. All this takes a lot of work and a lot of help covering his tracks. He needs several people on the inside to help him—on both sides, actually. Otherwise he'd never have been able to get supplies to the Third Moon without being detected."

"So," Leoni said, "Some Tsalagis and Nadytes are helping him. I did some research on the Brothers of Seven and found that they have members in both tribes. Maybe it's not a big leap to think Pram is part of them. He'd have the resources."

"True. But now that he thinks I'm dead, what's his end game? My death won't stop the merger. It's only delaying it. Coby said that Reem is moving forward, and without any argument from the council."

"Then he's got to be planning to do something at the merger signing. It's happening at the mine, right?"

"Yes."

"Then we'll be ready for him. He's got a plan, so we'll put together a plan. And a big part of that will be an emergency escape route—and making certain we trust no one other than Coby. Agreed?"

Nicola hesitated but finally nodded. "Agreed."

"Excellent." Leoni leaned down and gently kissed Nicola on the lips. "Let's go lie down for a bit. You could use some sleep."

"I can't. There's too much—"

"That wasn't a suggestion, General." Leoni narrowed her gaze at Nicola. "You can't keep working on this if your brain is too tired to think. Besides, I saw you rubbing your leg earlier. It's got to be hurting like hell."

"It does, but that's the medication and pain pills don't help with that. Every four hours, the

brace injects meds into the tissue to stimulate healing. I should be able to take the brace off in about two weeks.”

“If you haven’t keeled over from lack of sleep,” Leoni said and gently urged her off the chair. “Just a few hours. You’ll feel good as new, and we’ll get back at our investigation.”

Nicola looked ready to argue but surprised Leoni when she didn’t. Instead, she took Leoni’s offered hand and walked with her to their sleeping quarters.

Coby paid Leoni and Nicola a visit the next morning. After getting Nicola’s message, he’d gone to the wreckage site to look for evidence. The three of them gathered at the workstation. Nicola pulled up a map of the Third Moon on the holo. “Coby, show me where you found the bulk of the wreckage.”

“Here,” Coby said as he pointed. “A good portion of the crew compartment was still intact. From the damage, I estimate that the explosion took place near the cockpit. I found sections of it two kilometers north of the main site.”

“Any indication that anyone else has been looking around?” Leoni asked.

“No. I didn’t find much of the bomb itself, but I did get this.” He retrieved a blackened bit of metal from his waist pouch and handed it to Nicola.

Nicola turned the piece over in her hand. Half the size of her palm, it was twisted into an “S” shape. She wasn’t sure, but it could be part of a control panel. “This doesn’t tell us much, Coby.”

“It already has,” he said. “I found that near the auto-nav unit. Or what was left of it. What will help us is that I found Pram’s DNA on it.”

“Is that unusual?” Leoni asked.

Nicola nodded. “Highly. He may have access to all the ships, but there’s no reason he should ever be working on an auto-nav unit.”

“But as head of your security he might have been checking the ship out. Making sure nothing wrong with it. That’s plausible, right?” Leoni asked.

“No. We have security techs for that. He would certainly be in charge of directing them, but he’s not trained to go over a ship’s tech areas. I can’t think of any excuse he’d have to be in it. This will help us a lot.” Nicola closed her hand over the piece then gave Coby a kiss on the cheek. “Good work, Colonel.”

“My pleasure. I logged the evidence before bringing it here. We’ll just add it to everything we’ve found.”

Leoni said, “How much physical evidence is needed here? Do you two think we have enough to prove that Pram tried to kill Nic?”

“I think we do,” Nicola said. “His DNA on this piece from the wreckage, the weapons and equipment thefts, and the fact that I heard him talking to my kidnappers—I think that’s enough.”

“Has the signing been rescheduled?”

Coby said, “Yes. Sixteen days from now.”

“Enough time for Nic to rest and heal up her leg before we call that bastard out on all the shit he’s done.” Leoni glanced sideways at Nicola. “You’re going to rest, right?”

“I’ve been resting, Leoni. I haven’t done anything more strenuous than sitting at this workstation.”

“Nic, that’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

Nicola pretended not to understand, but she knew exactly what Leoni meant. Nicola hadn't gotten much sleep since they'd first come to the old storage facility. She was anxious to have Pram arrested, get the merger signed, and put the last few weeks behind her. She missed her son, her family, and her own bed. "I'll do what I can, but I make no promises."

Leoni looked doubtful. "I'll take that for now. Coby, did you remember to bring Nic's uniform?"

"My uniform?" Nicola looked from Coby to Leoni. "I'm wearing a uniform."

"Not that one," Coby said. "I brought your dress uniform. I already put it in your sleeping area. You need to look your best when we disrupt the merger and let everyone know you're not dead."

"I hadn't thought about that."

"I did," Leoni said. "Besides, I really want to see you in it again. You looked pretty damn good that first day we met." She gave Nicola a crooked smile, and Nicola smiled back.

"Thanks." Nicola kept her eyes on Leoni, felt the passion building. It scared her. Nicola trusted Leoni but didn't trust herself. She lowered her gaze and said, "Coby, get back to Alpha Command. Keep monitoring Pram's comm, and notify us if you hear anything significant. Otherwise, we'll see you in a few days."

"Will do." Coby saluted and headed out.

Nicola finished a few things on the holo, trying hard to ignore the penetrating gaze from Leoni. When she finally turned toward her, Leoni held her arms out and Nicola fell into her embrace. "What's this for? Not that I'm complaining."

"You looked like you could use a hug," Leoni whispered in her ear. "Besides, I wanted to make sure you know that we won't do anything you're not ready for. Okay?"

Nicola hugged her tight. "Okay."

It took two weeks for Nicola's leg to heal enough for her to be mobile. The leg was painful and stiff, but she could walk and that was enough. If Coby had gotten an updated medkit, the leg would have healed sooner. Nicola realized the regeneration meds would take time. Time she didn't have. Every minute she was there healing was another minute Pram and his group were gaining ground. For all they knew, Pram was planning to kill Reem next.

In a couple of days, the merger would be signed. Reem, Danou, and their security details, along with a select number of members of the media, would be in attendance. None of them knew that Nicola and Leoni would be there, as well, to deliver the evidence they'd collected regarding the stolen weapons and the Nadyte bases on the Third Moon.

Nicola wandered through the ruins of the operations center. Rubble and dust covered the once shiny floors. She carefully picked her way around the rocks and debris until she was at the open space where a wall had once been. The sun shone brightly, and its rays warmed her skin.

She closed her eyes and tilted her head skyward. An image of Jese when he was learning to walk came to mind. A sunny beautiful afternoon in the garden behind her quarters. He played in the grass on a blue and green blanket. Jese wanted a toy and pushed himself to a semi-standing position. She'd laughed at his awkward gait but was at the same time proud of him. His chubby little legs didn't hold him steady, and he fell twice. But he kept getting up. Sheer determination drove him to the toy he wanted. He sat down and played as if nothing unusual had happened. For Nicola, the simple act marked an amazing moment in her son's life.

It broke her heart that Kel hadn't been there to see it. She missed him the most when Jese did something that any parent would enjoy. He deserved to have his father in his life. Ved did his best to be a surrogate. It helped Nicola to have him around, and Jese loved him, though clearly it wasn't the same.

Thoughts of Kel quickly turned to Leoni. She loved Leoni. She longed to build a life with her. Leoni would be a parent to Jese and...

She sighed and opened her eyes.

The sound of a trans caught her attention. Nicola stepped behind a broken wall and watched the vehicle approach. A single-person trans came directly toward her. She drew her blaster and took cover behind the partial wall.

It landed beneath a piece of roof that was held in place by two-and-a-half walls. Coby popped out of the trans.

Nicola holstered her weapon as she came around the wall. "You should send a message before showing up like this. I might have shot you."

"No, you wouldn't have," Coby said. "You won't shoot until you're sure it's a good target. Let's get inside. I only have an hour, so I thought we'd go over our plan for the merger."

"Leoni's in the command area. Let's go there. Last I checked, she was memorizing the layout of the old mining center."

"I like that about her," Coby said. "She's always thorough."

Another of the many things Nicola liked about Leoni. She quietly fell into step with Coby.

Leoni stared at a holo and didn't look up when they entered the room. She waved to acknowledge them and said, "Coby, are you sure about us getting into this place? There doesn't seem to be a spot we can sneak in through."

"We'll use the emergency evac tunnel that runs underneath the operations center," Coby said.

"But the map here shows it collapsed after the explosions."

"It did. I had it dug out and reinforced two years ago."

"I don't remember that," Nicola said. "Exactly what were you doing at the mine?"

"Can we talk about this later?" Coby asked.

"Negative, Colonel."

He looked properly chastised. "I had intel that Morijan was trying to set up a base there. I used the tunnel because the entrance is on our side of the mountain." He locked eyes with her. He wasn't backing down. "Yes, I did it without your permission. My job calls for decisions like this. And no, I'm not sorry I did it."

Nicola understood and pointed to the holo. "Once we're in, then what? Won't both Reem and Danou have security stationed throughout the areas that are accessible?"

"Yes," Coby said. "However, the area you'll be in is actually blocked off from the operations room. The plan is to get you in via the ventilation shafts. I'll make sure you have enough provisions for two days. You'll be able to move around, but not much."

"If we move around, won't we alert security?" Leoni asked.

"No. You'll be far enough away from any areas they'll be in. Trust me. I'll have you tucked nicely away until it's time for Nic to come back from the dead."

Leoni said, "Do we have to crawl through those vents shafts to get to the room?"

"No," Nicola answered. "We'll be able to stand up in the shafts."

"You'll come out in this corridor." Coby indicated the spot on the holo. "My team will be monitoring that area. I have all the evidence on a holo chip. As soon as the media is set up and we're about to begin, I'll step forward to give it to Reem and Danou."

Leoni asked, "When do we come in?"

"Nic first, Leoni. I think you should wait to see how Pram reacts to Nic's presence. He won't be concerned that you're alive. His focus will be Nic."

"And if he decides to fight?" Leoni asked. She looked from Nicola to Coby. "Have you thought about the possibility that he'll have his own people mixed in?"

"Yes. That's why my team will be there. It's their job to watch for anyone who shouldn't be present. Pram chose the soldiers for the security detail. I assume those men are loyal to him. I've got contingencies in place. I'm ready for him."

"I should be the one to hand them the holo chip," Nicola said. "I'll come in, explain what we've found out, and we can arrest him on the spot."

Coby stared at the holo for a few moments. "Nic, you know I have to argue against this. I'd rather you come in after everything has settled and Pram is in custody."

"I do understand that, Coby, but you have to realize how that will look. I have to come in there, confront the man who tried to kill me, and present the evidence of what he's done to our people. To stay in the background will make me look weak. I won't have that. I'll make my entrance as soon as Reem and Danou arrive."

Coby didn't respond, and Nicola was glad. He knew she was right.

Leoni clapped him on the back with her hand. "Don't worry, big man. I'll be right behind her."

"You better be." He looked at his chron. "I have to leave. I've got fresh clothes for you in my trans as well as two secure wrist comms so we can communicate."

Leoni said, "Then let's get the stuff from your trans so you can get back there."

"How's Jese?" Nicola asked. She saw the fallen look on her brother's face, and that alone gave her the answer.

"As well as you'd expect. He's done his best to be strong. Ved told me that Jese is going through his day like normal, but at night he cries himself to sleep. Jese apparently doesn't realize anyone knows that."

Nicola's breath caught in her throat, and she fought back tears. "Just like his father."

Coby nodded. "That's what Ved said." He hugged Nicola and kissed her cheek. "You'll see him in a few days. It's almost over."

"I know." She cleared her throat. "Take Leoni to the trans to get our clothes. I'll look over the holo chip to make sure everything is there."

"Yes, General," Coby said. "Be ready."

That night Nicola paced along the corridor that led to their sleeping quarters. Her mind was a jumbled mess. In two days they would be at the mine, interrupting what should be a momentous occasion for their world. She had no fear of what might happen. Only concern that she and Danou would be able to go forward with the signing. Regardless of what else happened, she needed that merger to take place.

How would everyone react to her not being dead? Would they be angry? Especially Danou. She knew without doubt she could trust him. But Leoni was right. Coby was the only one that needed to know.

What about Jese? Her child spent his nights crying himself to sleep. How could she have done this to him? She second-guessed the decision. Every fiber of her being wanted to rush to Kalen

City and gather her baby in her arms and hold him tight. She wanted to comfort him and promise they would never be apart again.

But the soldier in her knew that wasn't yet possible. The task in front of her wouldn't be easy. She might not survive. Even with Leoni as her guardian, she could still be killed. Coby was good at his job, but Pram proved to be an opponent no one should underestimate. While there would be loyal soldiers present, she had to assume Pram also had a contingency plan of his own.

That thought alone opened nearly endless possibilities, and it made her head hurt. She rested her forehead against the cool stone wall of the corridor and leaned there for a moment.

"Hey," Leoni said as she entered the area. "You okay?"

"I have a headache," she said, not moving from her spot.

"Ah. Bet I can help with that."

Nicola felt Leoni move behind her. Leoni's strong hands began working on the tense muscles of Nicola's shoulders. She moaned with pleasure. The stress slipped away, and Nicola leaned into Leoni's touch.

Leoni's mouth was next to her ear. "Better?"

"Mmm. Much."

"There's a lot more where that came from," Leoni said. Their bodies came together, and Leoni's breasts pressed against hers. Nicola felt a familiar tingle run through her. Leoni's words barely penetrated her brain. "Follow me?"

Nicola cupped the beautiful face before her. She captured Leoni's lips with hers and explored their softness. The tingles became a slow burn, and she knew the time was right.

She broke off the kiss, took Leoni's hand, and led her back to their sleeping quarters.

Once there, Leoni wrapped her strong arms around her. The passion in Leoni's eyes nearly brought Nicola to tears. "Nic, are you sure?"

"I am."

Leoni kissed her mouth, and Nicola's knees buckled. Leoni held her up, hands pressing against the small of Nicola's back. "I want you, Nicola. All of you."

"Shh. No more talking." Nicola nuzzled Leoni's neck and trailed kisses along the dark skin, not stopping until she reached the V of Leoni's shirt. "Too much clothing."

Leoni was naked in a flash and started removing Nicola's clothing, taking her time as she worked the buttons on Nicola's shirt. With each one undone, Leoni kissed the exposed skin.

By the time the shirt was off, Nicola thought she'd explode with desire. She removed the rest of her clothing, pushed Leoni onto the flatbed, and covered her with her naked body. "Much better."

"No more talking." Leoni tried to roll over so Nicola was under her, but Nicola refused.

"No. I've got this," Nicola whispered. Leoni's response was a moan as Nicola's lips found a taut nipple.

Leoni watched as Nicola slept. Her face was peaceful for the first time in days. She lightly ran her fingers along Nicola's soft cheek. Could she really fall in love with her?

Visions of Tayanita filled her, and tears leaked from her eyes. Leoni got up and started for the door. The loss of Nicola's warmth stung her skin. Her heart was breaking. Her breathing hitched. Emotion overwhelmed her, and she fell to her knees. What was she doing? How could she even think of moving on? Tayanita was her life.

Worse yet, Leoni was in a land where she didn't belong. Fighting a war that wasn't hers. Killing people. Dozens so far. Maybe more. So much to deal with. Too much. She put her head in her hands and sobbed.

She sensed Nicola's movement. A hand rested on her shoulder. She couldn't look up.

Nicola wrapped her arms around Leoni and held her close. Her chin rested on Leoni's shoulder. "Talk to me, baby. What's wrong?"

"I can't."

"It's okay."

"It's not." Leoni pulled away from Nicola and stood unsteadily. "I don't know that it'll ever be okay again."

"I—I don't understand."

Leoni spun around. Nicola was still seated. "I don't belong here, Nic. This isn't my world. This isn't my life."

"I know that, but it could be. Please—"

"I'm sorry. I don't belong here. I don't know that I can ever belong here." Nicola's expression fell, and she stared at her hands. Leoni said, "I'm so sorry."

"I release you," Nicola said. She finally met Leoni's gaze. Tears streaked down her cheeks.

"What?"

"I release you." Nicola got to her feet, her voice thick with emotion. "Etsi told me that there's one way you could go home. I have to release you as my guardian. I'm doing that now. Go back to Earth. Live the life you had there."

"Hold on." Leoni had trouble wrapping her mind around Nicola's words. "You've known all along how to send me home, and you never told me? Why not? Why would you keep this from me?"

"Because I was thinking of my people. My tribe. Etsi said you were here to bring us together again. There's very little that's more important to me than that."

"I see."

"I don't think you do." Nicola paused. "Once the merger is signed, I won't need you as my guardian. You can go back to Earth."

"Really? You won't need me anymore? Was I ever anything more to you than a guardian?" Hurt and anger welled in her chest. "You told me you love me. Was that even true?"

Nicola snapped at her. "How can you even ask me that? I gave myself to you last night. I gave you my heart—my soul. Yes. I love you. And because I love you, I'm releasing you."

"What if I'm not ready to go?"

"Does it matter? You just made it clear you want to go home. Now you can." Nicola stomped across the room and dressed. "Soon as it's possible, I'll have Coby take you to Etsi Patra. I'm sure she can figure out exactly how you can go home."

"I'm not going anywhere yet. I said I'd protect you, and that's exactly what I'll do. I plan to be with you and Coby at the merger. After that, I won't let you—"

"You don't get to decide anything for me," Nicola said. She opened the door and stormed out before Leoni could respond.

Leoni leaned against the wall, stunned. She'd gotten what she wanted. Nicola had given her a ticket back to Earth. All Leoni had to do was accept it and leave. But Leoni had learned long ago that nothing was ever that simple.

Chapter Sixteen

Despite the limited space they occupied on the abandoned base, Nicola managed to avoid contact with Leoni. She spent most of her time going over the evidence they'd collected, as well as the layout of the mine. The information seared into her brain, and after a while, she blankly looked at the holo, not actually seeing anything.

No matter what she did, or tried to do, Leoni was never far from her thoughts. She loved her. It seemed simple. But as Etsi once said, it is not simple. She replayed the fight with Leoni over and over. While Nicola said she released Leoni as her guardian, deep down, she didn't mean it. Part of her was greedy and wanted Leoni to be at her side. Always. Even if Leoni didn't want to.

Nicola decided then she would do everything in her power to get Leoni back to Earth. If possible, she resolved to convince Leoni not to go to the mine. Nicola and Coby could handle things there. The merger would take place. Pram would pay for his crimes, and their world would be at peace again. Leoni helped Nicola get this far.

In less than an hour, Coby would arrive to take them to the mine. Nicola didn't have to go far to find Leoni. She stood near one of the lone-standing walls, her gaze turned to the skies. Nicola wished she could read Leoni's mind.

Leoni's shoulders were slumped, but as Nicola reached her, she stood straighter. Nicola could sense the barrier between them. "Coby will be here soon."

"I'm ready."

"I don't want you to go."

Leoni spun around so fast that Nicola took a step back in surprise. "I'm going," Leoni said. Her tone made it clear she wouldn't be talked out of it.

Nicola tried anyway. "You don't need to. Coby has everything well planned. Once it's over—"

"You didn't hear me. I'm going."

"No, you're not hearing me." Nicola tried to keep her voice steady as anger filled her. "When I'm done, I'll have Coby take you to *etsi*. She'll get you back to Earth. And if she can't, then I'll find a way to make it happen."

"You're that determined to get rid of me?"

She could hear the hurt in Leoni's voice and tried to ignore it. "I don't want to get rid of you. I'm trying to help you get home."

"Fine. In the meantime, I'm here to make sure nothing happens to you." Leoni moved so she and Nicola were toe-to-toe. "I give a shit what happens to you, Nic. I'll be there—at your side—whether you want me or not."

Nicola saw a shadow of doubt in Leoni's dark eyes. Her hands trembled as she fought the urge to caress Leoni's face. To hold her warm body and kiss her until they both forgot everything but the moment. She backed up and turned away before tears of frustration could fall from her eyes.

"I do want you," she said softly.

"What?"

"Nothing." Nicola straightened. She was about to say more when the distinctive sound of a trans reached them. "Let's go."

Coby dropped Nicola and Leoni off at the entrance to the tunnel. Each woman carried a backpack with enough supplies for two days. Leoni donned a pair of night-vision goggles and followed Nicola. More like a passage way, it'd been built to allow one person to pass through. They walked single file, with Nicola in the lead. No shiny, metaline wall surrounded them. Leoni wasn't sure what held the thing up, but the material was rough and dark. The ceiling loomed very close, and once in a while, Leoni felt something brush against her head. She didn't want to admit to a fear of spiders and shuddered to think what an alien spider would look like.

Gravel crunched beneath their feet. The pungent odor of something akin to car exhaust filled the air. "What am I smelling?"

"*Kole* dust." Nicola's response was clipped.

"That's what I figured. I thought I smelled something familiar." Leoni's voice dripped with sarcasm. "Care to tell me what *kole* is?"

"If you studied the mine, you'd know it's the by-product of brewst."

"Sorry I asked." Leoni remained quiet for several minutes. Twice, she replayed her fight with Nicola. The way Nicola stomped her way through the tunnel made Leoni walk more than a few feet behind her. Anger rolled off Nicola in waves.

Leoni checked her wrist chron. They'd been going for three hours. Nicola, who was damn good at being stubborn, now limped. Her speed didn't slow, but Leoni knew she was in need of a rest.

"Let's stop for a bit," she said.

Nicola stopped but didn't turn to face her. Instead, she leaned against the wall.

Leoni asked, "You okay?"

"Fine."

"Bullshit." Leoni couldn't see Nicola's face very well but assumed she was glaring at her. "I saw you limping. You need to sit down and rest."

"No. I need to keep going and get inside the building. I can rest there."

"And how much farther is that?"

Nicola checked her tracker. "Five kilometers."

"And at the rate you're going, another two hours."

"I'll be fine." Nicola pushed away from the wall. "Let's go." She started forward, stumbled, and caught herself before she fell.

Leoni said, "If you go down, it'll take us a helluva lot longer than two hours to get there."

Nicola turned on her. "What do you want from me, Leoni? If I stop now, I might not make it there at all and then this whole mission is over. If I keep going, I may stumble and it might take longer, but at least I'll get there. I'm sorry I can't heal overnight like you can. I'm sorry I don't have your stamina, and I'm sorry I'm not whatever it is you need. But right now, I need to keep moving. Follow me or don't follow me. Your choice." Nicola walked on, a bit slower, but no less determined.

For a moment, Leoni didn't move. She'd felt the hurt in Nicola's words and knew damn well she'd put them there. Any venom Nicola felt she had to spew at her, Leoni was sure she deserved. She sighed and followed. How the hell could she keep her mind on the mission?

She jogged a few steps and put her hand on Nicola's shoulder. Nicola shoved her away.

"No. We're not continuing on like this, Nic. Only thing we'd accomplish is defeating the mission before we ever get started."

"All you're doing right now is delaying things with talking. I don't want to talk."

"Then knock off the attitude, General. We won't achieve anything."

Nicola didn't respond right away. "Leoni, we need to get to the building. If you still feel strongly enough about it, we can talk then. Alright?"

"Better than nothing."

"Fine." Nicola started forward again. This time, Leoni stayed on her heels.

Four hours later, they reached the room they'd be using. It placed them well away from the command area where the merger would happen. The pain in Nicola's leg caused her to slow, regardless of how hard she pushed herself. She didn't want to rest. She'd never admit it, but the closed-in space of the tunnel made her nervous and it took all she had to control the urge to run.

Leoni stayed close by, hovering like an over-protective mother. Nicola stumbled twice. Both times she'd pushed Leoni away, physically and emotionally. She had to keep her distance. Otherwise, she would not be able to get through the next two days.

They entered the room, and Nicola was relieved it had once been crew quarters. She figured it would have held twenty to thirty people in single beds. The beds were still there, lined on either side of the room, though in various states of decay. She limped down the path created between the beds and found a cleansing room. Toilets and a communal shower looked intact. She came out to find Leoni had already dropped her backpack and was standing beside one of the few beds that looked usable.

"You take this one," Leoni said.

Nicola nodded and put her backpack on the bed. She sat down and sighed in relief.

Leoni moved around the room until she found another, mostly usable bed. She put her backpack there. "I'm going to check out the area and find the entrance to the vent shaft. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Leoni, wait."

"You need something?" Leoni asked, an edge to her voice that Nicola wasn't used to.

"No, but I said I'd talk to you when we got here." Nicola hoisted her leg onto the bed and leaned back against the wall. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For whatever I've done to anger you. No matter what you might think, I care about you. At the very least I'd hope we could remain friends."

"Friends?" Leoni sounded incredulous. "Is that what you want? To just be friends?"

"It's all we have, Leoni." Nicola couldn't meet her gaze and looked at her hands, which were shaking. "I released you. You'll be going back to Earth. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't stop it."

"Do you want to? Stop it, I mean? I know what I said, but—"

"*Etsi* said it wouldn't be simple, but she never said I could stop it once I said it." Nicola finally looked up. Leoni hadn't moved. "Don't you want to go home?"

"I don't know. I don't have a clue what I want anymore. Nic, you have to see it from my perspective."

"I wish I could."

"Me, too." Leoni moved toward her but stopped. "I'm your friend, Nic. That much I know for sure. It won't change."

"Thanks."

"I'll check the place out. You stay put." Leoni hurried out of the room.

“I love you,” Nicola said to the empty room.

The two days prior to the merger passed faster than Leoni thought possible. She'd walked the vent shaft several times to measure the distance. The shaft exit was less than ten meters from the operations room. It would take them ten minutes to get into position. In his last message, Coby told her he would have someone he trusted in the corridor to greet them. Leoni suspected it would be Ved.

Leoni did one final inspection of the vent shaft and joined Nicola in the crew quarters. Coby had hidden a camera in the operations room. The holo Nicola now stared at was linked to the camera.

Nicola stood with her hands clasped behind her back. She was wearing her dress uniform, complete with the medal that Leoni now knew was given her after Kel was killed.

Stark white, crisp lines creased the pant legs and the arms, with epaulets on the jacket shoulders that showed her rank of general. The uniform looked good on her. More than that, Nicola changed when she put it on. She exuded confidence.

Leoni observed the keenness with which Nicola watched the holo. She took in every detail, every word. Her face was a mask of concentration. Leoni admired Nicola and could clearly see why she was the leader of her tribe. Leoni forced her attention from Nicola to the holo.

A round table dominated the center. A dozen members of the media were stationed along a bank of windows that overlooked the rivers and lakes of the Nadyte territory. On the opposite side, the view was of the Tsalagi fields. Armed security guards stood at several points in the room. They wore special blue uniforms so no one could be sure whether the individual was of the Nadyte or Tsalagi tribe.

Everyone's attention was drawn to the table as Reem and Danou entered from opposite sides of the room. Timed so that neither of them came in first, and they reached their seats simultaneously.

Danou said, “Greetings, Chief Reem.”

“Greetings, Chief Frew.” Reem placed a comm pad in the center of the table.

Danou laid a memory chip beside the pad. “My condolences on the loss of Chief Daelis.”

Reem nodded. “My condolences to you as well for the loss of your sister.”

“She was lost to me a long time ago.” Danou cleared his throat. “Thank you for continuing Chief Daelis's work. I'm ready to proceed.”

Reem inserted the chip into the comm pad, and a holo appeared between them. Leoni couldn't make out the words, but she understood they were examining the terms of the merger. Both men took the time to read every line.

This was their cue, and Nicola headed for the vent shaft with Leoni two steps behind her. Nicola gripped a data chip in her right hand, her hold so tight her knuckles were white. Leoni wondered if she'd break the damn thing. Nicola reached to open the vent shaft door.

“If anything goes wrong,” Leoni said, “you get the hell out of here. Period. These people don't need to mourn you twice.” Her gaze locked with Nicola's, and she waited for the rebuke.

“Agreed.” Nicola opened her mouth as though to speak more, but closed it, and stepped into the corridor. She didn't appear surprised to find Ved standing there, wearing a blue uniform. “I thought you were on restricted duty.”

“I thought you were dead.” Ved gave her a tight, but quick, hug. “No way could I miss this. Shall we?”

“After you.” Nicola followed him into the meeting room.

As they walked in, Nicola saw Danou place his hand on the comm pad. An image of his palm print appeared as an overlay of the document. Danou said, “By signing this, I agree to the merger of our tribes.”

Reem, who was visibly relieved, placed his hand on the comm pad. “By signing—”

“Stop the proceedings,” Nicola announced as she strode into the room.

Every head there turned to the corridor entrance as the general, the chief of the Tsalagi tribe, appeared. Excited murmurs came from the crowd of reporters. The soldiers didn’t seem sure what to do, while at the same time, Reem stood with his mouth gaped open.

Leoni and Ved stayed near the doorway.

Nicola said, “I’m sorry, Head Council Reem, but I can’t allow you to sign that.”

“Chief Daelis.” Reem finally found his voice. “It’s—we thought—you’re alive.”

“I am. Thank you.”

“Nic!” Danou also had a delayed reaction but threw out any decorum. He virtually sprinted around the table and gathered Nicola into his arms, lifting her off the floor in the process. “I can’t believe you’re alive!”

Nicola returned his hug, unable to contain her smile. “I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you,” she whispered. “I’ll explain everything if you’ll just let me down.”

“You’d better,” he whispered back and set her on the floor. “I’m so happy to see you.”

“Same here,” she said and took a step back from him. “I’m sorry I had to deceive everyone,” she said to the stunned crowd. “Deception was necessary to carry out our mission.”

“Mission?” Reem asked. “We were told you’d been kidnapped and then killed.”

“Morijan had me kidnapped, but with Captain Wolf’s help, I was able to get free. We jumped from the shuttle moments before it exploded over the surface of the Third Moon. Our mission then became to use my death as a mask to hide our investigation. That was the only way we could safely figure out who was behind my kidnapping and attempted murder. In the process, we uncovered a conspiracy larger than I’d imagined.”

“Chief Daelis,” Reem asked, “would you like the media to stay? Or is this information that is best presented privately?”

“I want them here,” Nicola said. “I want our world to know what’s been going on and who the people are that have been trying to prevent peace.”

Danou said, “Please, continue.”

Nicola nodded to Coby and handed him the data chip she’d kept tightly in her fist. “Colonel, put this information on the holo.”

A moment later, a holo replaced the one over the table. A map of the base Nicola and Leoni had discovered was displayed.

“After the cruiser exploded above the Third Moon, Captain Wolf and I were able to make it to this base. Initially, I thought the moon was abandoned, as we believed the Nadytes hadn’t had any activity on the Third Moon in years. There were no soldiers present, but we did find enough weapons and equipment to supply an entire battalion.” Nicola paused to let that information sink

in. “While I can’t say I was surprised to find a cache of equipment, I was stunned to find everything there belonged to the Tsalagi. Weapons, equipment, two cruisers, several fighters and anti-grav units—all of them clearly Tsalagi.”

“How did Tsalagi weapons get there?” one of the media members asked.

“Captain Wolf and I spent several days investigating that.” Nicola turned her gaze to Pram, who had yet to speak or make a move. “Multiple shipments, over the last six months, were rerouted to the Third Moon. By Lieutenant Pram.”

Pram held her gaze and shook his head. After some hesitation, he said, “That’s not possible.”

Nicola knew he was working out what to do next. She felt, rather than saw, Leoni tense. “We confirmed your ident, Lieutenant. You were the only one who had access to change the numbers so it wouldn’t immediately be clear that the shipments were missing.”

“Anyone can fake an ident, General. You have to believe that I’d never do anything like this. I’m loyal to you—”

“Is that why I heard my kidnappers talking to you over the comm of the cruiser? Is that why you set a charge on the ship to make sure any evidence of your involvement was wiped out? You did this, Lieutenant. There’s no sense denying it. We have your DNA on the remnants of the explosives that took out the cruiser Captain Wolf and I were in.”

Pram took a step toward her as did Leoni and Ved. The guards leveled their weapons at him, and Nicola held up a hand to stop them all. She allowed Pram to come within a few feet.

Pram said, “I’m denying it all. I didn’t steal anything, and I didn’t try to kill you.”

“Are you saying your voice was faked? Or that I’m mistaken? That your DNA was somehow put there by someone else?” The look in his eyes gave away that he knew he’d been caught. “Answer me, Lieutenant.”

“Gladly,” he said. “You did indeed hear my voice. But you misunderstand my role in it.”

“By all means, explain.”

“It has always been my goal to achieve peace, General. I don’t want more war.”

“And yet you supplied a dozen bases on the Third Moon for just that.”

“Placeholders. No soldiers were there. You know that. Well, a few soldiers ended up there, but not on my orders. Morijan worked alone.” He glanced briefly at Danou before continuing. “No one could control her, so I let her do what needed done. I’d hoped that if you managed to survive, she’d finish the job. I should have known that she was as incompetent as her brother.”

Nicola held a hand up to stop Danou’s coming tirade. “Get to the point.”

“The point is that after today, you will all be dead. Frew is a weak leader, but he’ll make an excellent martyr. We’ll use that for our momentum to defeat the Tsalagi once and for all. In the end, the Nadyte tribe will rule our world and we’ll have the peace we deserve.”

“You’re going to kill us all?” Nicola asked. “Won’t that include you?”

Pram shrugged. “Not necessarily. There’s still time for my escape.” He laughed and the sound grated on Nicola’s nerves. “You didn’t think I’d come here without having a plan, did you?”

“I wasn’t sure you were that smart, actually,” Nicola said. “So your plan was to kill everyone here. I suppose it’s just a bonus I showed up?”

“A pleasant bonus, yes.” Pram held up his hand. “Call off the guards, General. You kill me, and you’ll all be dead in minutes.”

Nicola narrowed her gaze at him, trying to ascertain if he was bluffing. She couldn’t be sure, so she held up her hand to stop the advancement of Leoni and Ved.

Pram moved to within inches of her face. Nicola didn’t blink. She maintained contact with his eyes. “You’re going to be dead, Lieutenant. One wrong move, and one of my guards will put a

blaster bolt through your head.”

“Not when you figure out what I’ve done.”

“I’ve had enough of this. Arrest him, Colonel.”

“It’s too late,” Pram said, a delightful smile on his face. “Here.” He shoved a round disc, no larger than a data chip, into her hand. “Now it’s all up to you.”

Nicola glanced at the disc. At the center of the silver piece was a tiny, green light. It started blinking. “What is this?”

“It’s a detonator switch.” Pram didn’t resist the soldiers who restrained him. “Once it read your DNA, it activated. If you drop it, or wander more than ten meters from Chief Frew, he’ll explode, taking you and this entire mine with him. One spark is all that’s necessary to set off the kole dust.”

“Get him out of here!” Coby ordered. He then turned to another soldier. “Evacuate everyone. Now!”

Soldiers guided the media out of the room after Pram was arrested and taken away. Coby followed.

Nicola stared at the device in her palm, not sure if she should believe Pram or not. She looked at Danou as he moved closer.

Danou gently took her hand and examined the device. “It’s a class three detonator. I’m not sure I can disarm it, Nic.”

“It’s okay,” she said. “We’ll figure this out. Ved?”

Ved was already there, scanner in hand. “I don’t know if this will work, Danou, but let me scan you for explosives.”

“There’s too much kole dust here. It’s bound to interfere with your readings.” He kept hold of Nicola’s hand. “Nic, you and I need to get off world immediately. We’ve got to get far enough away that if there’s an explosion it won’t hurt anyone else.”

“Agreed. Let’s move out.”

“No. Wait,” Ved said. “We don’t know that the detonator won’t activate once we leave the mine. If we’re not far enough away, it could take out our ship. There’s enough *kole* dust here to flatten this mountain.”

“What do you suggest?” Danou asked.

“A very careful search.”

“Pram was never close enough to me to plant any devices. I’m not convinced he was telling the truth.” Danou started removing his clothing. “But let’s be sure of this first.”

Each piece of clothing was carefully inspected by Ved. From shirt to shoes, Ved declared that Danou was explosive free.

“Good,” Nicola said. “Now let’s get out of here.”

“Not so fast,” Danou said. “Pram isn’t stupid. He was specific that I would explode if you get too far from me.” He started getting dressed again. “There has to be something to that.”

“It could be a big bluff,” Leoni said. “Are you all even sure that thing in her hand works? What if it’s not real? Or what if it is, but it’s the bomb, not just the detonator. You said the *kole* dust is highly explosive. It wouldn’t take much to set it off, would it?”

“No.” Ved started pacing.

“Where’s Coby?” Nicola asked.

“Interrogating Pram.” Leoni clapped Ved on the shoulder. “Go check on him, and see if he’s got anything.”

“Sure.” Ved hurried off.

As soon as he was gone, Leoni turned her attention to Nicola. “I have an idea.”

"I'm listening," Nicola said.

"Every time your life has been in danger, I've felt it. I've known where you were, and I've gotten to you in time. I don't feel that urgency right now. At all."

Nicola shook her head with a sad resignation. "That's because I released you. You're not my guardian anymore."

"Nic, if I wasn't your guardian I wouldn't be here. I mean, I sort of showed up when you needed me. It only makes sense that I'd disappear when I'm done." Leoni held her arms out to the sides. "I'm not gone. And I'm not getting any vibes that your life is in danger. At least not yet."

Danou said, "If her life isn't in danger, than what's going on here?"

"She's not in danger, yet, Danou. Key word is 'yet.' During our investigation, Nic and I found out a lot about Pram. He's not stupid and he's smart enough to pull off a bluff. That's how he's been operating all along."

"My first instinct was to leave the mine," Nicola said. "If I leave, obviously Danou would come with me. What if this thing is designed to detonate at a distance from the mine? Pram would get what he wants. We'd be dead and so would anyone within a hundred kilometers of the mine. I'd be a martyr and his group—I'm sure he has followers—would get what they want. A new war."

"Which they're ready to fight," Leoni said, "thanks to all the supplies he's squirreled away on the Third Moon. We know he had one base fully equipped, and I'd be willing to bet he's got a dozen other bases equipped as well. Danou, use the holo and see what you can find out about this detonator. I want to know all the different types of devices this thing can set off."

"Sure." Danou got to work.

Leoni urged Nicola toward the windows that overlooked the Tsalagi territory. "Pram is doing this thing with the hand detonator on purpose, isn't he?"

Nicola seemed to understand where Leoni was going. "Maybe he wants to do what Lade couldn't. Kill a lot of people in the name of his cause."

"The Brothers of Seven. Is it possible Lade also worked for them?"

"Anything's possible, though Danou never mentioned it."

"He might not know. Look, we're sure the BOS were behind the attempt on Ved's life. That left the door open for Pram to become head of your security. But he needs something really big to show the Brothers of Seven what he can do. I don't think that was ever his intent to kill himself. If he kills you and Danou, I'm willing to bet the Brothers of Seven would find a way to break him out of jail and celebrate what he's done."

"How does this help us find the explosive?" Nicola asked.

"It helps us get into his head. He's fucking with us. Coby won't get him to give up any information."

"We need to figure something out. I'm getting a cramp in my hand," Nicola said in an attempt at humor. Her smile was short-lived.

"I know, Nic," Leoni said and covered the hand holding the detonator with her own. "It's not a detonator." She took it from Nicola. "Nic, you know how I get those feelings? How I know when you're in trouble?" Nicola nodded. "I don't have that feeling right now. If you walk away right now, nothing will happen. He's delaying us." Leoni threw the device against a wall, and it shattered into dozens of pieces.

Danou spun around at the sound. "What are you doing?"

"Saving your life." Leoni's gaze locked with Nicola's. "There's something else. And it's coming to us. We have to get the hell out of here!" Leoni urged them both into the corridor where they nearly ran into Ved. Leoni said, "We have to get out of here."

“I know. There are two Tsalagi cruisers on a collision course with the mine. Follow me.” Ved took off at a dead run, leading them down the corridor.

Leoni said, “That’s what the delay was. He wants to take us out and blame it on the Tsalagi.”

“How far out are they,” Nicola asked.

“Twenty minutes.”

Leoni asked, “Where the hell is Coby?”

“He took a ship to intercept the cruisers.”

“What about Pram?”

Ved slowed to open a door for them. “He was sent to the base under guard.”

Chapter Seventeen

A Tsalagi light cruiser was waiting for them in an old shipping bay. Another part of Coby's contingency plan. Nicola strapped herself into the copilot's seat, while Ved settled into the pilot's. Danou and Leoni sat behind them. Nicola got to work. She needed to find those Nadyte ships. It didn't take her long.

"Less than five minutes before they reach the mine. Have the Tsalagi and Nadyte bases next to the mine been notified the cruisers are on an impact course?"

"Coby signaled the alarm as soon as he got on board his ship. We've launched our ships, but they can't get here in time." Ved skillfully maneuvered the cruiser out of the hangar bay and away from the mine. "We've got everyone from the mine out and into shuttles. We should be able to get clear of the blast radius. I ordered our base evacuated, but they might not get out in time."

"Why just the Tsalagi base?" Leoni asked. "Won't the explosion impact the Nadyte one, too?"

"No. Our base is closer to the mountain. If the mine goes, it'll take most of our base with it. The Nadytes might sustain damage, but nothing like we'll have."

"I've got my base on alert," Danou said. "I've told them to launch fighters to chase the cruiser, but I'm sure Coby'll get to them first."

"Is Coby's ship the only one on an intercept course?" Nicola asked.

Ved looked at Nicola. "Yes, but—"

She had anticipated what he would say. "Arm weapons and reverse course," she ordered. Her tone of voice left no room for discussion. "Danou, care to do the honors?"

"Yes, ma'am, General Daelis." Danou moved to one of the weapons consoles and took control. "I've got the port cannon, though I'm a bit out of practice."

"You'll do fine," Nicola said. She activated the comm to contact Coby. "We're a minute out," she told him.

Nicola was surprised when Coby didn't argue. "One ship is coming in from the east. I'll take care of it."

"Roger that." Nicola felt the cruiser turn sharply as Ved adjusted their course. "Danou, fire as soon as you have a target."

"Copy that," Danou said.

The cruiser came into view. No shots were fired from it. Sensors indicated it was empty. Nicola wondered who controlled it remotely. Ultimately, it didn't matter. Danou sent two missiles into the underside of the cruiser. It exploded upon impact, two kilometers before it would have hit the mine. The debris fell into one of the lakes on the Nadyte side.

Nicola said, "Danou, you'll need to contact your people at the base. See if they can salvage anything from the wreckage. I think we'd both like to know more about that ship."

"Consider it done."

"Fifteen contacts coming in fast!" Ved shouted. "All fighters, weapons armed. I'm not getting any ident signals from them."

"The Brothers of Seven," Leoni said. "This is what Pram wanted all along. He wanted us to stay at the mine so they could take everyone out at once. Including two of your largest military bases."

"Well, he's not getting what he wants," Nicola said. "Ved, Offensive Pattern Delta. Danou, contact your base. Launch fighters." Nicola didn't wait for him to respond. She punched up the comm to contact her base. "Hanes Base, this is General Daelis. Contact with enemy ships. Launch

fighters. Target ships with no ident. Do not, repeat, do not engage any Nadyte fighters. Acknowledge.”

“Hanes Base, copy that, General. Two squadrons enroute. ETA two minutes.”

“Copy.” Nicola turned to Danou as he completed his transmission. “You take the port side cannon. I’ve got the starboard. Leoni, you’ve got the aft. Let’s do some damage.”

Leoni grasped the handle that would steer the cannon. It conformed to her grip and felt a little like the gearshift of a car. Her left hand operated two slide mechanisms that would control the speed of the weapon’s fire. A holo activated at eye level. The center display was a 180-degree view from the aft of the ship. Three smaller displays surrounded it, so Leoni had a view of the forward, port, and starboard sections.

She glanced over her right shoulder to see Nicola watching her. Their eyes met briefly before Nicola looked away. In that instant, Leoni saw Nicola’s love for her. She straightened, locked her gaze on the holo, cleared her mind, and waited.

Nicola called Coby and said, “Did you copy all that? Fifteen fighters heading our way.”

“I heard,” he said, his voice terse.

“Download that data chip you have to the main holo at Alpha Command.”

“Nic, I don’t have time—”

“That wasn’t a request, Colonel.”

Coby didn’t respond.

A high-pitched whistle alerted Leoni to the forward holo. The fighters came into view. They were the same type as the fighter ships that Ved had shown Leoni. It seemed as though the ride they’d taken occurred years ago, rather than a few weeks. But Leoni remembered every moment of it. Most important, she recalled how maneuverable the ships were.

Nicola ordered, “Shields up.”

Seconds later, all hell broke loose. Nicola, Ved, and Danou immediately started coordinating their attacks.

Leoni kept up as best she could, but once the first fighter came into range, she concentrated solely on taking it out. Three shots to the command pod, and the fighter exploded. Two more replaced it. Leoni targeted the closest and fired. The shot struck the pod, but her second shot missed when the ship dove under them. It popped up again in Nicola’s view. Her shot was true, and the fighter spiraled out of the sky.

Nicola said, “Danou, tell your squad they’re using Tsalagi fighters.” She didn’t wait for him to respond and said, “General Daelis to incoming squadrons, stand down. Repeat, stand down. Enemy combatants are in our ships. Remain in the area for further orders.”

“Fuck,” Leoni muttered.

Two more fighters shot past her. She followed the closest one with her cannon. Both fighters were heading away from the melee. Leoni damaged one ship, but it kept up with its partner. She said, “Nic, two fighters just got past me. Heading away from us.”

“They’re going to the mine,” she said. “Coby, break off and pursue the two fighters heading back. Protect the mine.”

Leoni waited for Coby to argue, but he didn’t. He said, “Copy that,” as his cruiser zoomed by them.

Two more fighters broke off to pursue Coby. Leoni targeted the closest. One sustained shot tore off his left wing. Out of control, the fighter crashed into its partner and both ships went down in a ball of fire.

A third tried to replace them. Leoni's shot went through the pilot's pod. Unlike the other times, this ship managed to turn around. It flew close enough to the cruiser that Leoni saw one person moving in the cockpit area. She was reminded that each of the fighters she'd taken out was controlled by people. It made her sick to think about it.

The fighter was closing in, so she shot it again. It spun out of control and out of her view. It reappeared to the port holo an instant before it struck them.

The cruiser suddenly lurched to the right.

"Ved, report!" Nicola shouted.

"Port side hit. Shield down to forty-eight percent."

An explosion rocked the cruiser again. Leoni felt them drop as they lost altitude.

"We've lost the port cannon," Nicola announced. "Ved—"

The cruiser nose-dived just as Leoni was about to shoot down two enemy fighters. The straps kept her in the seat but did nothing for the sudden nausea from the rapid descent. Ved managed to right the ship, but the flight was no longer a smooth ride.

Leoni swallowed back the urge to puke, sighted one of the fighters, and fired. The damn thing exploded. She was sure she'd only hit the wing, but when another fighter zipped around the falling wreckage, she knew she'd had help.

The new fighter easily glided away from the burning wreckage and out of Leoni's immediate view. Her holo indicated the fighter was Nadyte.

Another one, also Nadyte, took up position behind them. The fighter was larger than the Tsalagi ships. Shaped more like a fighter jet, it had a pointed nose and slanted wings. Leoni could make out the shapes of two pilots behind the small windshield and felt a weird urge to wave at them.

Ved reported, "I hate to say this, but we're going down."

Danou said, "I've got two squads around us now. They report that all enemy ships are either destroyed or gone."

"Thanks," Nicola said. "Coby, report."

"All clear. Both fighters destroyed."

"Good work, Colonel. Now head to our location. We have to make an emergency landing."

Leoni released her controls and spun her chair so she was facing forward. Danou did the same thing.

Ved's hands flew over the console. Leoni spotted yellow lights blinking and the holo Nicola used was gone. The forward view showed the planet coming up fast. She wondered if they'd survive.

What a cosmic joke that'd be. All this fighting and killing, only to crash the damn ship and die. She almost laughed.

Ved said, "Brace for impact!"

Leoni translated that to, "Tuck your head between your legs and kiss your ass goodbye."

Chapter Eighteen

Ved's command to brace for impact was a cosmic joke. They landed in water and pontoons released from the starboard and port sections. The ship floated like a boat. Moments after their "crash landing," Coby parked his cruiser next to theirs and took in the four of them. Leoni would have to pay Ved back for the minor heart attack she'd had.

Three hours later, they arrived at Alpha Command. They stepped out of the cruiser, and Leoni stood back as Nicola fell to her knees and caught the small blur that ran at her. Jese wrapped his arms around his mother and buried his face between her neck and shoulder. Leoni was engrossed in the emotions coming off Nicola. She held Jese so close Leoni thought she'd squash the boy. But he didn't seem to mind. He was crying as much as Nicola.

Leoni was compelled to walk away and give them time to be alone, but Nicola grabbed her hand. "Jese," Nicola said. "I'm so sorry I couldn't tell you what was going on."

"It's okay." He wiped his tear-streaked face on the sleeve of his shirt. "You're here. That's all I care about."

"I'm here because Leoni saved my life."

Jese turned his red-rimmed, violet eyes to Leoni.

Leoni's heart melted at the expression on his face. "You okay?" she asked him.

Jese threw his arms around Leoni and surprised her. She nearly fell over, but Nicola's grip on her hand steadied her. "Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome. So, you ready to go home now? Back to your own bed? Your own school?"

"Seriously?" He tossed a big grin toward his mother. "We can go home?"

Nicola said, "Yes. I need to see your grandmother first, but then we get to go home. Sound good?"

"Yes!" Jese jumped up and down.

Leoni kissed the fingers of the hand she still held. "You okay?" she asked Nicola.

"After I see my mother. I need to talk to her."

"Will she pin you down and make you get a full medical exam?"

"Probably."

A voice said, "Do you need a full medical exam?"

Leoni released Nicola's hand, and both women turned to find Beryl Daelis standing in the doorway of the landing bay. The skeptical look on her face was quickly replaced with a genuine smile as she opened her arms.

Beryl said, "The least you could do is offer to hug me."

Nicola did, holding on to her for a long time.

Leoni was uncomfortable, reminded again of the hatred her own mother spewed toward her. She couldn't remember the last time she'd received any kindness from the woman who gave birth to her.

"Leoni?" Nicola spoke, but Leoni hadn't been listening. "My mother wants to talk to you."

"Okay." Leoni turned her attention to Beryl. "I'm sorry."

Beryl stepped forward and gathered Leoni into a motherly embrace. She whispered, "Thank you for taking care of my baby."

"My pleasure," Leoni said around the lump in her throat.

Beryl released her and her smile faded a bit. "Nicola Daelis, I believe your next stop needs to be the medical center. I want a scan of that broken leg."

Nicola looked like a chastised child. “Yes, Mother,” she said. “Soon as Jese is ready, we’ll go there.”

“I’m ready, Mom!” Jese was at her heel and took hold of Nicola’s hand. “Let’s go.”

Beryl held the door open for them. “My trans is waiting.”

Nicola spent a few hours with her family. Her focus was on Jese, though she’d noticed her mother watching her. After she put Jese to bed, the rest of the family trickled out of her quarters, leaving only Beryl and Nicola.

“Sit with me,” Beryl said and patted a spot on the couch beside her.

Nicola placed her tired body there, almost wishing she could sink into the furniture and pass out for a day. Every bit of her body ached, especially her newly splinted leg. Maybe this time she’d be able to rest long enough for the bone to heal properly.

“Tell me what’s on your mind,” Beryl said. Her hand rested lightly on Nicola’s knee.

“A lot. Mostly that I’m so tired I can’t really think anymore.”

“And Leoni?”

“She’s at Etsi Patra’s.” Nicola saw the change in her mother’s expression. “Mom, she’s your sister. Whatever happened between you—you should just put it aside. It’s not worth—”

Beryl held up her hand to stop Nicola. “It’s between Patra and me. You can’t fix it, dear.” She cleared her throat. “I meant to ask, how are you and Leoni?”

Nicola studied the cuts on her fingers. “She wants to go home.”

“She’s said that since she got here.” Beryl slipped an arm around Nicola’s shoulders. “She watched you all evening, but the two of you barely said two words to each other. I know you’re in love with her. And I know she’s in love with you.”

“How can you know that, Mom? I’m not even sure if she’s in love with me.”

“I know the look in her eyes, my dear. I may be old, but I’m not dead. She had nothing but love in her eyes for you. Now, tell me what happened. Why aren’t you together?”

Nicola felt the sting of tears as she recounted the events after she and Leoni made love for the first time. Beryl handed her a tissue when she finished. “Mom, I love her so much—I don’t know what to do. For the first time in my life, I don’t know what to do.”

“You fight for her, Nicola Daelis. You need to fight with everything you have. If you love her, then she’s worth it. And if you released her and she’s still here, maybe she’s not meant to leave.” Beryl pulled her into a quick hug. “I suggest you head over to Patra’s and talk to Leoni. You’re here. Her wife isn’t. I don’t doubt for a minute that she loves you. And I have a strong feeling she’s worth fighting for.”

“She is,” Nicola said. She wiped her face dry and stood. “Will you stay here with Jese? I don’t know how long I’ll be.”

Beryl smiled. “I’ll settle into the spare room. You come get me if you need anything. Okay?”

“I will. Thanks, Mom.”

“Thank me when she’s here to stay.”

Nicola raised her hand to knock on *etsi* Patra's door but hesitated when she heard Leoni's voice. She knew she shouldn't, yet something compelled her to listen.

Leoni said, "...don't know, Patra. I miss the work I did, the people. It's hard to walk away from all that."

"You had no choice."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean much. How would I explain where I've been? I start talking about magic mirrors, spaceships, and aliens, and I'll be tossed in the loony bin."

"Do you wish to stay?"

A long silence filled the space between them. Nicola wished she was sitting in front of Leoni. She wanted to see her expression. Did she want to stay? Had she changed her mind?

"Nic released me, but I'm still here. So I guess it doesn't matter. Like I said, I have no choice."

"There are always choices, Leoni."

"Not for me. You told Nic she could release me, but I'm still here. I should be back home."

Nicola leaned her forehead against the door. *Back home*. Earth. Home would never be Forensia. Home wasn't with Nicola.

Patra said, "She cannot release you unless she truly wants you to go."

"So she wants me here?"

"She did at the time."

"So I'm stuck here?"

Nicola didn't wait for Patra to reply. She hurried to her quarters, her decision made.

"So I'm stuck here?" Leoni sighed heavily. "Why the hell don't I get any say in all this? It's my damn life."

"It is. As I said, there are always choices. It will come. You must be patient."

Leoni leaned forward in her chair and rested her arms on her knees. "Patience isn't easy for me. It's the one thing I didn't get from my father."

"I can see that." Patra's voice held a hint of humor. "Do you love her?"

Leoni didn't look up. She fiddled with the rings on her finger. "I do. It hurts, but I do love her."

"Why does it hurt?"

"I feel like I'm betraying Tayanita. Like I'm forgetting her by loving Nic."

"Perhaps you would do well to go on another vision quest."

Leoni lifted her head. "Like I did during the trials?"

"Yes."

"As long as my mother doesn't make another appearance, I'm good with it."

"You know I cannot guarantee what you will see. That is up to you."

"I understand. Let's do it."

Patra stood and Leoni followed her to the same round room where she'd gone through the Seven Trials. She knelt in the center as she'd done before. This time, the fire was warm and inviting. After a few minutes, Patra knelt beside her.

"I will offer you this drink and pray that you find the answers you seek."

Patra handed her a cup of the black liquid. Leoni still had no clue what was in the foul-smelling stuff and didn't really want to know. She drank quickly, trying to ignore the nasty taste. She hadn't remembered it being so gross the last time.

She waited for something to happen and was disappointed when it didn't. "Why isn't it working?"

"Patience. A vision quest takes patience. This is different than before. Relax. Close your eyes." Patra began chanting, her voice so soft Leoni could barely hear her. She could make out that the words were Cherokee, but their meaning refused to penetrate her brain.

Leoni closed her eyes as all sense of the present began to leave her.

The sun's warmth wrapped around her like a lover. She leaned into it, feeling it caress her naked body. The sound of water rushing over rocks reached her ears, and she opened her eyes to the sight of a creek before her. She stood on the muddy bank, her toes covered in the cool substance.

The water was clear enough to watch the fish swimming around. Leoni breathed in the fresh scent of the forest around her. She sucked in a lungful of air and dove into the water.

She emerged from the cool creek, the top half of her body exposed to the air. She heard a giggle and turned to the sound.

Tayanita, her copper skin highlighted by the sunshine, lay upon a blanket on the grassy bank. Her radiant smile stirred Leoni's heart. It almost made her forget the giggle. Almost. "What's so funny?" she asked, though she suspected the answer.

"Your nipple-o-meter. It says the water is cold."

"That would be correct."

"And that's why I'm up here. Dry, warm, and having fun at your expense."

"Is that so?" Leoni gave her a crooked smile as she casually made her way onto the bank. She stood over Tayanita and allowed water to drip onto her. "Don't wanna get wet?"

Tayanita's eyes burned with passion. "I didn't say that."

"Hmm." Leoni dropped to her knee beside her. "Do you know how beautiful you are?"

"Tell me," Tayanita said. She sat up enough to pull Leoni on top of her. Their lips met, and Leoni melted into Tayanita's arms. Her heart beat faster as their kissing intensified.

Their bodies twined together. Skin on skin. So soft and supple. Leoni adjusted so her knee was between Tayanita's thighs. She began to grind against her, pleased at the wetness she felt. She inhaled Tayanita's arousal.

Tayanita grasped her head and kissed her deeper—hungrily as their tongues fought for domination. Tayanita's hands moved to Leoni's ass and urged her closer.

Leoni paused to gaze upon the amazing woman under her. To take in her—blue eyes?

She pulled back, shocked to see Nicola lying there. Passion filled those blue eyes as she gazed up at Leoni. "I love you," Nicola said. "I need you."

"Nic—I—"

Before Leoni could work out anything to say, Nicola was gone. Once again, dark eyes burned into hers. Tayanita stared at her with love and compassion.

"You love her."

Leoni said, "Yeah, but I love you, too."

"I know. But I'm not there. Nicola is."

"I promised you forever."

"My forever ended. It's time to move on, Leoni. Be with her. Love her for as long as you can. Be happy. Gvgeyui."

"Gvgeyui."

Leoni leaned down to kiss her, but Tayanita was gone. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Tayanita was gone.

Leoni fell forward, her body wracked with sobs. Patra gathered her in her arms and held her through the torrent. For the first time, Leoni allowed herself to mourn her wife.

Nicola splashed cool water on her face, trying to hide the traces of her tears. Her heart was in a million pieces. Why was she surprised Leoni didn't want to stay here? What was here for her? Wouldn't Nicola want to go home if their situations were reversed?

She couldn't imagine being thrust onto a world she didn't know. To deal with a war that wasn't hers. To protect a woman she didn't know.

Leoni.

Nicola closed her eyes. She wanted her last memories of Leoni to be of the night they made love. She would never forget the feel of Leoni's hands on her body. How Leoni had awakened a need Nicola thought was long suppressed. No one, not even Kel, had brought so much emotion from Nicola. To be so cherished and loved. And all too short-lived. She knew no one would ever make her feel like that again. Nicola would never love anyone the way she loved Leoni.

She dried her face and wandered into her bedroom. Her quarters, though she was glad to be back, no longer felt like home. A building with a collection of rooms to live in. Maybe after tomorrow, when Jese was back, it would be a home again. He always filled it with so much laughter and love—Nicola recognized how lucky she was to have her son. She'd make sure this was a home for him.

She glanced at the mirror on her wall and had a sudden urge to smash it. The inanimate object was responsible for bringing Leoni into her life, and Nicola sensed it would take her away as well. If she smashed it to bits, would Leoni still return to Earth? If she wanted it to happen, she would. Nicola understood the mirror was a portal, but also that regardless of where they were, a portal would open so Leoni could go back to her life.

Nicola was about to turn from the mirror, when it shimmered. At first she thought she'd imagined it, but then the image of a woman appeared. She was so beautiful, with copper skin like Leoni's and eyes as dark as night. The woman smiled, and a great weight was lifted off Nicola's shoulders. Like she could read Nicola's thoughts—or see into her soul. It unnerved Nicola. She reached out to touch the mirror, but the image faded away and the shimmering stopped.

“Nic?”

The sound of Leoni's voice startled Nicola. She stopped staring at the mirror and answered her, “I'm in my bedroom.” She waited patiently as Leoni came in.

“Nic, we need to talk,” Leoni said.

Nicola turned to her and saw the evidence of tears on her face. Her eyes were puffy and red. “What's wrong? Did something happen?”

“Yeah. A lot. I went to see Patra—”

“I know. I heard you talking to her.”

Leoni's eyes widened in shock. “You did? Then you heard what I said?”

“I did.”

“Good.” Leoni looked relieved. It led Nicola to believe she was doing the right thing. “I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I just—it was so hard.”

“I understand. Leoni, I release you as my guardian.”

“I love—what? What did you say?”

“I said I release you.” Nicola looked to the mirror. It shimmered again. No image appeared.

The color drained from Leoni’s face. “No. No, you can’t do this!” She backed away from the mirror so fast she tripped and landed on her butt. She stared at the mirror as if it were a monster. “Make it stop!”

“No. Leoni, this is what you want.” Nicola knelt beside her. “You didn’t deserve to be dragged from your home and your life. I’m giving it back to you.” She gently touched the side of Leoni’s face. Leoni turned frightened eyes to her. “I love you, Leoni. I want you to be happy.”

“Then make the fucking thing stop.” Leoni grabbed Nicola’s hand. “I love you, Nic. I want to stay here and make a life with you. You make me happy.”

“I don’t understand. I heard you talking to *etsi* about missing your home.”

“Then you only heard part of it.” Leoni cupped Nicola’s face in her hands. “I went on a vision quest. Tayanita was there. She helped me to let go. I couldn’t love you until I let her go. I never thought I could love anyone after Tayanita, but you proved me wrong. I love you with everything I am. I don’t want to fucking go back, Nic. My life is here. With you.”

Leoni crushed her lips to Nicola’s, intensifying the kiss that told Nicola exactly how she felt. The kiss sent shivers through Nicola’s body and woke it up in ways that only Leoni could.

Nicola was left breathless. “I wanted to give you a choice. I wanted you to be able to go back.”

“I’ve made my choice, baby.”

Nicola stood and pulled Leoni up with her. They moved to the mirror. The shimmering had stopped. “I guess the portal’s closed.”

“I want to break that stupid thing into a billion pieces.”

“Me, too.” Nicola took the mirror off the wall and handed it to Leoni. “Would you like to do the honors?”

“Hell, yes.” Leoni threw the mirror to the floor and laughed when it shattered. “Seven years of bad luck, but I don’t give a shit.”

“You do know that the portal isn’t tied to that mirror.”

“I do, but I didn’t like it. I’ll buy you a new one.”

“Good. I’d hate to go out in public without making sure I look okay.”

Leoni wrapped her arms around Nicola and brushed her lips against hers. “You’re beautiful no matter what. Trust me.”

“Marry me.”

Leoni was clearly surprised, and Nicola tensed as she waited for her reply. “Of course, Nic. I love you and I’ll marry you.”

Nicola kissed her tenderly and gently urged her toward the bed. “Jese is staying with Mom tonight. He was too tired after the excitement, and Mom thought we’d like some time alone.”

“Smart mother you have there.” Leoni kept kissing Nicola as they both shed their clothing.

“Yes...(kiss)...very...(kiss)...smart...(kiss).” Nicola pushed Leoni onto the bed and covered her with her body. “It’s time you knew how special you are, Leoni.”

“I do, Nic.”

Nicola grinned wickedly. Her hands traced their way along Leoni’s body and stopped at the junction of her legs. “No, I don’t think you do.”

“Show me.”

So she did.

About the Author

Patty is the Goldie Award-winning co-editor of *Blue Collar Lesbian Erotica* with Verda Foster. She and Verda also coedited *Women in Uniform: Medics and Soldiers and Cops, Oh My!* and *Women In Sports*. Her first novel, *Souls' Rescue* was a finalist for the Ann Bannon Popular Choice Award. Patty is a retired paramedic and currently resides in The Netherlands with her wife, Sandra, and their kitties. Visit her website at www.pattyschramm.com

Books by Patty Schramm

From Flashpoint Publications

Finding Gracie's Glory

Gracie Kato survived years of abuse at the hands of her wife. While her body has healed, her heart and soul remain damaged. Gracie seeks solace at her grandfather's home in the Yukon Territory of Canada. There she'll be able to work at his gold mine, named for her grandmother, Gracie's Glory. It's the perfect place for her to start over again. Liv Templeton's heart was crushed years ago and she doesn't see any chance of recovery. She's never alone unless she wants to be, but never seeks any commitments. Instead she puts all her energy and time into running the family mining business. From the moment they meet, Gracie and Liv's connection, physical and emotional, is obvious to them both. Is Liv ready for a serious relationship? Even if she is, will she be able to convince Gracie to trust again? To let her soul heal? Will Gracie open herself up to Liv? Or will she close her heart forever?

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Better Together

Mac Bradenton has never been south of the Mason Dixon Line or across a body of water wider than the Ohio River. But her best friend is sick and on a quest to complete her bucket list. First stop is Paris, France. Mac goes along expecting to enjoy the time with Kristy, never anticipating just how much her life will change.

They meet up with Kristy's friend, Lenie, who has promised to give them a guided tour of Paris and while there, romance blossoms between Mac and Lenie.

Once home, life takes some major turns for Mac. As she struggles to deal with the challenges thrown at her, will everything fall apart? Or will she be able to lean on Lenie knowing that, no matter what happens, they are better together?

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Kelly McCoy is a firefighter and paramedic who's lived most of her adult life in New York. After 9-11, she relocates to Cincinnati, nursing a broken heart and looking for a new start. She takes one day at a time, trying not to let her losses overwhelm her.

Talia Stoddard is an insurance wiz who's always been smart on the job, but unlucky in love. After years of being told that she's too big, too tall, too black, too lesbian, and not a very snappy dresser, Talia has resigned herself to a life alone with only her dear gay friend Jacob for a diversion.

When Kelly and Talia's lives crash into one another, it's under the most stressful and threatening circumstances. Talia is in terrible danger, and it's up to Kelly to rescue her. In the horrendous situation they end up in, neither expects to find a friend, much less a soul mate.

Will they rescue one another and heal the wounds of their pasts? Or will they both continue to believe that they're not worthy of the kind of love the other might offer?

Souls' Rescue is the story of opening up to love, taking chances, and building a life that everyone dreams about, but few people ever find.

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Because of Katie

Siobhan Landry's granddad had one wish before he died. That she would travel from their small town in Indiana to the place of his birth in southern Ireland and become the artist he knew her to be. She never expected how much her life would change when she got there.

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