



Book One of the  
FORCED TO SERVE  
Series

# THE DEMON OF SYNAR

DONNA McDONALD

# The Demon of Synar

Book One of the *FORCED TO SERVE* Series

by  
Donna McDonald

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Edited by Toby Minton

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*This book contains content that may not be suitable for young readers 17 and under.*

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## About this book

When the original story grew too large, I decided to put the content containing the back-story and the first chapters that dealt with the plot into a short Book One. This book lays the groundwork for the series and will hopefully interest you enough to buy the others. Book Two is twice as long and more along the lines of what I envision for the rest of the series.

I started the *Forced To Serve* series as a group of paranormal/fantasy/scifi romances, but the stories have ended up being enjoyably complex for me. I loved writing about the inner struggle my characters are having as they try to be authentic. I loved writing about the battle of good and evil going on inside them all the time. These stories are a little bit of everything as most good science fiction is for readers who love it.

I hope you enjoy reading this series as much as I enjoyed writing it.

~ Donna McDonald

## Character guide

When you are writing, and especially when you're world building in a paranormal, fantasy, or science fiction story, you develop very intimate relationships with the characters you create and how they sound in your head.

Okay yes, I hear voices, and yes, sometimes they do tell me to do things. Usually, it's along the lines of "either you write this scene this way or I'm going to play it like a movie in your head until you do". Most of my characters are alpha to some degree. You wouldn't believe how hard it is to get a happy ending out of them sometimes.

In this book, I decided to let the reader into my head to hear the voices I heard a little. So I'm including a list of the main characters along with a pronunciation guide. Not that you have to call the characters these names in your head when you're reading—feel free to change them if it pleases you—but I thought you might like to "see" my spin.

**Captain Liam Synar** (*pronounced Lee-um Suh-nar*)

SPECIES: Norblade AGE: 268

Intuitive/ Demon master/Ship Captain

**Peace Keeper Ania Looren** (*pronounced Uh-ni-uh Loo-ren*)

SPECIES: Pleiadian AGE: 918

Enlightened spiritual being/Warrior/Demon possessed

**Lieutenant Dorian Zade** (*pronounced Door-ee-an Zayd*)

SPECIES: Half Siren/Half Greggor AGE: 623

Empath/Intuitive/Warrior/Spiritual Counselor

**Commander Gwen Jet** (*pronounced Gwin Jet*)

SPECIES: Half Earthling/Half Thelorian AGE: 35

Strong-minded warrior/Passionate female/First Mate

**Chiang of Greggor** (*pronounced Chee-ang of Greg-gor*)

SPECIES: Greggor AGE: 142

Empath/Intuitive/Physically powerful/Healer

**Malachi, Demon of Synar** (*pronounced Mal-uh-ki*)

SPECIES: Demon Mist AGE: Over 1000 (he is not saying how much)

Created demon/ Loves to control/Can possess any creature

Unlimited power but bound by the Creators of All (name of supreme deities)

## Prologue

*Two years ago....*

"I was nervous the first time I bound myself to a female as well," Dorian said, watching his best friend and current captain pace the room.

"What makes you think I'm nervous?" Synar asked, pausing to give his friend a strange look.

Dorian laughed at Synar and his blank expression. "What still shocks me is that Ania Looren passed up dignitaries, presidents, other ambassadors, and more warriors than I can count to tumble into your bed like a love stricken Earthling. I'm in awe of you turning out to be the one male in her entire life that she couldn't refuse."

"If you think I'm going to be indiscreet and brag about my bonding time with Ania, you are mistaken my friend," Synar said, grinning at Dorian's guilty look.

"Being a Siren, my vows are especially hard to endure, Liam. Today the most celibate planet in the Alliance is tuned into your mating vibrations, as am I. As your best friend, the least you can do is let me live vicariously through you once in a while," Dorian teased. "I know you were her first breach."

"Yes I was, but I'm still not telling you details. That won't be happening. The first time is a private matter and a special sharing. Find your own female and start living again," Synar ordered.

"I want peace, not another mate. It hasn't even been a century since I lost the last one. I know not all creatures live as long as Sirens, but a century doesn't feel all that long when you are grieving," Dorian said, narrowing his eyes as his friend picked up speed. "Liam—you're going to wear out your footwear if you keep that up."

"I don't know what's wrong with me—can't seem to stand still. I'm truly not nervous taking Ania as a formal mate, just impatient to get the public ceremony over," Synar said. "My intuition is sending out massive warning signals, but I can't tell if they are real or just a reaction to the events of this day. I don't want to be an embarrassment to her in front of her family, so I haven't said anything. I have a couple crew members observing the ceremony and looking for problems. They haven't found anything yet."

"Why are we even doing this ceremony anyway? I distinctly remember Ania saying it wasn't necessary for her sake. She said you were too anxious to wait until after and that you had filed the legal mating forms before ever leaving the ship," Dorian teased. "You and she belong to each other now in all the important ways. What will this ceremony accomplish?"

"Ania is a high-level Peace Alliance ambassador. You don't just throw one of those over your shoulder and run off to your quarters with her," Synar answered. "This ceremony is for her family. They've waited a long time for their only child to take a mate. My mother declined to come, which was just as well since she hasn't spoken to me since my father died. I think my mother has more trouble believing Conor killed him than I do."

Dorian could hear the pain in Liam's voice without even looking at his energy. "Is your brother still exiled?" he asked quietly.

"Yes," Synar said flatly. "And it will stay that way for at least the next century of his life. Mother will just have to deal with it and be glad that at least Conor isn't dead."

“Have you told Ania about your family and your inheritance?” Dorian asked.

“No,” Synar answered, adjusting the cuffs on his uniform jacket. “I asked Malachi to block her from knowing for now. Once Jonas is gone, the demon is going into the amulet until I can figure out the proper person to rule him.”

Skipping over the advice he wanted to offer Liam about the dangers of keeping such a large secret from the person closest to his spirit, Dorian instead focused on the main issue he saw as a problem. “How can you be so sure that you are not the proper person?”

Synar looked and held Dorian’s gaze until he was sure his friend saw the truth in him. “No one in my family is worthy to rule the demon any longer—certainly not Conor or me.”

“I can tell you sincerely believe that, but I think you are more suitable than you realize,” Dorian said quietly.

He glanced at the timekeeper on the wall of the room they were in and saw it was time for them to go.

“Enough of this morbid conversation,” Dorian said briskly. “This is a day to celebrate. There will plenty of time for you to mourn your errors later when you realize how much taking a mate is going to complicate your life.”

Synar snorted, refusing to laugh at Dorian’s teasing. “Your words offer me no comfort. Tell me why we are friends again?”

“Because I haven’t had children and having a much younger friend is the closest I intend to get for a while,” Dorian said. “I like your blind spots about your life and find them mostly entertaining. Plus I know you have no idea who you are mating today. You see only a very small part of the female who waits for you at the altar. It’s going to be interesting to witness your shocked reaction when you find out the rest.”

“Enlighten me then,” Synar demanded on a laugh. “That’s what friends are supposed to do about each other’s females.”

“I am an unusual friend. I consider that Ania’s task, not mine,” Dorian said with a knowing smile. “I have told both of you that I refuse to mediate your mating relationship. I confess it is amazing to watch two of the most intuitive beings I’ve ever met completely ignore their intuition about each other.”

“Maybe Ania and I know all we need to know about each other,” Synar said firmly, smiling as he looked across the room at the female standing near the altar, who turned and smiled at him.

He was attracted to Ania’s beauty, but also to something indefinable in her spirit that he sensed. All the challenges of their mating faded when he acknowledged that pull to be near her. He’d never felt it with any other female.

With Dorian following, Synar walked to stand at Ania’s side, feeling the respectful silence of the congregation descend around the two of them like a cloak.

Defying convention on her planet, Synar held out a hand to her, smiling as Ania placed hers in his without even glancing at anyone else. On a planet where all touching was considered something to do behind closed doors, her easy acceptance of his touch was more significant to him than any ceremony could be.

Synar glanced at Dorian standing taller than anyone else in the assembly and his first mate, Jonas, standing by Dorian’s side. He nodded his head to both of them that he was ready.

Then Synar formally inclined his head to the entire assembly, then to the officiate,

and finally to the female facing him and smiling as she held his gaze.

“Ania Looren, before this congregation of friends and family I openly declare my sincere desire to be your mate for the rest of my life. All that I am and will ever be, I give into your power this day. Do you accept my offer and pledge?” Synar asked.

“Aye, Liam Synar. I accept your offer and pledge. All that I am and ever will be, I give into your power this day as well. Let us be declared as mates,” Ania said, pleased that her voice was as confident and sure as Liam’s.

“Let it be declared that this couple is mated,” the officiate said loudly.

“Joined by the will of the creators,” the congregation said, the sound of their common support rolling up the walls of the room and filling every fraction of space with its energy.

Then the celebratory music began, the vibration of it swelling.

Synar turned his head slightly and watched Jonas fall to the floor with stunned disbelief, a large hole blasted through him, his life force leaving rapidly.

“Malachi, come forth and stop those that seek to do harm,” Synar called urgently, watching the mist hover over Jonas as Dorian and two other crew members scrambled to find those responsible.

Hearing Synar call out to someone, Ania instinctively turned to the crowd and saw a weapon flash. Without stopping to think, she stepped in front of her new mate and felt a searing fire in her back.

“Liam,” Ania called in alarm.

“No,” Synar called out in shock, clutching her falling form in his arms. “Malachi—kill them all but one.”

*It will be done as you command, Malachi sent.*

Synar sank to the floor clutching Ania’s weakening body. “What have you done? Why did you step in front of me? That blast was not meant for you.”

“Take care for your life,” Ania said. “I believe I am returning to the creators. Do not mourn me long. I have long planned for this day.”

“No—this will not be, must not be,” Synar denied, looking around the room that was mostly vacant now except for the dead and dying bodies lying scattered across the floor.

When the mist appeared above him, hovering and waiting, Synar looked up in numbed surprise.

*The attackers are all dead except the one being restrained by your Lieutenant Zade, though even that one is starting to wish he were dead. Let Zade finish him for you, Liam. You and I have a bigger problem to attend to because Jonas is no more, Malachi sent.*

Synar looked at the male cowering by Dorian and at the carnage on the floor.

*Are any of the Pleiadians who tried to stop them still alive, he asked?*

*One or two linger, but not for long, Malachi reported.*

*Go into the largest one for now, but do nothing else until I command you, Synar said. Do not reanimate him.*

*As you wish, Malachi said, heading for the best body he saw, glad that Liam was letting him choose his host this time. Jonas had been Synar’s choice and not his, though Malachi admitted to himself that he had grown quite fond of the easy going male host. Being in Jonas had been like taking a holiday because the Greggor male loved nothing better than bonding with females and making music.*

Before Jonas, Liam’s father Bogdan had put him into an uneducated, giant stump of

a male who was forever stumbling over things and getting so drunk he was unable to perform even the most menial tasks. Malachi didn't even want to think about that host body and what it had done.

Synar lay Ania's mostly unconscious form down on the floor and stood to walk over to the cowering male. His uniform was covered in Ania's life force. The killer glared defiantly at him, but Synar also saw fear in his eyes. If there hadn't been any, Synar would have made sure to put some there.

"Did my brother Conor send you to kill me?" Synar demanded. "I warn you your death means nothing to me now, so you might as well try to redeem yourself before the creators receive you."

"Yes—Conor sent us. He wants you and the demon. He said to capture you alive, but kill everyone else that got in our way. The stun was meant only to wound, not to kill you," he said.

"If my mate dies, you will die. If she lives, you will take a message back to my brother that killing Malachi's host bodies won't gain him anything. Your inept group left plenty more bodies for him to inhabit," Synar looked at Dorian. "Will you take this coward away and send medical help to look after Ania?"

"Indeed," Dorian said, grabbing the male by his arm and dragging him out of the room.

Synar went back to his mate. "Ania, can you hear me?"

"I feel the cold of dying, Liam. I don't know why I did not intuitively see this coming. I guess all I could think about today was you," Ania said, trying to reassure him with a smile, but her eyes closed and the blackness she drifted in claimed her once more.

"Malachi, come out and do no harm," Synar called, his voice heavy, the pressure inside him to scream at fate barely restrained.

He couldn't let Ania die when he had the power to stop it from happening. He just couldn't.

"Damn me if you must—I don't care," Synar said, sending the words to the creators of all.

He looked then at the demon mist floating in front of him. "Malachi, Demon of Synar—enter this female's body and lend her your life. She is your new host."

*You can't mean to put me in a female, Liam.* Malachi's vibrations wavered as he protested the gender with both disdain—and shock.

"You will go into the host body I have chosen and do all I ask. You will repair her body and take no more from her than what is necessary for your survival. She is never to know you inhabit her. She is to remain just as she is," Synar said, making himself put intent behind the words. "As I command, you will obey."

*This is a mistake Liam, Malachi chastised. I am to be put into warriors, used to fell armies, used to vanquish legions of evil. Why do you dishonor the sacred contract? There is no redemption for me in this enlightened female.*

"It's either go into Ania Looren or into the amulet, demon. If Ania dies, I will lock you away and drop the amulet into the volcanoes on Terris so that you will never be found again by any creature," Synar said sincerely. "You can truly spend eternity in a fiery pit like many spiritual beings fear doing. Your spirit will not die, but you will never live in a host again either."

Malachi hovered, flexed, and finally acquiesced. His tie to Liam Synar and his



family exceeded his power to deny his current master. Cursing the creators of all once more, he resigned himself to a dreary existence in a female for a while. Malachi pulled his mist form together more tightly.

*I hear and will do all that you command*, he vowed, disappearing quickly into the body of the female while Synar turned his head away until it was done.

Moments later, Ania's eyes fluttered open and Synar let out a ragged breath of relief that he hadn't been too late to save what was left of her. "Ania—are you still with me? Help is on the way."

"What happened?" she asked.

"We were attacked by an enemy. The weapon was fortunately not set to kill instantly," Synar said. "You are severely wounded, but I believe you will survive."

"Is everyone safe now?" Ania asked.

"Yes—but I fear this is not the end of it. I must leave you and go seek those that did this to make sure they will not do so again," Synar said sadly. "You will be safe with your family. I will come back for you when I am done."

"We just mated, Liam. Take me with you. I'll heal on the ship," Ania demanded.

"I can't put a high-level Peace Alliance ambassador at so much risk," Synar said, stroking her cheek, wanting nothing more than to do just as she demanded. "Heal while I am gone. Let your family care for you. Serve your planet until I return."

Synar bent to brush her lips with his. "I know you don't like kissing, but I need to reassure myself that you live."

"I must be getting used to it," Ania said, struggling to return the pressure of his mouth. "I didn't mind that kiss at all."

"Help is coming shortly. Let them repair your body. You will be weak for a while, but soon this will be nothing more than a bad memory," Synar said.

When she didn't answer, Synar realized that she had fallen into the healing sleep of the demon. Malachi was already working on her. Now Synar had other things to do to make Malachi's efforts count.

Dorian came back shortly and found Synar and Ania still on the floor. "Help is on its way. They were afraid to come back inside. How is she?"

Ignoring Dorian's concerned question, Synar raised his gaze to his friend's face.

"We are taking the bodies of Jonas and the Pleiadian male Malachi went into earlier with us. Put both on the shuttle and take them to the ship before you come back for me. I will explain later. I will register the body we are stealing as host to my demon now. Then we are going to release the killer we captured and send him back to warn Conor that I'm going to be actively searching for him. If we check, I bet we discover Conor is no longer confined to the planet he was exiled to," Synar said stiffly.

"Is the Pleiadian male joining our crew once the demon reanimates him?" Dorian said, the words distasteful, but the truth often was.

"No—the Pleiadian male will not be reanimated," Synar said quietly. "The body is a ruse to fool Conor. I have given Malachi a more noble assignment."

Dorian looked at Ania's body then, seeing the energy signature but not wanting to believe it. "She was dying, Liam. Ania was prepared for that. Why did you stop her death? Do you know how much she would disapprove of what you have done?"

"Ania might have been ready for her death, but I wasn't," Synar said tightly. "It is done and I will not be changing it. I chose to tell you only because I need your help."

Dorian saw Ania's lashes flutter open at the same moment he heard help finally running in to their aid.

"Dorian—I forget sometimes how tall you are. It's like looking at a mountain to see you from the floor. This sure hasn't happened in a very long time," Ania teased.

Despite his beliefs and his sense of foreboding about what Liam had done, Dorian smiled at his teacher and friend with great relief. She remained herself so far. He hoped that would always be true.

"I have never forgotten a single moment of my training at your hands," Dorian said, smiling down at her.

Ania laughed, but it hurt to do so. Then she felt her eyes closing again. With a tired sigh, she entered the blackness calling to her.

Several healers rushed to them, and Synar slipped out of their way. He stood and looked up at Dorian. "Well?"

"I will help you," Dorian said at last, thinking that he didn't want Ania to die either. No matter how much the demon clashed with his beliefs, her death didn't feel destined in that moment either. "May the creators forgive us both."

"Pray all you want for forgiveness, but I don't need any," Synar said firmly. "I have no regrets."

"Let's hope that remains true," Dorian said. "You go with Ania and see to her. I will take care of the rest."

Synar nodded and followed the medical transport bed out of the building.

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After they were gone, Dorian walked over to the dead Pleadian Liam had indicated, lifting him easily despite the dead male's bulk. He cringed knowing his uniform would be ruined after this and need to be replaced. He didn't want to even think about how messed up his energy was going to be.

Why had he promised to go along with something he knew Ania would be appalled to know was happening? Yes, he would have missed her if she had passed on, but all creatures returned to the source eventually.

Dorian couldn't remember ever being so torn by an ethical decision before. Knowing his own motivations eluded him. Liam's actions had a reason, but his were just as illogical. Unlike Liam, Dorian was sure he was going to live to regret his agreement to the deceit. He just hoped Liam was right about it deceiving his brother as well as his mate.

Evidently Conor Synar was more than Liam's brother. They had learned today he also a formidable enemy. Dorian doubted Liam would ever underestimate his brother again because the price for doing so even once had been extremely high.

As he focused on the task of moving the bodies, Dorian realized it would take him a second trip back to collect the body of the first mate, Commander Jonas Tangier. Though Dorian was next in line and a logical choice to serve as first mate, he didn't want the responsibility of leading.

Instead, Dorian much preferred serving as spiritual counselor and remaining third in the command chain. As spiritual counselor, he gave energy readings, cleared chakras, and helped crew members make decisions that would most greatly benefit them. Part of his gift was the ability to see a person's most likely future, but when he tried to use his intuitive abilities to see what the future held for them now after their actions today,

nothing would show itself to him.

At his age and advancement in his skills, Dorian knew there were only two reasons the future ever got blocked from his sight. One was when he had done something wrong and was being punished by the creators, which usually took the form of his gifts waning for a period of time. The other was because the creators of all didn't want him to be cognizant of their plans.

As Dorian finished what he had committed to do, he pondered which one was most relevant to the current situation.

## Chapter 1

The two men sat across the table from each other both frowning over their next mission. It was bringing up an old argument they had both been avoiding for over a year now. Dorian clamped his jaw tight and glared.

"What other choice is there? Stop being resistant to your destiny and set a course for Pleiades. You have to go tell the investigating counsel the whole truth," he said, glaring at Liam Synar who was looking at the com station with murder in his eyes. "You know you can't let Ania be punished for something out of her control. Besides which, your demon might kill more people because of her."

"Malachi is not *my demon*, and don't you think I realize the risks?" Synar asked stiffly. "I fear my brother was behind the recent attack on her and her parents. When Conor discovers the group he sent has been killed, he'll know Malachi is nearby. I just wish I could rescue Ania without her planet announcing she's a demon host to every other bloody planet in the Alliance. The Pleiadians believe in making things public. The day after I go there, Conor is going to know exactly where Malachi resides."

Dorian nodded. "How can you face conflict after conflict on planets full of creatures who kill without thought and yet hesitate over this? Do you really fear your brother that much?" he asked.

"Yes, because no matter how much time has passed, my death is still his goal. More I fear what Conor would do if he actually gains control of Malachi. I can't let that happen," Synar said. "I'm caught between the past and the present, and I curse my father every day for that fact."

Using his Siren intuition that he'd spent centuries perfecting, Dorian scanned his friend's energy and saw that fear of his treacherous sibling was not Liam's largest concern. The worst thing Liam feared at the moment was facing the wrong he had done to his mate for the past two years.

"Are you also worried about seeing Ania again after all this time?" Dorian asked, bringing up the touchy subject in the gentlest manner he could.

Synar took a moment and then answered with a question of his own. "Did you know Jonas before he hosted Malachi?"

Dorian shook his head slowly. "Just barely. Why?"

"Jonas dreamed of having a family and was trying to convince his favorite bonding female to formally mate him. When I put Malachi into Jonas to save his life, the female severed her relationship with him almost immediately. She said there was something different about Jonas and she couldn't bring herself to bond with him anymore," Synar said sadly. "I never felt that aversion with Ania, but I also never bonded with her before I left. She wasn't healed enough. In our last discussion, she accused me of no longer wanting her. I let her believe it."

"I still say that all your concerns would have fixed themselves over time if you'd just taken her with us. Do you really still think the answer was to abandon her completely?" Dorian asked.

"Regretting the past will not change what I did," Liam said, frowning.

"Yes that is true Liam, but avoiding it won't make it go away either," Dorian said.

Dorian hoped the familiarity of hearing his first name would help the message get through his friend's strong mind. Honor and duty had stifled Liam's personal growth.

“I didn’t abandon her,” Synar said, the question bitter on his tongue even after all this time. “I believed if I left Conor would chase me and leave her alone. It’s mostly worked for the last two years. That proves I was right to leave her and the demon where they were both safe from Conor.”

“Maybe from your perspective your plan worked. What do you think the cost has been to your mate?” Dorian asked. “What do you think Ania feels about it?”

“Do you think I did this randomly? Without thought to the pain for us both? Well, I didn’t. I knew it would hurt us.” Synar drummed his fingers on the table. “Though I haven’t finished the third training book, I can tell you there’s nothing about demons being hosted in mates in the first two books of training. My father would be sorely disappointed in the demon master I’ve turned out to be. Yet I would do the same again to save Ania’s life. The decision is as horrendous to me now as it was when I made it, yet I would repeat it. I’ve all but gone mad dwelling on it.”

“I’ve known Ania a lot longer than you have, Liam. Her spirit is resilient and truer than any creature I have ever known. She bears the mark of the creators inside her. I believe she remains much more than a demon host body. In fact, she is a more complex being than you ever took the time to discover, which is why you underestimate her. You have always been blinded from seeing the whole person by focusing only on the physical desire you feel for her,” Dorian said.

“It was never the physical, Dorian. She was always small and fragile looking, and the lack of heat in her was vexing to me. I had to always be careful when we bonded. So no, it was not the physical. It was the spirit inside her, the way she had of seeing and dealing with things. I’ve always liked older females who were very settled in themselves,” Synar said. “Ania is unique. She can’t be replaced. It’s why I haven’t dissolved our mating agreement.”

Dorian’s spirit leapt to know that Liam Synar still had a great affection for his teacher and friend. Though he hadn’t been the catalyst for their meeting, he had counseled Ania to give his friend a chance. He had teased Liam in the beginning, but Dorian had seen they were meant for each other in a way few mated couples ever were. It was not the kind of gift from the creators that anyone should set aside—for any length of time.

“Indeed—unique is a good word for Ania Looren. She deserves more than you have given her, Liam. Don’t make me choose between the two of you again. I will choose very differently next time,” Dorian warned.

Synar nodded as Dorian stood and walked to the door.

“As a celibate Siren, you are a male quite adept at avoiding his own destiny. How can you claim to know so much about mine? Are you ever going to claim your *own* mate, Dorian? I’m not the only one who’s been avoiding things for two years,” Synar reminded him.

“Have I killed the other males in her life yet? No I have not. I know precisely what I am rejecting, and yet I would not stand in the way of her finding happiness with other males. Can you say the same? What if Ania Looren one day finds another male who will not walk away from her in times of trouble?” Dorian asked, shrugging as he walked out of the room.

Synar frowned at his friend’s back. It had honestly never occurred to him that his Pleadian mate might one day replace him. He assumed Ania’s fidelity was bred into her

in a similar way as his. His body didn't even long for another female. In fact, his desire was dormant until he thought of her.

Now Dorian's words made him wonder if hosting Malachi could have changed Ania's nature. Had she perhaps already found someone else?

Synar rose from the conference table and headed to his room to study the books of training again. His mind was now filled with dark thoughts about the only female that he'd ever wanted badly enough to bind her to him.

## Chapter 2

“So what’s the plan, Synar? Are we slowing them down or just killing them outright?” Gwen asked calmly, rolling the power pack on her weapon until the charge indicator turned green.

“I don’t expect any problems, but if there are some, we just need to stop them temporarily. Some of them hold high offices in the Peace Alliance. These is not a population who would kill us without strong provocation,” Synar answered, adjusting all three of his weapons to the same setting.

After two years of helping rescue high-level Peace Alliance officials from their sticky planetary situations, Commander Gwen Jet had already known what her captain’s answer would be from the stance of his body. Gwen was merely entertaining herself with forcing her non-communicative leader into polite conversation while she adjusted her weapons.

“You haven’t said much about this mission. Who are we saving today?” Gwen asked, keeping her voice as light as possible as she adjusted her other weapons.

In the two years she had served as Captain Liam Synar’s first mate, Gwen had never seen him so anxious for a recovery to get started. Nor had Gwen personally seen the Norblade warrior’s eyes glowing gold like a tiger’s until now either, even though the rest of the crew often reminisced about a past when Synar’s eyes were that color every day.

When Synar continued to ignore her question about the prisoner’s identity though, Gwen stopped her preparations.

“Captain, if I’m going to die today, I’d at least like to know why,” she said dryly. “Is the female Pleiadian someone special?”

“You will not die today, Commander Jet,” Synar said with laugh at his first mate’s dramatics. “Though Ambassador Looren’s detainees might not be so lucky. They should never have placed her in a situation where she is being threatened in any way.”

Gwen could hear how much it mattered to him in his voice. It only made the situation stranger and her more curious.

“You know the hostage personally?” she asked, figuring if true it might explain the strange vibes rolling off Synar.

Though she kept her human side on a tight rein in most ways, the natural curiosity in that part of her ruled her thoughts and tongue, making her question nearly everything. She had an insatiable desire to know the “why” of circumstances involving her. All those years of living with her mother on Earth had done that to her.

But even if the Earthling side of her hadn’t been curious, her Thelorian side could see Synar’s apprehension manifesting in his jagged energy waves. To say his nervousness alarmed her was putting it mildly. The normally stoic, unemotional male was suddenly vibrating with all kinds of emotions today.

“Yes, I know the hostage personally,” Synar reluctantly admitted, stopping his preparations to meet the probing gaze of his second in command but keeping his face as expressionless as he could make it. “In human terms, Ambassador Looren is my wife.”

“*Wife*,” Gwen exclaimed, fumbling with the news as she completed her weapon assembly. “That’s quite a revelation, Synar. You have a life mate that doesn’t travel with you? Nothing in the service contract bars her from coming along, or at least mine didn’t contain any anti-mate clauses.”

“There are good reasons Ambassador Looren does not travel with me,” Synar said flatly, turning away to make sure Gwen knew he was not willing to elaborate.

“I suppose that explains why you don’t indulge in recreational relationships like the rest of us,” Gwen grumbled softly, not really realizing she had spoken her thoughts aloud until Synar glared at her rudeness. “Sorry. My apologies, Captain. It’s none of my business, but I’ve always wondered why you kept to yourself so much.”

“How very human of you to assume all that from my revelation, Commander. Now if you’re satisfied with the explanation of risk for our mission, could we leave?” Synar asked coldly, walking away without waiting for her reply or acknowledging her comment about his personal choices.

“Sure. I’m ready when you are. You know I’ve always got your back,” Gwen said, purposely using the Earth slang she knew Synar hated to hear from crew members.

Gwen admitted to herself that she was trying to goad him into opening up a little more. Synar had just revealed that he had a secret wife. It made her wonder what else she didn’t know about him.

“Commander, make a note to remind me to schedule language protocol classes when we return,” Synar said, grinning at her over his shoulder as he stormed away.

Gwen bent her head and hid her smile.

The spoken English language had survived many millennia on Earth and found its way out into the universe as other planets were settled with humans and human hybrids. Since there were humans routinely now on most every ship in every galaxy, it was often the common work language, though Gwen conceded that many sentient beings hated using it. Even time was counted in Earth measurements among the crew, though the ship’s computer also logged time in the standard increments of the planet that programmed it.

Synar always spoke English to her despite the fact Gwen was quite fluent in his Norblade tongue. But ultimately the joke was on him because she enjoyed his insistence to use it. He always sounded like a stuffy academy professor. This was true even though Gwen knew Synar watched current Earth movies for entertainment. What they did for him, she could never decide, but they rarely failed to improve his mood.

Gwen actually envied Synar his ability to use vids to relax. Standard entertainment was not relaxing for her. Instead, she preferred enlisting one of the friendly and mostly human ship engineers for a few hours of rolling around in her bed. Her blood boiled with a restlessness that had never found an outlet that appeased her spirit for long.

Her father was similarly plagued and dealt with it by continuously working. It was one of the main reasons her parents had chosen to separate shortly after her birth. Gwen handled her restlessness by keeping her service contracts short and moving on to another ship after three years.

Honestly, she didn’t know how Synar could get by without some physical relief now and again. Both he and one other crew member lived like they had taken spiritual vows of purity or something. Gwen figured she would have gone completely mad in the last two years if she had tried to live like that. Only one year left and she was already anxious to move on.

Finding out Synar had a secret wife was a shocker, but it provided a solid reason for him never having asked her or the other single female on the ship for bonding. She would have refused Synar on principal of course. She didn’t bond with her commanding



officers. But that didn't mean she hadn't noticed that Synar was a fine male of his species, and one that looked to be fully capable of satisfying even the pickiest of females.

Walking several steps behind her captain to literally cover his back, Gwen had a great view of just how prime he was. She shook her head to clear it of carnal thoughts, and when her vision cleared she saw energy spikes shooting out of Synar, reaching out like tentacles. That might explain her sudden awareness of Synar as a male even more than the realization that he had a serious bonding relationship.

Her thoughts cleared when they walked into the shuttle docking area where three other crew members waited for them, including the blazingly attractive but also celibate Lieutenant Dorian Zade. His height and breadth exceeded everyone else's aboard ship. The male was stunningly attractive with his light brown skin, black hair to his shoulders, and the bluest eyes she had ever seen on any planet or off. When it was necessary for him to fight, Zade was also as fierce a warrior as Gwen had ever seen in her career, which now spanned five rescue ships in fifteen years.

But she had learned the hard way over the last two years of her service that if you talked to the beautiful male, you had to be prepared for an argument. It still made no sense to her that such a contrary person could serve as the ship's spiritual counselor. Nor did it make any sense someone as attractive as Zade would opt to live such a barren existence. Though the latter probably explained the root cause of his perpetual bad mood where she was concerned.

Truthfully, she would never have touched Synar because he outranked her, but in her first year onboard she would have been glad to roll with Zade. In fact, for a time she'd been obsessed with the urge for him. Zade had refused her for reasons he still declined to explain, and it still occasionally smarted when she remembered how intensely she had desired him.

Now she kept her distance, dealt with Zade when she had to, and accepted the fact that the male in question just had no interest in bonding at all. Which was just as well, Gwen conceded, because her stomach had a tendency to do strange things when Lieutenant Zade looked directly at her. Not to mention the energy vibrations coming off him scared her Thelorian side as well as her Earthling one.

That kind of persistent gut awareness was nothing but a distraction in her opinion, and Gwen did not want any part of it. She had seen many female warriors like herself ruined by allowing a controlling male with too much physical power over them into their lives. Such a bonding commitment ended careers like hers.

She pulled her attention away from thoughts of Zade and heard Synar lecturing the mission crew.

"Do not fire at anyone unless ordered to do so by me," Synar said tightly, looking at each of them. "And do not under any circumstances attempt to touch the hostage. You must leave that only to me. Ambassador Looren is exceedingly dangerous. If ordered, you will take cover until I tell you to come out. Do not attempt to assist me."

"Wait," Gwen said, grabbing Synar's arm as he started to board. She was sure she had misunderstood his order. "Captain, I don't think I heard you correctly. If something bad happens, you just want us to *run and hide*?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I want you to do, Commander Jet. It's what you must do to survive this encounter," Synar said flatly. "Ambassador Looren is a demon host. If she is threatened, the demon will protect her at all costs. I happen to know that the demon she

carries is not discriminating of friends and foes. He will kill and drain the energy from anyone near her when he attacks.”

“Say that again. She’s a *what*?” Gwen asked, shocked, following Synar to her seat across from him and trying not to look at Lieutenant Zade taking the seat next to her. “I thought demon hosts were a myth.”

Synar fastened himself into the seat. “No. Neither are demon masters, though there are not many uses for them since the Peace Alliance came into being.”

“You’re telling me there’s a demon master we have to worry about as well as a demon in the hostage we’re rescuing?” Gwen asked, curious and concerned all at once. She tried to reign in her curiosity by reminding herself the situation was also dangerous to them all.

“The demon master is among our crew. And before you ask, yes I have been aware of the fact,” Synar said quickly, seeing Gwen’s increased shock at his answer.

Gwen narrowed her eyes at him. Rumor was that demons and masters were so powerful as a unit that their combined thoughts could become reality instantly. Legends said the two of them working together could wipe out a military force of thousands without engaging in any normal combat.

Gwen’s eyes perused each crew member, and she made herself look at her attractive seatmate long and hard, even though staring that long at Zade made her want to sigh like a lovesick teenager, something she had never been—thank God.

Eventually, her gaze returned to Synar when she couldn’t figure it out.

“Thelorian energy reading failing you on this one, Commander?” Synar challenged. “No worries. You’ll find out which one of us it is soon enough.”

Gwen snorted at his demeaning statements about her skills. Even if it was the closest to teasing her Synar had ever come, his words were still dripping with sarcasm. She decided to see if her captain could take teasing as well as he evidently could dish it out today.

“The only person’s energy that is strange today is yours, Synar,” Gwen challenged back, narrowing her eyes on his face as her gaze met his resistant one. “Since the hostage is your wife, why aren’t *you* more worried?”

To her astonishment, Synar laughed at her. Really laughed. She could only stare at how attractive he was without the stoicism it had taken her almost two years to get used to. What the Helios was wrong with her today? She couldn’t get her mind off sex.

“Why are you mocking me, Synar?” Gwen demanded, pushing away her awareness of him as a male. “Better yet, why are you smiling at me so strangely?”

“It would take me days to explain my amusement well enough to satisfy your doubting human mind. Since we do not have days to spend, you will just have to learn as we go,” Synar said firmly, leaning back in his seat. “Now I need silence to prepare myself. Ease up, Gwen, you’ll figure this all out soon.”

When he said silence, Gwen knew it meant Synar would be praying or meditating or whatever the ritual was the Norblades all did before a confrontation. She leaned back and watched her captain roll a second set of dark eyelids down and zone out. That act was just freaking weird no matter how many times she watched Synar do it.

Just as well that he closed his second set of eyelids, Gwen decided, frowning at Synar. Her captain was looking more and more like a damn Earth tiger, and it continued to bother her. Even his normal eyes were creeping her out today. Her own apprehension

was far more worrisome and interesting to her than some hypothetical demon master, which could still be no more than a joke at her expense.

What concerned her about his lack of real answers was that Captain Synar seemed to be preparing for more than just a simple extraction of a high-ranking hostage from a mostly peaceful situation on the officer's home planet.

It was her business to understand the risks, minimize them, and make sure one of the two of them returned to the keep order on the ship. So far she had made damn sure Synar always returned. She had no intention of letting anything change that record, not a demon or a demon master.

Her thoughts were chaotic and troubled, and then she felt intense waves of body heat followed by a giant wave of calm floating over her tight muscles. She fought back the huge sigh that wanted to be released, refusing to look at the origin of those pleasant sensations.

Spiritual counselor my ass, Gwen thought, clamping down on her body's reaction to Zade.

"You are wise to be concerned, Gwen. Life is going to change for all of us today," Dorian said softly, leaning down from his much larger height to whisper into Gwen's ear.

"And I suppose you know exactly what's going on?" Gwen complained bitterly, unable to keep the resentment from her voice or from squirming in her seat as she felt another wave of relaxation go through her. Sirens emitted calming vibrations naturally, but that didn't mean she had to appreciate the fact.

"I was with Captain Synar when he and Ambassador Looren were mated. And I was there when she was brutally attacked and almost killed. What happened after was destiny, but Liam does not yet accept it. Today he must stand and face his worst fears," Dorian explained in a whisper. "He will need you to be strong for the sake of the crew."

She sat up straighter in her seat, fuming quietly at Dorian Zade's lack of respect for her position. He rarely used her title to address her. Instead, he always used her personal name. While from time to time Gwen admittedly wanted nothing more than to hear Zade calling her name over and over, she just wanted to be riding him to bliss when he did it, not sitting through one of his patronizing lectures about his perception of her duty.

"There are good reasons I was assigned to be first mate instead of you, Lieutenant," she said coldly, refusing, as she always did, to call him by his personal name.

Dorian inclined his head at her defense of her role, his expression revealing nothing of what he thought about her statement.

"Indeed there were good reasons. I do not disagree. It is precisely for those good reasons that I stepped aside to let it happen," he replied easily.

Gwen snorted in derision at the complete lack of humility in his words. "Two years and you're still singing that same old tired song. Get over yourself, Zade. I got the promotion fairly, and I *deserved* it."

Seeing no further words would reach her mind while Gwen remained determined to resist all new knowledge, Dorian merely turned back in his seat to wait for their arrival at the planet.

It irritated him that he'd once again felt overwhelmingly compelled to try to help Gwen today, and worse, obligated to do so when he saw Liam unable to confess the truth of the situation to her. Dorian was sorely tempted to tell her the truth even though it would be extremely disloyal to Synar.

He conceded that Gwen deserved to feel her resentment for Liam's lack of disclosure. After all, she could well be the person Liam would have to leave in charge of the ship and crew if things went awry. Not preparing her for that inevitability was a bad leadership decision in his opinion. And Liam rarely made bad ones.

But helping the crew and Liam hadn't been his only motivation for helping Gwen, and that was Dorian's real problem.

No—he had been utterly compelled to warn Gwen personally that she was in for a big shock today. The human female was way too young and disrespectful of change to fear the magnitude of what could happen in this instance.

There ought to be a law against any being who wasn't at least one century old serving on a ship, Dorian thought, allowing himself to feel the bitterness festering in his spirit about it all.

Maybe he was just getting old and starting to worry too much about the wrong things. He had seen it happen, even to his species who sometimes lived for several millennia. At his advanced age of six hundred and twenty-three years, even Liam's age of just over two and half centuries seemed much younger to him most of the time.

In fact, the longer he served on this ship, the more Dorian was of a mind to quit and go into retreat on his home planet. Maybe a century spent in quiet reflection would end his present torment, which unfortunately involved the first mate, Gwen Shenu Jet.

At barely thirty-five years old, Gwen was like an infant to most everyone on the ship, though admittedly a fierce one. She was also the least experienced crew member. Even the males Gwen bedded on a regular basis to relieve her physical needs were all at least a century old, though Dorian doubted she'd ever asked any of them about it.

Not that her bonding habits were his concern. Her passions were as shallow and fleeting as her anger was when ignited. And if her wiggling was any indication, she had virtually no control over her nervous energy even though she was half Thelorian. It was the Earthling side of her that always won in every behavior conflict, just like it was that same side of her that created the curvy body he couldn't keep from admiring, despite his meditations to prevent his interest.

*Shades of Kellnor*, Dorian swore, realizing where his distracting thoughts had gone. It was difficult to remain neutral while Gwen shifted restlessly in her seat, brushing her extremities against his over and over. The female was nothing but a temptation to his peace of mind. How he could possibly want such a one dimensional creature was beyond his understanding. Her single-minded focus on her job role kept her personal growth stunted worse than Synar's did.

Would she be capable of understanding that if he told her?

*Of course not*, Dorian thought, answering his own question. Her lack of respect for her spiritual life was why he had never acted on his vicious physical need for her.

Who needed the kind of responsibility she would require?

He certainly didn't.

And how she loved reminding him that she was the captain's first mate. Hadn't he been the one who told Liam to choose someone other than him? Maybe she was the first mate, but only in the Earth definition of such things, Dorian decided, allowing himself to feel anger about it at last.

In his many centuries of working alongside them, Dorian had observed that all full humans and most hybrid ones were every bit as arrogant as Gwen Jet. Those who spent

long spans of time on Earth without traveling among other species were the worst.

Dorian privately thought the best event in that primitive planet's history was being forced into the Peace Alliance. Now all manner of creatures had settled there, forcing Earthling awareness past rudimentary differences to larger ones. Yet the mix still produced offspring that grew up to be like Gwen, regardless of what culture shared the gene pool. Earthlings still had not figured out that longevity came from peace and calm, from using your inner intuition as a guide, and not from fighting every bloody conflict you felt.

When Gwen continued to shift restlessly, Dorian turned to watch her throw her head back and sigh in frustration. He acknowledged his instinctive urge to soothe her, but worked to let it pass away just as quickly as it had arisen.

Admittedly, he had tried to talk Liam out of taking Gwen on as first mate. Thelorians with their energy awareness had their uses on every ship, but Earthlings were always poor choices for crew. Their volatile emotional states led to breakdowns over extended time periods. They got bored easily and then they caused trouble.

Only two Earth years had passed and already Gwen was nearing the end of her patience with life on their ship. He sensed her growing restlessness like it was his own.

"This mission will not involve any risk to you or the captain," Dorian said finally, tightening his jaw at his inability to stay silent when concern for her peace of mind lit a burning fire in his natural compassion for her.

"Well, that would make a nice change from our usual messes, wouldn't it?" Gwen said, irritated at the effect Zade always had on her, hating that he made her want to sigh and be hugged by him.

Yes, it was quite obvious which side of her nature ruled her, Dorian decided, turning away and letting anger have its moment within him again as he studied her energetically. Gwen thought herself a peace keeper, but it was her biggest illusion as far as Dorian was concerned. If anything, Gwen was a peace disrupter.

"Do you ever sit still for any length of time?" Dorian demanded sharply, the words spilling out despite how unwilling he was to speak to her further.

"Bite me, Zade," Gwen said, promptly regretting her slang when her mind decided to show her a literal image of him doing just that.

"Don't tempt me," Dorian said fiercely, hoping he sounded irritated instead of like a rough-tongued male in heat. The female was getting to him, and raging fires of Helios, he had a decision to make about it soon. His body needed her despite how much he fought it.

Gwen Jet was the third Earthling female in his life to cause him the kind of anguished longing that made him turn to complete abstinence rather than claim her. In six centuries, he had never understood why his body only seemed to want females from Earth for mates. It was doubly annoying because all of them, even the hybrids, aged quickly and died. Losing a mate after so short a time definitely lowered his contentment.

Neither of his previous mates had lasted much longer than a century no matter what care he had taken to preserve them. The only thing Dorian had not done was to share his life force, but that was altering the greater plan all beings participated in too much. His beliefs forbade it. True—with the first human mate he hadn't known how to do it, and with the second there had never been sufficient motivation.

At the end of each mate's life span, Dorian had grieved the loss of them from his life until he was mad with it. Caring, losing, and grieving was not a cycle that he wished to

repeat. The last thing he'd expected was to so quickly find yet another mating connection when Gwen had joined Liam's crew. Getting over the loss of his last mate was one of the reasons he had taken a post on the ship to begin with.

When Liam's head came forward and his eyes opened again, Dorian's attention came out of his thoughts of mating Gwen to marvel at the change in his long-time friend. Liam Synar had been a student where Dorian had been teaching. In his face now, Dorian saw someone he had not seen in a while. He saw a male who knew his true purpose, someone excited about life again. Even the air around Liam shimmered with an expanding quantum of possibilities.

No wonder he felt needs within himself awakening, Dorian decided. His close connection to Liam would naturally involve that kind of energy sharing.

"I feel the power again," Synar said, looking at Dorian, his eyes fluctuating, pupils changing shapes as the familiar energy filled him once more.

Synar knew Dorian would understand that the demon was calling to him. Though he loathed the dark power he'd inherited from his father, Synar had also missed it in the time they had been apart. Never having wanted to wield such power, his last use of the demon to kill those that had almost killed his mate made it obvious that everyone was safer when Synar was away from his demon's host.

"If anyone has harmed as much as one hair on her, I will see to their deaths before Malachi has a chance to seek his revenge," Synar said viciously, forgetting his audience as he searched his intuition for answers to concerns that threaten to eclipse all other thoughts.

Dorian smiled, understanding that bald truth for what it really meant. It wasn't the demon that Liam was worried about, but rather the demon's host.

Gwen's eyebrows shot up as she unbuckled her safety harness and stood. What the hell had happened to Synar's voice while he meditated?

"Synar? What did you say?" Gwen demanded, needing to ask before she imploded from the need to know what was going on.

Ignoring Gwen and her question, Synar walked impatiently to the shuttle door. He was out of the craft before the landing plank had even fully lowered.

Dorian put a hand on Gwen's shoulder to stop her from following.

"Hold the demands sitting on your tongue and use your eyes instead," he ordered, concern for Gwen's mental state overwhelming him once more. "At the moment, Liam is not the captain you normally serve. Remain as stoic as you can so as not to distract Liam from what he must do today."

"What do you mean?" Gwen demanded.

"It is not for me to say," Dorian returned, clamping down on his urge to tell her everything, to warn her about what was to come. "For once in your bloody life, Commander, use your intuition for the greater good."

Gwen jerked away from Zade's grip and stalked to the door, not willing to take advice from a male who continually counseled her like she was a child. It irked her that Synar let him get by with his disrespect.

When they all got out of the shuttle, Gwen could see they had landed in a barren area just outside what appeared to be a city. Looking around, she saw there were other shuttles, like some gigantic parking lot in a desert.

She saw the two suns in the sky and the one giant moon rising nearby. She knew

they were in what Earth called the Taurus constellation of her own galaxy, but she couldn't believe they were on the planet they were on. It was one of the most peaceful planets in recorded history and one known for its benevolence to all.

"Is this really Pleiades?" Gwen asked Synar sharply, who to her consternation just continued to ignore her.

Heaving a sigh of resentment at Synar's lack of response, she glanced over her shoulder at Dorian who nodded briefly in answer.

At least it was a planet that had been among the first to adopt the English language, Gwen thought, so she'd be able to hear and understand what was said. She looked over to Synar who was staring ahead, his eyes unfocused and all but glazed over. She wasn't sure he'd even come out of his meditative state. Gwen pulled herself up straighter, prepared to do what was necessary.

"Captain, this is a peaceful planet of the Alliance. Why have we landed an hour's walk from the city instead of inside its walls?" Gwen challenged because she was the only one on the crew who could.

Synar turned to glare at her, and Gwen swallowed hard but did not back down from her right to ask him questions. In fact, it was her duty to question him.

"If the crew is at risk, I want to know," she said sternly, keeping her voice as calm and cold as possible.

"The crew is not at risk. You are not at risk. I am working to make sure that remains true. I needed time to prepare to use my power again—that's all," Synar said, his gaze boring into hers. "Could we make the walk in silence while I do so?"

What power was he talking about? His Norblade warrior tendencies? Synar was not making any sense, but after searching, Gwen found her intuition wasn't sending off any loud alarms yet.

With Zade's advice to use her eyes suddenly seeming to be not only her best option but her only one, Gwen nodded once to let Synar know she accepted his statement. Then to reassure the crew, Gwen lifted her hand to the dirty road, sweeping it to indicate they would all follow.

Gwen watched Synar stalk off, leaving them to follow or not. It was obvious that her captain didn't really care at this point.

The biggest part of Synar's attention seemed to be on wherever they were going.

## Chapter 3

“Ambassador Looren, the charges against you are quite serious. I urge you to consider your answers carefully. Now I ask you once again—did you kill the three Greggors who attacked your family or not?”

The Pleiades Peace Alliance commissioner glared at her. Ania lifted her chin, sighing with frustration at having to repeat her statements over and over.

“I can only continue to tell you what I’ve already been telling you. I have no memory of killing the Greggors. Though considering my father and mother both were physically accosted and hurt, and several of their servants injured and killed, I also feel no regret for their deaths whatever the cause,” Ania said flatly, seeing no reason to lie about anything she remembered or felt. “Most Greggors are benevolent. I do not understand why those three males attacked us.”

“The witnesses who called for help have told us that you were pushed to the ground and held there by two of the males. The witnesses said you eventually broke their hold on you and killed all of them with only your hands. Their injuries bear out the truth of these reports,” he complained. “I concede that one lone female defending herself against three strong Greggors is a hard story to believe, yet the witnesses have been truth tested and passed.

“I do not know what more you want me to say if you remain unwilling to hear my words as truth as well,” Ania said calmly, her voice strong and completely free of guilt.

“Because of your position, we are allowing you the privilege of speaking instead of having your memories scanned during truth testing. However, your refusal to be honest continues to be a waste of this committee’s time. Enough people saw what happened for us to believe them. What I cannot determine is why you are not willing to confess when there will likely be no penalty for doing so.”

Yes—what was the truth, Ania wondered, sighing at a situation that eluded her intuition. Something deep inside her struggled to see it for herself, but it was like there was a wall of blankness. Her longing to know was deep as well, but had less to do with the investigation than just her own frustration with her life.

In the last couple of years, she had ceased to care about a good many things. Her personal sadness had made her a less compassionate person, but that still didn’t mean she was responsible for doing what they said she did.

As a reformed warrior, Ania knew she was technically capable of causing the Greggors’ deaths, but she doubted anyone on the council had looked far enough back in her history to know that about her. She knew most of them were half her age. Compared to the first one hundred years, the last eight were full of accolades and peace prizes.

If she had caused those deaths, Ania certainly would not have hesitated to say so. The Greggors had deserved to be stopped by whatever means necessary to prevent them from taking more lives.

The only thing Ania remembered of that day was seeing her father being hit over the head and her mother being struck across the face repeatedly. She didn’t even remember what the males had been trying to find out from her parents.

The last memory she had was of the males holding her down and one of them pulling back his fist to hit her. The next memory was finding herself on the ground in the middle of her unconscious, injured parents and the three dead attackers.



Ania put a hand to her stomach as a huge cramp swept through her. She had been to a healer on multiple occasions, but they could find no explanation for the internal pain she endured all the time. Yet today, the cramps were occurring every few minutes instead of their normal interval of every few days. Ania could only conclude it was a reaction to her required appearance before the investigating committee. Perhaps at her advanced age, such a physical reaction to stressful times was something to get used to happening more and more.

When the doors at the back of the room opened, Ania was completely surprised to see the one male she believed no longer wanted to help her come strolling in through the doors, obviously heading straight to her. Scanning for lingering hurt inside herself, Ania was relieved to find little remaining pain concerning his abandonment. All she felt was the typical pull her body normally felt in Liam Synar's presence. That she could ignore. She'd had plenty of practice doing so over the last two years.

Why was he here? Her mind could not come up with any reason except that her parents must have called him about what had happened.

"Captain Synar," the Pleiadian commissioner said with relief. "Thank you for coming. The counsel apologizes for demanding your presence, but we have a most unusual situation with your mate. We believe she has killed, but she swears no memory of it. We are seeking to understand what happened before determining if Ambassador Looren needs to be put through mental reconditioning. We called you because we have doubts now concerning the soundness of her mind. Her parents refused to stand as your proxy for the medical evaluation. As her mate, it properly falls to you to take responsibility since in all probability Ambassador Looren has become unstable."

Social reconditioning was something Pleiadians had instituted several millennia ago. Though it was invasive on the subject's mind, reconditioning was not a terrible idea, Synar thought. But it would never work on Ania. The demon might kill all the healers for trying to control her thoughts because he considered the host body to be his own during his inhabitation. At the very least, it would torture Ania's spirit which probably didn't understand anything of what was happening.

Though Synar had dreaded facing Ania's tribunal, words to defend her tumbled out of his mouth with little thought to the consequences.

"It was not my mate who directly committed the crimes, Commissioner. There is an explanation. Because of its extraordinary circumstances, it is best shown instead of discussed. May I demonstrate?" Synar asked, waiting for permission to be granted.

The commissioner looked at the panel sitting nearby, saw their nods and shrugs. "We are willing to indulge you for a few moments if it would help clarify."

Synar looked fully at Ania for the first time since he had come in. The sight of her, coolly beautiful as always, almost took him to his knees. He felt Dorian's mind reaching out to his in support, but still had to clear the emotion from his voice to speak.

"It does my eyes good to see you once more. I apologize for the additional pain I must cause you, but it is for the greater good of all," Synar said to her directly, regret heavy in his voice as the female he'd cherished enough to mate stared at him like he was a stranger.

Disappointed, but also understanding the cause, Synar ignored his mate's lack of emotional response to him. He knew he must choose to only see Ania for what she was now as host to his demon, not what she once used to be to him. It was the only way he

could do what must be done to save what was left of her.

Synar reached out his hand to Ania, his eyes glowing. Hers began to glow in return. “Malachi, I command you to leave the host. Come forth, but do no harm to anyone.”

Upon hearing Synar speak, Ania clutched her stomach, calling out in pain as she fell to the floor. A blanket of black mist lifted off her as if leaving every pore. She closed her eyes weakly, thinking it felt like the very life force was literally being drained from her.

From the floor, Ania stared at the shadowy figure, not understanding. Her eyes closed more as Malachi’s opened wider. She fought the urge, but could not keep them open. Drifting, she felt herself fading and fading until everything around her became a hazy dream.

The mist whispered thanks softly to Synar as it assembled itself into a wavering mass that eventually formed itself into a short, well-formed male with dark hair in a dark suit of clothing. In fact, the only light about the misty apparition was what he’d stolen from Ania’s own eyes as he’d left her now weakened form.

It took Malachi several times to direct his energy into what passed for a resonating voice. His skills were rusty after not speaking for two years.

“Well there you are at last—I had all but given up on seeing you again,” Malachi said, giving his missing master a reproachful look.

“Did you kill the men who attacked your host?” Synar asked.

“Yes—they intended to kill my host and her parents. You’re looking just as impressive as always, Liam Synar, son of Bogdan. You can see that I have guarded the female host and kept her alive as directed. In fact, I have done all you asked. Now release me from her and let me find a male host. I should be rewarded for what I have endured.”

“You forget yourself, Malachi. You have done as I asked because you have no choice but to obey me,” Synar told him. “And you will continue to do all I ever ask for the same reason unless you wish to return to oblivion.”

“Just as much fun as always I see. Still can’t take a joke,” Malachi said, shoving a misty hand into a misty pocket. “Wait—what’s my line from all those Earth entertainment vids you enjoy so much? Oh yes—now I remember. *What is your bidding today, oh demon master?*”

When Synar just continued to frown, Malachi groaned in mock frustration.

“Such a pitiful entity you are, Liam. Your mate was always a restrained creature, but her sense of humor completely died when you abandoned us. I’ve been bored, and she’s been depressed. You should be ashamed of yourself for what you did to both of us. If your father were alive, we would both punish you.”

“Silence until I command you to speak again,” Synar ordered loudly.

He turned to address the commissioner.

“If Ambassador Looren’s life was threatened in any way, the demon would have done what was necessary to save his host body. This is the being who killed the men. I read the charges before coming here. From what the witnesses described, it was an act of survival as the men had killed others and injured her parents. Malachi’s actions were within his rights.”

The commissioner and panel of judges were looking at Synar in shock. He was not surprised at their reaction. Synar swallowed hard but did not look away from their censure. Instead he looked at Ania’s body and thought about going to her.

“This is a most upsetting situation, Captain Synar. Why has Ambassador Looren not

registered herself as a demon host body? This of course makes her ineligible to continue her diplomatic duties with the Peace Alliance. I am quite disappointed by such an unethical action from someone of her advanced enlightenment,” the Commissioner said.

“My mate does not know her life is tied to a demon’s. When she was near death but still alive, the demon needed a new host. I made an expedient decision to use her body and was within my rights to do so given my mate status. I was unaware that it would be a problem in her Pleiadian ambassador duties since her mind remains unaffected by the possession. Most hosts live unaware of their state, and this is the case with Ambassador Looren,” Synar said coldly, hearing Malachi laughing. “She is for the most part who she has been for all the time she has served the Pleiadian people.”

*You don’t sound like you really believe that,* Malachi sent telepathically, forcing the words and the skepticism into Synar’s mind. *You don’t trust that I left her essence alone or her mind in place, despite your commands. Why don’t you trust me, Liam? When have I wronged you?*

Synar tightened his mouth at hearing the truth, even if it was just in his head. *No, I don’t trust you,* he sent back. *You are a demon.*

*Your father was a better master, Liam. You have a lot to learn. You could at least show me a bit of gratitude. Unlike you—I took good care of your mate,* Malachi informed him.

The commissioner’s look of derision made Synar want to swear. He wasn’t offended at the fellow Norblade male’s opinion, just disgruntled that it had worked out this way.

“The entity once known as Ania Looren must be told at once of her situation and given the chance to decide whether or not to continue it, Captain Synar. Demon possession is against the spiritual beliefs of the Pleiadian people. As Ambassador to the Peace Alliance, her record of service is exemplary. If she does retain mental cognizance as you say, then your mate needs to be allowed her death choice. Your reluctance is understandable,” the commissioner said, leaning back in his chair.

Synar nodded that he was hearing, but his thoughts were on how fast he could get Ania and his crew out of there. He suspected the attack on her had been his brother again. Conor could even now have a group waiting for another chance to strike.

Synar pulled his attention back to the commissioner, hoping the lecture he was getting wouldn’t last long.

“The graver matter is that your absence is in direct violation of both Pleiadian law and the agreements that demon masters of all planets have followed since the demons were created. You know it is expressly forbidden for demons and demon masters to be physically separated for more than the very briefest of times. How long have you been away from the host body of your demon?” the Commissioner demanded.

“When you are rescuing high level officials and doing the work of the Peace Alliance, you don’t mark time in quite the same way as when you are on planet, Commissioner. What matters is that I am here now and bow to your will,” Synar said diplomatically.

“Are you willing to resume a more responsible role as master of the demon within your mate?” the commissioner asked, imbuing the question with the implication that Captain Synar had wronged the Ambassador. He never had any use for those who preyed on the dying, but that someone’s mate would do so without their permission was beyond despicable as far as he was concerned.

Synar nodded once, chastised by the disgust on the commissioner's face more than by his words.

The commissioner looked at the panel. "All in favor of Captain Liam Synar taking the demon and its host body off planet?"

The vote was unanimous.

"Very well," the commissioner said, satisfied to have a solution and to be able to close the disturbing matter. "Charges against the entity previously known to us as Ania Looren are now dropped. Going forward, the entity will be registered as Demon Host to Malachi and be considered the property of Captain Liam Synar for the purposes of these proceedings and for future reference. Ania Looren's parents will be allowed to erect the death monument to her former existence as is customary. A new ambassador will be appointed after the traditional three light cycles of mourning following the ceremony."

Synar fought back the weary sigh of resignation and the accompanying anger that he felt. The decision of the council meant Ania might as well be really dead because her people had just made her legally so. This is what he had feared would happen and a large part of why he had left. Now he could see his absence had been for nothing.

He felt the weight of his choices in his chest, but could not give in to his grief with all eyes on him. It would not help their situation. It would not save what was left of Ania's life. Only one thing could do that and it was still within his power. Maybe it was the only thing that was.

"Malachi," Synar said, pointing at Ania's body as he had done once before when there had been no other acceptable choice. "Enter your host and lend her your life."

The demon faded into a mist that found its way to Ania's body on the floor. Moments later, her confused eyes fluttered open and Synar felt the same relief he had felt the first time Malachi had brought her back from the edge of death. Though he knew Malachi resented being hosted in a female body, Synar had no plans to let him go into any other host as long as what was left of Ania drew even the smallest breath.

Synar walked resolutely to her and bent down to offer his hand, knowing the panel of her judges and accusers was still watching.

Wondering how she came to be lying on the floor, Ania put her hand out to the only male she had ever instinctively trusted to touch her. She had resigned her spiritual vows to share his bed and be his mate. But if the time since Liam Synar left her was proof of anything, accepting him as mate had turned out to be the worst decision she had ever made. She would remedy that status at first opportunity, Ania decided.

"I don't understand, Liam. What just happened to me?" she asked as calmly as she could. "I felt strange, and then I remember seeing you talking to a dark male for a moment, but then nothing until I woke up on the floor. Did I fall asleep during the proceedings?"

"The inquiry concerning the killings is over. You are released from the investigation without being charged. Further explanations about what occurred will have to wait," Synar said tightly, feeling her hand beneath his just as warm as it ever had been.

He resented that the warmth of life in her was more Malachi than Ania. But instead of anger, a sadness like no other he'd ever known washed over him. His time away had not helped distance him from the pain of losing his life with her. Now what was he supposed to do?

"We are in danger again. I regret this situation, but you must come with me to say

your goodbyes to your family. We have to leave the planet immediately. I fear your parent's lives will be at further risk if we don't. You must trust me in this matter until I can explain," he commanded, searching her gaze for acceptance.

Yet Synar's mind could not even conceive of a reasonable way to tell Ania everything. Probably because there was none, he decided. The paperwork from her inquiry would reveal his confession whether he told her or not, so there was no keeping it secret any longer, regardless of his desire to do so.

Now because of his promises to the commissioner, Synar also had to think about what he would do if Ania asked to be rid of the demon. Obligated to her Pleiadian laws or not, could he really let her die? He gripped Ania's hand more tightly, everything in him rebelling at the thought.

"Come with me—quickly please," Synar said as gently as possible, tugging her up from the floor.

Strength slowly returned to her limbs as Ania stood, but she still had to lean heavily on Liam. Under other circumstances, she might have lived in the moment enough to enjoy his touch after the barren time without him. Instead, Ania found her awareness drawn to the familiar stirring of something inside her that she could never quite understand. It was so odd to feel and at times caused her to imagine her body was carrying a child. Not that she'd ever carried a child, but it was just a terribly strange sensation without adequate description.

Now it made her wonder what was going on and how much Liam knew about it. Then her intuition suddenly sent a full and complete knowing that the secret—whatever it was—was behind the attack on her and her family.

Odd, Ania thought, looking at Synar's profile when she dropped her hand from his. He sighed as she pulled away, but continued walking on seeming not to be affected by her withdrawal. It had been a long while since her intuition had spoken to her so strongly. She found herself wondering what about being with Liam again had awakened it.

Walking slightly behind him as they left the room, Ania passed by what she assumed were several of his crew members since they were all dressed in uniforms much like his. The Earth female with first mate insignia was glaring at her while stealing hard looks at Liam. It was obvious that particular female felt she had some personal right to critique Synar's actions.

Maybe she did, Ania thought. What did it matter to her?

Yet when she looked beside her at the male who had come to her aide, memories flitted through her mind—and her body. There was a time it would have mattered very much to her.

Once in a great while, she could almost remember their physical bonding. If the possibility of bonding again with Liam still existed, Ania doubted all her wisdom would have stilled her tongue from ordering the female to leave him alone. But the urge was foolish and the possibility did not exist. He had left her with promises to return, only he never had.

Somehow she had failed to please him as a mate, but Ania had never figured out what she had done wrong or not done right. Liam had refused to talk about his reasons for refusing to return. It had all started with the first attack, which Liam still attributed to an enemy he would not name to her. Now it was like time had formed a circle. There had been an attack on her family again, though she remembered little of the details.

Losing his touch after all the work she had done to accept it had been difficult to endure over the last two years. But the hardest thing was that Liam had refused to discuss his decisions.

Of all her memories, one remained the strongest, and it never changed. Ania remembered the hardness of his face the last time they had argued about it and Liam had told her specifically that he didn't know when, or even if, he would ever be returning. That was over a year ago now.

Some vital flame inside her had flickered and gone out with his words then, leaving her bereft of all support. Even for someone as old and experienced in pain as she was, Ania thought, it was still extremely difficult to give up hope. It had taken her all the time since Synar had said he wasn't returning to accept her relationship to him was likely over. Now she was feeling remnants of old longings.

How was she ever going to endure spending time on his ship?  
She would rather he just left again.

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The transport to her parent's domicile took little time. Liam's crew waited outside while she collected her things and he spoke with her parents to explain their abrupt departure. When she came back with only one small packed bag, Liam looked at her in shock.

"You do not wish to take your reflective stones and tablets?" he asked.

"I no longer use them," Ania said flatly, meeting and holding his surprised gaze. Truth was, she no longer observed any spiritual ritual, not even those that had seemed as natural as drawing breaths for most of her very long life.

Liam's abandonment had changed her in ways she had never been able to fully comprehend. When he had not returned for her after promising to do so, Ania had given up caring about anything remaining between them. It hadn't been a choice so much as just a natural reaction.

For the first year of his absence, she had lived numb and barely functioning.

During the second year, she had at least found some small purpose for living in her work, if not any true contentment. Without her work, she had often thought that she would have had no reason to exist. It was the worst part of losing a mate. She had observed others suffering from it, but had managed to avoid it until Liam.

Looking at him now talking to her parents, Ania searched inside herself, no small task these days with her skills as damaged as they seemed to be. She could only hope that her departure would genuinely protect those who gave her life.

Blessedly, there was an emptiness inside her where the pain had been for so long.

Looking at his profile as Liam turned back to her parents to take his final leave, Ania realized he was no longer familiar to her as a male or a mate. Being with him today was like experiencing a dream and had the same sense of non-reality about it. Maybe that was how she would survive their future interactions. She would think of him as surreal and guard her thoughts and feelings from him.

As they walked out of the house and joined his crew again, what did occupy Ania's thoughts was how curious she was about what had happened during the time she had fainted during the inquiry. It was all very strange the way she felt like an observer of events instead of a participant.

Yet she hardly cared, which on some level Ania knew wasn't like her true self at all.

But she couldn't seem to help that reaction. Her mind chided her for caring, and as if it was a separate person, pushing away her worrisome thoughts with relative ease. Really such concerns over an uncertain future served no logical purpose, Ania supposed. She certainly agreed with that on most levels, even though she felt a nagging sense of it not being fair or right.

Also some tiny, tiny voice inside, one struggling out of a darkness like the kind that had descended upon her during the inquiry, kept insisting that knowing what happened was better than not knowing.

## Chapter 4

Onboard Liam's ship and stashed out of site of the majority of his crew, Ania felt depression settle on her as she unpacked, putting the contents into the various compartments of the tiny room Liam had assigned her.

No—*not Liam*, she chastised herself. She needed to stop calling him that, even in her thoughts of him. It was *Synar* or *Captain Synar*. There was no familiar male by the name of Liam on the ship or in her life.

Before they had left her parent's house, he had asked her to refrain from using his given name onboard. Ania saw no reason not to comply with his request regardless of how much it increased the distance between them or disrespected what they once were to each other.

In fact, he was making it very clear in a variety of ways that she was no one important in his life. Why hadn't Synar just said it straight out to her? It wasn't like she hadn't figured out their personal relationship was over.

There was a quiet knock on her door. Ania opened it to find the last person she had expected to see so soon. So cool had her reception been by everyone so far, she figured Synar has issued an order for her to be shunned.

"Greetings, Dorian Zade," Ania said, bowing her head and closing her eyes. "It is a pleasure to see you once more. I saw you in the recovery crew who came to collect me, but you hardly spared me a look. I wasn't sure if you were going to be allowed to speak to me."

"Greetings, Ania Looren, and apologies for my lack of acknowledgment. My interest earlier was in Liam and his reactions to what was happening. He was struggling to control—well, it is not my place to explain for him. I am sure he will do so in time as there is no choice now," Dorian said, bowing his head in return. "I just wanted to see if you were getting settled and needed anything."

Ania walked from the open door to return to her unpacking.

"Unless you came to offer me the information Liam seems unwilling to share yet, there is nothing more I need at the moment. My parents cried when I left as if I were dying instead of merely joining Liam—I mean, *Captain Synar*, on his ship. It is quite obvious that many secrets have been kept and are still being kept from me," Ania said.

"Peace will return in time," Dorian said softly.

Ania turned her face away from a male she had taught to read her. She would never be able to hide her true feelings from Dorian, so it was just as well she never had the urge to do so.

"I have not had peace since I met the one you still call your truest friend. Tell me, Dorian—did you ever regret setting aside your spiritual vows to take a life mate?" Ania asked sadly.

Compassion flowed through Dorian for Ania's emotional pain, which was much greater than Liam was allowing himself to know. Dorian sent her all the vibrations of kindness the demon would allow her to receive. It was surprisingly more than he had expected Ania to get. Her sad facial expression eased a little as she absorbed the energy of his kind thoughts. Dorian silently thanked the creators as he began to realize the enormity of Ania's pain. His own role in helping cause it, shamed him.

"Yes—I admit that both times I mated I regretted setting aside my spiritual vows.



Yet as contradictory as it seems, I never regretted a moment of the actual time I spent with my mates. It is a paradox that I often meditate on,” he said. “Which reminds me of my second offer—I have created a meditation space on the ship that you are welcome to use for your spiritual work.”

Ania turned away and bowed her head, the hardest admission she still had to make hovering on her tongue. Of all the people she hated admitting it to, Dorian was at the top of the list.

“I thank you for your consideration of my spiritual needs, but I no longer meditate. I have lost the ability. The moment I close my eyes, I fall instantly into a dreamless sleep. Projection is also impossible now. I seem bound to my body in new ways, and yet communication with my in-dwelling spirit also eludes me. I have come to see these penalties as the price I paid for rescinding my vows and mating, though it only happened after—well, it doesn’t matter,” Ania said.

“Of course it matters. Everything you feel matters. My spirit grieves for your spirit’s pain,” Dorian told her, coming into the room. “May I touch you, Ania Looren.”

“No one has touched me but my mother and father in a long time, Dorian. You may, but do not be disheartened at the absence of my spirit. My parents say it is like I am only a shell of who I once was,” Ania said.

Dorian walked to Ania and placed hands on her arms. He felt the dark energy pushing back on him, but he sent only compassion and understanding into her body. To his pleasure, Ania closed her eyes and breathed out a sigh as she released a bit of her emotional pain.

Amazed, Dorian felt the demon step aside and relinquish his hold to let Ania be comforted. He thanked the entity and immediately was shown an image of her spirit sleeping as if in a trance.

“I feel such an agony of longing all the time,” Ania whispered. “Why does all peace elude me?”

Shame and guilt at her words shook him.

Dorian bent and touched his forehead to Ania’s, something rarely done except by close mates. To match the third eye chakras was a very intimate experience, yet he would hold nothing back from Ania Looren ever again that could help her genuinely heal.

“Close your eyes again while I offer solace,” Dorian whispered.

Ania did as he asked and allowed his compassion to warm her. It cleansed her body like a wave of light. It was the first comfort she’d had in a long time. She whimpered at the relief, but refused to allow herself any further emotional displays.

Dorian felt both the demon and Ania ripple in relief at what he did. The same emotion was emanating from both and it was extreme loneliness and fear. He found it most unexpected to learn that even the demon had missed Liam. There was obviously a lot his friend did not understand about the creature he’d inherited—as well as about the female he had mated.

Then unexpectedly, the creators opened up Ania’s future to Dorian with rolling images of what was to come. Knowing the demon could prevent him from seeing inside Ania, Dorian hadn’t anticipated even being able to see her spirit.

But there it all was—Ania’s most likely future suddenly laid out for him to read. It was both marvelous and more frightening than anything Dorian had intuited in his life before that moment.

He had to clear both awe and fear from his throat in order to speak.

"There are great changes possible for you, and many decisions to be made," Dorian said carefully. "Know there are as many kinds of death as there are life. Make choices that you can live with no matter how difficult they are for others to bear. Ania. . ."

His voice tapered off as he saw what Ania would become if she chose a certain path. The vision shook him as he stood touching her. Did he dare reveal it?

"What did you see?" Ania whispered, feeling Dorian's intense heat envelope her.

"The words to describe the possibilities will not come to my tongue, but my instinct is that the creators of all are the architects of these plans for you," Dorian said, raising his head and opening his eyes. "I will also selfishly ask you not to choose your own physical death regardless of how hard your new life seems."

"*My new life?*" Ania repeated his words calmly, though she felt anything but calm. Her life was a trap from which she had found no escape for two years.

She made herself step away from the comforting touch of Dorian's hands. It was hard to give it up because she could at least feel his sincere compassion. Most Pleiadians did not touch routinely and no one touched someone of her rank. Liam Synar had changed her desire for even the most basic of physical contact almost from the first moment they had been introduced.

What had she become because of the Norblade male who had abandoned her?

Ania shook her head as she stepped out of Dorian's reach. "I have no life. In all the ways that matter, I am already dead. I was dead to my mate when he left, and now I am dead to my parents as well. How much more death can there be for me? I fear there is even too little of my spirit left for the creators of all to want it. Never sacrifice your spiritual life for a mate again, Dorian. It is not a good exchange."

"All you say may feel true to you at the moment, and yet you are still physically alive, Ania," Dorian said firmly. "Plus I saw all of you within you still. Your spirit is still there, just hidden away, sleeping until something awakens it. I will meditate for you until you are able to do so for yourself again. Blessings, my great teacher. I serve you still."

Yes--teacher. She had been that, Ania thought, though the details were like a story that happened to someone other than her. Ania was tempted to demand more answers from Dorian. If pressed, he would probably tell her what was happening. But it wasn't Dorian's responsibility to mediate her mated relationship, so she couldn't in good conscience ask him to divide his loyalties between Synar and her.

There was no choice but to wait for Synar to finally talk to her.

"Blessings on you as well, Dorian Zade," Ania said, bowing her head to him again.

Dorian turned his body to the door, but his head was still turned toward Ania, reluctant to leave. Her head was bowed in even more defeat now than when he had entered the tiny cramped space where Synar had put her.

Dorian almost ran over the person in the doorway as he considered whether to stay or go. "Liam—pardon. I didn't see you."

"Why are you here?" Synar demanded. "I thought I said Ambassador Looren was not to be disturbed at all today."

"I am here for the reasons her mate should have been here, *Captain Synar*," Dorian said sharply. "If you're willing to help see to her needs, I will go now."

Dorian's anger settled when he saw that withdrawing their familiarity with each other had the desired effect of causing Liam more guilt than a thousand carefully chosen

words could have.

“Lieutenant Zade is not disturbing me anymore than you are Synar,” Ania said, keeping all emotion out of her voice. “He offered me solace and kindness, as is the best gift of his kind. To get some business settled between us, I hereby officially request you to stop addressing me by a title I no longer hold. I claim the right be called Ania Looren. I revoke all other names and titles.”

Ania hoped he realized “mate” was also one of the titles being revoked. It would save further confrontation.

Synar stepped past Dorian into the room, ignoring the warning look the older male bestowed on him as he walked away.

“As you wish,” Synar said to her. “The role of peace keeper on the ship is not so different from being an ambassador.”

“I probably no longer qualify. I was stripped of the title ‘ambassador’ as you are well aware. My stoic mother could not stop weeping over it,” Ania said, turning from her now completed task of unpacking to face him. “You said we would discuss what happened when I fell asleep during the inquiry. Is this a proper time?”

Synar looked at her in the crew uniform she had donned and all he could think was how much Ania looked just like she did when he met her. In her capacity of ambassador back then, she had come aboard his ship to be transported to a multi-planet counsel session. Though she had looked beautifully cold and unapproachable, he had become ravenous to physically bond with her. Her light hair was not as vivid as he remembered, but her sky blue eyes were amazingly clear considering what lived behind them.

The rest of her body remained unchanged, and his body was all too aware of the fact. The thought of Ania being with or belonging to another male was just as unbearable as it had been in the beginning days they knew each other. Unfortunately, another male already had claimed her, and there was nothing Synar could do to change that fact other than to allow Ania to die completely—which he couldn’t do.

He was no closer to being able to give her over to death now than when he’d sent Malachi into her the first time. He didn’t care how many planets’ laws it broke. Every instinct Synar had said this female had to live whatever the cost.

“Do you require anything for your comfort?” Synar asked quietly, putting hands in his pockets to keep them off her.

“No. My needs are even more simple now than when you used to know me,” Ania said flatly, keeping her gaze trained on the door and not on Synar. “May I speak my truth?”

“You may always speak your truth to me,” Synar said, bracing himself to hear it.

“I feel an imperative need to discuss what happened during the inquiry. I also want to know why I am now required to be on your ship when you so obviously do not wish me to be here. If you retain any respect for my former place in your life, I would ask that you make your explanations of those things a priority. Dorian spoke of me having to make decisions soon. I feel compelled to obtain knowledge as soon as possible in order to prepare myself,” Ania explained.

“What else did Dorian say?” Synar demanded, stalling his response to her comments.

“Only kind and comforting things,” Ania said sincerely, unwilling to fully disclose Dorian’s energy reading. “He also gave me his compassion. I had forgotten how nice it could be to be touched in kindness.”

Synar looked away, unable to hold Ania's accusing gaze, while inside he secretly resented Dorian's interference.

*His offering of spiritual comfort is not what you resent, Malachi sent. You just don't like that a Siren male was touching your female. You should have seen how happy your Lieutenant Zade made her with sharing just the slightest bit of his compassion. Ania almost wept with relief. Physical comfort was beyond my ability to give her these last two years, Liam. How could you leave a female who needed you that much?*

*Be silent,* Synar demanded.

He wanted to touch her. He wanted to hold her. He wanted it now but could not bring himself to embrace her knowing the demon was a witness to it. The idea that Malachi would be hearing everything, sharing everything, bothered Synar more than he could set aside.

Dorian had cautioned him when he first bonded with Ania that there was very little bonding heat in her for him. But he hadn't needed his intuitive friend to know Ania's physical desire for him was lukewarm. Synar had been very aware that after many centuries of setting aside the physical side of herself, Ania never had reached the point of being more than mildly aroused by their bonding.

Yet her lack of open desire had not put him off from formally mating her. Synar had sensed that inside Ania was all the mate he would ever want or need. The Norblade male he was had only considered it a challenge to have to work on releasing those more passionate emotions in her. Every vibration she accepted and returned had been as satisfying to him as winning any battle. The first time they had shared a bonding vibration had rivaled the moment he'd earned his captain rank. Every one after that eclipsed all others he'd shared with any female.

"Dorian should have checked with me before he came to see you," Synar said, sounding harsher than he intended.

"Despite your obvious preference that I have no contact at all with your friends or crew, I would not shame Dorian Zade by refusing his spiritual gifts," Ania said coldly. "My friendship with Dorian is older than you are, Liam Synar. I will not allow it to be disrespected no matter what you think of me."

"I am not talking about your friendship to him. You are I are still mated, Ania. It is not respectful to let another male touch you when I am not around," Synar said, choking on the hypocrisy of his words.

"You need to check the last records that were transferred as I joined you. We are no longer formal mates, Captain Synar. That is an illusion that serves no one, and I will not be a part of it any longer. Two years of pretending was enough," Ania said, her eyes flat and empty, but it soothed her that her voice sounded so sure.

The mating dissolution form had been filled out the day Synar refused to set a time to come back for her. Seeing him again had convinced her to file and make it official.

After hearing the commissioner inform Synar that legally he was responsible for her, Ania had decided to make sure that he would have no further responsibilities or rights to make decisions for her, especially not while she was under his command on his ship.

In the end, sending the form and getting the acceptance back in a mere instant had not hurt at all. It had seemed the only logical thing left to do to end a relationship that was over.

"I have not seen the notification," Synar said, shocked that Ania would take such an

official action without first informing him of her intent to do so.

Then Synar found himself wondering why the Pleiadian ruling house would accept the formal dissolution of their mating if they no longer considered her a live entity. Bureaucracy was always confusing, but in this case he didn't care anyway. Filing a form was not going to change his commitment to her.

Synar realized he'd been staring at her and swallowed hard. "Why did you feel the need to dissolve our arrangement?"

"I will not maintain the illusion of our mating as it is grievous to me to deceive deliberately, even those of your crew that I do not know. While I packed, I filed the dissolution form. It was acknowledged instantly. You are free now legally as well as spiritually. I am officially and spiritually your mate no more," Ania said.

Ignoring her angry pronouncement, which made him angry enough in return to start destroying her things, Synar turned his attention from the detail he refused to acknowledge to the bigger issue.

"What else do you know about the outcome of your inquiry?" he asked, wondering if she had read anything of the decisions from it.

"The details were not published before we left. The best of my intuition has been stripped from me in the last two years, but I still possess a lot of knowing and it tells me you have my answers," Ania insisted, turning her back to him and pretending a great interest in the contents of her room. "I am being as patient as I can be in the circumstances."

Curse Malachi, Synar thought. He was behind her knowing. He was supposed to be suppressing her awareness.

Was the demon truly so determined to shed Ania's body that he would hasten their confrontation? There was no available host body on the ship for the demon to use in place of hers. If Ania chose death, Malachi would have to go into the amulet in Synar's room. In the amulet would be nothing but a void. He knew the demon wanted to avoid that.

What could Malachi be planning?

*I am planning to get the truth out so we can move forward. Ania Looren will not choose death, Malachi sent. How is it that you know so little about the female you mated? Tell her—or I will reveal it to her myself. This is allowed. I obeyed you while we were apart, but I am out of patience with your cowardice. Ania and I are both done with waiting for you to do what is right.*

"Very well. We will meet in the briefing room after the evening meal. Commander Jet and Lieutenant Zade will need to be present to witness the discussion. Given our disagreements on the status of our relationship, I expect we will need others who are more objective to mediate us. What I have to say will not be a comfortable truth for either of us, but you have a right to know," Synar said finally, not wanting to admit to himself that Malachi's communication was reassuring, even if accompanied by a threat.

"Thank you, Synar. I wish only to know the truth that belongs to me," Ania said.

She bowed her head respectfully, but not before she watched Synar flinch from her words. Then Ania watched him leave as abruptly as he had arrived.

She felt a fluttering inside her and rubbed a hand over her midsection to soothe it. Anxiety and stress, Ania decided, frowning at how unwell she had felt lately. She was sincerely tired of feeling so emotionally fragile. It was not at all how she thought of herself.

## Chapter 5

“All I’m saying is that it’s good to have another female on the ship. Ambassador Looren is just as alluring as she always was,” Chiang said with shrug. “I don’t know how the Captain was able to leave that fine-looking female wasting away on her dreary planet while he lived like a monk on the ship. I was serving with him when they met. Mating changed the captain in some strange ways. Isn’t that just like a female to do that to a male?”

“Lucky for you I left my weapon in my room, but I will still kick your sorry Greggor ass if you keep insulting her,” Gwen told him.

Her loyalty to Synar fueled her words more than any concern for his wife’s reputation—or former wife now, if the rumors were true. Synar had put Ania Looren in her own room, which had everyone assuming their mating dissolution was a fact.

“I thought you appreciated my sorry ass, Commander Jet. In fact, I distinctly remember you appreciating it for almost half a sleep cycle just a few days ago,” Chiang said, smiling.

“You’re right. I like your ass just fine. It’s your mouth that’s the problem. Guess I’d have to cut out your split tongue instead,” Gwen said, finishing her food.

He stuck out his tongue, waving each side at her. “If you ever let me, I could change your attitude about that too.”

Gwen snorted and laughed. “I don’t let anyone do that, especially not a genetic mutant like you.”

“Baby, you love me—you know you do,” Chiang teased, though it was obvious by now that Gwen Jet was not truly for him.

She was also not for the other two males she consorted with either, though they hadn’t been on the ship long enough to know what Chiang did.

Though his intuition had its basis in empathy, now and again he got a flash of the future. Chiang now knew the one Gwen Jet *was* meant for was about to stake a claim to her shortly. He could see it coming, just not when.

Chiang just hoped he got to have one more bonding experience with Gwen first because she was much more entertaining and pleasurable than Calliope, the only other unmated female on the ship. Calliope didn’t have much personality or seem to care much about what she did or with whom.

“I heard that Ambassador Looren legally dissolved her mate agreement with the captain. I figure it’s true since she has her own private sleep space. Do you think that means she’s available for bonding?” Chiang asked, stating the question he knew was on every male’s mind.

“Yes, I heard she unmated him right before we left her planet, but I wouldn’t get my hopes up about scoring with that female if I were you,” Gwen said, not the least bit jealous. Chiang was pleasant, good in bed, and fun. But she had no wish to commit to him, or to extract a commitment of any sort from him. That’s why she had not allowed Chiang to be the only male in her life.

“Mated or unmated, Ania Looren is a Pleiadian. They don’t bond anymore than they have to because they think it corrupts them. She’s not going to be into your kind of free love recreation, Chiang,” Gwen warned.

“Too bad,” Chiang said. “She’s so cool looking. I wonder what she’s like in heat.”

“Don’t engineers study planetary cultures in academy? Females from Pleiades don’t allow themselves to enjoy heat cycles. They shun going into heat until they are ready to conceive, and then they cry the whole time they’re doing the deed,” Gwen informed him. “Pretty wimpy if you ask me. Pleiadian males must be terrible lovers to make their women cry over sex—I mean bonding. Sorry, I know everyone thinks Earthlings calling it sex makes it less sacred. Hell, maybe it’s true—but I’m not trying to be disrespectful.”

“Forget other planets. I’m just saying we need more unmated females on the Liberator,” Chiang complained, pleased to make her laugh, even though he saw Lieutenant Zade frowning at them when she did.

The Siren’s glare merely confirmed what Chiang had seen in his visions, so his sigh of disappointment was genuine. He didn’t see Zade as the kind of male willing to share his female. He truly would miss bonding with Gwen. She was a good female and a fierce warrior. Definitely a suitable mate, Chiang supposed, just not for him. Yet somehow he didn’t see her going along with Zade’s ideas about it either.

“I honor you and our time together, Gwen Jet. Go in peace for the rest of your life’s journey. Know that I will always be your friend,” Chiang said sincerely, smiling at her in pleasure.

“What’s up with the poetic send-off, Chiang? Are we breaking up officially? Okay—fine. *I honor you too, Chiang of Greggor. Go in peace for the rest of your life’s journey,*” Gwen said jokingly, laughing as she returned the formal goodbye. “But I don’t think I’ll be going anywhere without you anytime soon, and the Liberator isn’t that large.”

“I misspoke—I will still see you,” Chiang clarified, smiling wider. “We just won’t be able to bond anymore. If you opened your mind to the future more often, you could see these things for yourself and be better prepared to deal with the change that is coming.”

Gwen snorted. “Will you stop that philosophical crap? You sound like Dorian Zade and his constant spouting of future mumbo jumbo. The only future I care about is the next two revolutions on the ship’s timekeeper. I have to join Synar and Zade for a briefing with the Captain’s wife—I mean ex-wife or ex-mate—whatever term you want to use.”

“That may be how it begins,” Chiang mused, nodding at her clueless expression. Then he laughed. “May the creators guide your destiny, my little sweet Earthling. Since you don’t want to mentally prepare, you may be in for a rougher ride than I could ever give you.”

“Well you might be in for a rough one if I get out of the meeting in time,” Gwen teased, enjoying his pleased male laughter as she rose. “I need to go take care of some pesky body things before I join them. See you later, Chiang.”

Chiang lifted a hand as he watched her go. Then after she disappeared from sight, he looked across the dining hall, met Lieutenant Zade’s questioning stare, and bowed his head respectfully. The other male’s eyes widened in surprise at his concession, but Chiang held in the laugh he wanted to release. Many underestimated him and his gifts, and Chiang was fine with that for now. He liked being an engineer and keeping the ship running. It was mindless work that soothed his spirit and his kept his hands occupied with productive tasks.

Part of Chiang liked Gwen enough to want to warn her about Zade’s intentions, but the other part wisely knew after his almost century and a half of life that a person’s

journey was their own. You had to be very careful about informing someone about their possibilities. It was completely obvious to everyone who knew her that Gwen Jet did not want to think of anything but the present. Ever. Which was not a bad trait in a temporary bonding companion, Chiang admitted, grinning at the thought.

But he personally found it was more helpful to be able to shift your thinking quickly as possibilities loomed and manifested right before your eyes. Chiang had every confidence that Gwen would learn these truths for herself, and for all he knew it was Zade's purpose in life to teach her.

He just hoped that the Captain took on some other female crew members soon. Celibacy did not suit his nature, and Chiang wouldn't want to change ships just to be near more available females.

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## Chapter 6

“Captain, would you like me to locate Lieutenant Zade?” Gwen asked.

“That won’t be necessary,” Synar said. “He is making some spiritual preparations for this meeting. Such matters are not precise. We will indulge Dorian this time.”

*And I will put the inevitable off for a few more minutes,* Synar thought.

When Dorian walked in finally, Gwen thought the very air seemed to be sucked towards him as well as the attention of everyone in the room.

“I apologize for my lack of timekeeping,” Dorian said, addressing everyone but keeping his gaze on Ania. “I meditated for you, Ania.”

Gwen watched Ania Looren—not Ambassador Looren, she’d been admonished—turn and bow her head respectfully to Zade.

Synar cleared his throat and began. “Engage log. Record time and entire discussion, video and audio. Witnesses to this discussion are Lieutenant Dorian Zade, Spiritual Counselor, and Commander Gwen Jet, First Mate. Also present are Ambass—strike that. Also present are Ania Looren, ship’s Peace Keeper, and Captain Liam Synar. Subject of discussion. . .”

Synar stopped as Ania turned her gaze from the windows of the ship. She returned to the conference table and sat opposite his seat. He had no choice but to look into her eyes as he finished his log entry.

“I am beyond ready to hear this. Please continue, Captain Synar,” Ania said sharply, folding her hands in her lap.

With her instincts on full alert, Ania tried to quell the fear that threatened to overtake her with the same blackness that kept her from meditating. More than anything, she wanted to know what was causing it.

“The subject of this discussion is my revelation to Ania Looren that her body is being used to host a demon called Malachi,” Synar said flatly, letting his declaration echo on the air between them as he finished.

Ania closed her eyes at his words, searching for the truth of them. It seemed to be swirling inside her. The fluttering increased along with the pressure of her life force rushing around fiercely inside her physical form.

*A demon. She carried a demon inside her. How? How could she not have known?*

And to think she had compared the fluttering and pain to carrying a child, Ania thought.

“This is the secret you’ve been keeping from me? That I am being used to host a demon?” she repeated, almost too numb with shock to ask all she needed to know.

Her senses reeled. The truth of it resonated.

“How did this come to be?” she demanded, her gaze boring into the male facing her.

Synar looked away, unable to hold her gaze while he explained. “On our mating day, we were attacked by a group of mercenaries who hoped to capture the demon’s host and gain control over his power. The host at that time was. . .”

“... First Mate Jonas Tangier,” Ania said, surprising all of them, including herself, when her mind suddenly filled with a perfect image of the male. That kind of absolute intuitive knowing hadn’t happened to her in a very long time.

She felt the stirring inside her again as she spoke the deceased male’s name, an almost joyous moment. The demon must have liked that host. How could she have

missed that indicator of demonic possession? The fluttering was always followed by a sense of dread.

Her spirit had simply refused to acknowledge it—or maybe the demon refused to acknowledge her spirit. Either way she was caught between two kinds of spiritual death.

“You are correct—Jonas was the host,” Synar said quietly, holding her inquisitive gaze now that the first shock had passed. “Malachi was able to subdue the attackers, but not before Jonas’ body was killed. During the attack, your body was critically wounded to the point of death. The demon went into you and basically saved your life by lending you his.”

“So the demon just left Jonas’ dead body and came into my body because I was available and unable to prevent his possession?” Ania asked, reality starting to set in at last. “I am aware of the sacred contracts. That’s not how it’s supposed to work.”

*A demon. I carry a demon,* Ania thought.

No wonder she couldn’t meditate. It likely wouldn’t let her. She hadn’t seen a demon in several centuries, but she remembered them. Oh yes, she remembered. She had a healthy respect for their fate.

“Malachi is a linked demon and unable to act beyond small ways of his own accord. His master ordered him into your body,” Synar said flatly.

“If Jonas was the host, who was the master? More to the point—where is the master now since I am linked to both?” Ania asked Synar, hearing Commander Jet draw in a sharp breath, swearing softly.

When she turned to the female, she saw Dorian place a restraining hand on Commander Jet’s arm. The first mate already knew, but was angry about Ania not knowing. What was that about?

Following the female’s glare, Ania’s gaze ended up right back at Synar’s unrepentant one.

*Synar. No. No—it couldn’t be. Surely Liam Synar had not mated her without telling her he was a demon master?*

But as she studied the defiant lift of his chin, she realized the truth. He had breached her centuries-old chaste body, and then given it over to his demon servant as a home without concern for how dishonorable it had been to her spiritual life.

As her formal mate, Synar would have been fully exercising his rights to do with her dying body as he wished. No one would have dared stop him. But he knew her, knew what she was, what she believed. She’d spent over eight hundred years becoming enlightened. He should have known she would never want to be used for such a vile purpose, no matter the loss of her life.

Ania rose from the table and walked across the room until a solid mass of blue wall blocked further exit. Panic rose in her and along with it a primal scream, her survival mechanisms kicking in at last. She opened her mouth to call out in pain, but only an eery panicked silence escaped.

A cramp hit her midsection with the force of a fist, but Ania knew what it was now.

*A demon lives within me.*

Needing some outlet for her emotions, Ania drew back her fist and rammed it forward, blasting through three layers of wall as if it were nothing. Pulling her sore hand back, she studied it like a child studies something it doesn’t understand. It had been a bit painful to do that, but mere moments later there wasn’t a single scratch on her to indicate

the effort.

She turned slowly around and faced the male who had condemned her spirit, a male whose face was full of a deep concern that mocked her anger.

Pleiadians lived for thousands of years. No wonder her parents had been crying. They knew as well. Everyone had known but her. Synar hadn't wanted her to know.

Did he really hate her so much that he would both deceive her and condemn her?

"You purposely put something vile and evil inside me. Why, Synar? You knew my beliefs. Why did you not honor them and let me die?" Ania asked, the questions torn from her.

Ania clutched at her stomach and bent with the pain as the demon struggled within her, punishing her for her words, maybe even her thoughts. She pulled herself straight from the cramping just as Synar lunged from the chair and walked to stand in front of her.

"I put the demon inside you because I could not watch you die when I had the power to save you," Synar said, the truth ripped from him at last, his relief so great to say it aloud that he wanted to sink to the floor at her feet.

"But don't you see? *What you have done to me—this is death,*" Ania replied, her voice cracked with all the ragged pain she felt but could not express without being punished by the demon. "You might just have well killed me outright by your own hand."

She turned away from Synar, clenched her hands into fists, then whirled back to confront him.

"Your rejection of me as your mate felt like death too, but I bore that, along with the mistake I made agreeing to become your mate in the first place. *But how could you hide this kind of truth from me and allow me to walk alone on my planet?* The demon killed three other beings, and I obviously couldn't stop him or soften the outcome. Your actions were both foolish and selfish," Ania said, her pained gaze meeting his own.

"Aye—they were selfish," Synar agreed, his pain no less than hers, but his guilt threatened to make him want to promise her anything if she would just seem less destroyed by the knowledge, anything except her death.

Synar reached out to grab her chin, only to have his hand violently knocked away. The rejection of his touch was much more vehement than he'd expected. But the pain of feeling his mate's displeasure—the pain was indescribable.

"Perhaps I am weak, but I would do the same thing again to extend your life. Malachi is vicious when provoked, but he is always good to his hosts. He has been in my family almost since he was turned to a demon. I inherited him, but being his master is not my choice. You must try to understand your situation from my perspective," Synar insisted.

"*Your perspective?* I see your perspective. You are a spoiled child seeking to be forgiven for a huge mistake. What do you know of what his kind endured turning to demon mist? I am the one who watched it happen to the last of them," Ania said, sneering in disbelief as she held his troubled gaze. "I *chose* not to follow the path of Malachi's species. I *chose* a different life, and yet you do this to me. Remove the demon from me at once and let my body die, Synar. It is my personal right."

"No—not yet. I cannot refuse you forever, but I also cannot risk the demon not having a host at this time. No action can be taken until another host can be found. I will not take a life even of a volunteer for such a purpose," Synar said, his stomach heaving at the thought of Ania lifeless, never to be reanimated.

Ania closed her eyes and fought to calm the turmoil inside her. Getting more angry would solve nothing.

“Too bad your noble sentiments towards the rest of your family don’t extend to me. I gave up my enlightenment to be mated to you, Liam. Why do you now dishonor me in every way a being can possibly dishonor another? How did what we found together become this unholy thing?” Ania asked, voice full of pain and devoid of hope.

Now even the memories of the caring she had once felt from him were meaningless. Liam Synar was truly a stranger. Worse, she realized he had always been one.

“I understand your point of view, and yet I will continue to value your physical life until other arrangements can be made,” Synar told her flatly, his voice husky with shame but also full of his determination to adhere to what he was saying.

From the depths of her, Ania felt the demon offer up several centuries of old memories, and in them she saw a passionate, risk-taking female who had warred until her whole culture had devoted itself to peace. When she had personally seen that the only way to peace was through the practice of good, she had given herself over to fostering it with just as much devotion as she had shown Liam Synar in becoming his mate.

She had all but forgotten herself as a young girl not even a century old, forgotten that it had been the warrior who had come first. Then just as clearly, she saw why the demon had chosen to give those memories back to her at this moment.

Synar was treating her like an enemy treats a prisoner of war, like an objective to be used as he saw fit. Her former mate held both their lives in his control at the moment, but she knew it didn’t have to be like that. She had never been anyone’s prisoner for long.

Ania felt the demon fluttering in approval at her rebellion, the feeling in her gut so familiar that she wondered why she had not connected to it before.

“You may be master of the Demon of Synar, but you will never be my master, Liam. One day soon I will take back control of the destiny you have exploited for your own purposes. Neither you, nor your demon, will stop me. This is my new vow to you and replaces all former ones I have ever made,” Ania said harshly. “Between us now there can be no peace. You should be grateful you are not more my enemy or your life would be forfeit as well. *Ai lee na cum silane.*”

Synar paled at her words, spoken adeptly in the ancient tongue that all creatures feared. How did Ania know it so well?

The remnants of Ania’s energy that had remained within him were suddenly wrenched from him as he stood meeting her angry glare. His mate had just shut him out of her soul and taken back her energy. He did not know exactly what Ania’s words had meant, but the personal distance between them now was worse than any he had created by leaving her alone so long. He felt no compassion from her at all. It was like some invisible cord between them had been cut.

Ania turned her back on the male who had done this to her to face another she thought had been a friend. Her illusion of Dorian’s caring was gone as well. It was difficult to choose which hurt worse. It seemed she was to retain the comfort of nothing and no one. She would have killed her physical body by her own hand if the demon would have allowed it.

“You knew Synar did this to me and yet said nothing. The demon I carry is capable of bringing death to a whole planet. I could have killed all my people. Despite his insistence that he is the demon’s master, it’s obvious Synar has little understanding of the

power, but you know of what I speak, Dorian Zade. In many ways, your betrayal hurts me more than even Synar's. You have betrayed my spiritual trust and a friendship of many centuries," she said coldly.

"Perfect clarity was denied to me in this matter except for one fact. It was not your destiny to die that day," Dorian said just as coolly in return, his heart saddened by Ania's reaction, but he had already seen how deeply she would be hurt. "Liam's guilt over you made him a coward in dealing with you afterward. My affection for you both made me one as well in choosing between you. I remained loyal to Liam in hopes he would find the proper path. I wanted to wait for the will of the creators of all to work this out, which I believe is happening now."

Ania laughed bitterly and lifted her arms. "Arrogant males abound across all species. You both are fools as well as cowards. By the raging fires of Helios, Dorian, what gives you or Synar the right to determine anyone's destiny but your own? My life while I lived freely was given over to easing the pain and suffering of all creatures, not in increasing the risk of harm to them. I could have destroyed my planet because of you and Synar."

"I could not control what was done to you, neither the attack nor Liam's actions to save you. It was also not my place to make the decision for Liam to tell you his truth," Dorian said, trying in vain to defend his loyalty. "Liam ordered the demon to protect you and do no harm. From my observations, this has come to pass."

"Neither you nor Synar will ever know the truth of how much spiritual pain you both have caused me. When I am energetically no more, ask the demon how many tears I fed him over two years of my spiritual being stripped away. Ask him how much grief I bore to feel his darkness growing like a child within me. Ask him what cost he exacted after Synar left me living a lie full of hope for a mate who kept promising to return, but never did," Ania demanded. "He kept my misery deep and I kept his need for my misery well sated. This is the life you two forced on me."

She swung back to Synar, muttering streams of words that had both males calling her name in alarm.

"Ania, stop cursing us," Dorian ordered, watching the Khalsa warrior awaken from her centuries-old sleep. He was more afraid than anyone in the room because the last thing any of them needed was the demon to share that power in her. And finally he understood what his loyalty to Liam has cost his teacher and friend. "I was wrong. Liam was wrong. But do not condemn us all with your words. There are many on the Liberator who do not deserve your wrath."

"Fine, but now do you see?" she asked. "The demon could use my power to curse and kill as much as his own. Over the centuries I made myself a healer, an instrument of good. Against my will, Synar made me an instrument of evil again and now a bringer of mass destruction and death, not just an individual assassin of good. I will not allow my physical body to be used in such a manner. One way or the other, with or without anyone's permission, I will have my death and cease to feed the demon."

Ania turned and left the room, not waiting to be dismissed from the meeting. Who would stop her? Power rose within her and the demon fluttered in approval.

For the second time in her life, Ania hated herself.

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After Ania left, Synar went back to his chair, sat heavily, and put his face into his hands trying to escape. Shame engulfed his spirit like leaping flames. Malachi was

probably dancing with happiness at Ania's anger.

Synar had known Ania could use many ancient words of power to heal. How foolish of him not to ever wonder if she also knew the ones to curse and destroy. It was said that only certain generations of Pleiadians had that training, and that those who wielded the words had paid a high price for doing so.

He had never really thought of Ania's age or her status on her planet, never really considered that a healer like her would ever have studied the darker arts. Well, now he knew, but it was too late to change it. If his father had still been alive, Bogdan would have said it was Synar's punishment to have to face his mistake.

One thing for certain, Ania had raised his awareness about the danger she posed to everyone. Synar would never leave her or the demon unattended again.

Gwen stopped staring and looked away from her captain to give him privacy. Synar had brought his pain on himself by keeping what had happened a secret. She knew it wasn't the actions he took that were the biggest problem for Ania Looren. It was the deceit that rankled so much in his former mate. Gwen would have wanted to kill him too. Evidently, the men thought Ania had the skills to do it, though Gwen didn't see how the smaller, paler female could hurt anyone. Her words might have some dark magic to them, but what could she do on a ship?

Looking away from Synar, Gwen ended up looking into Dorian Zade's troubled face. He didn't look much better than Synar did, and all he did was betray one friend to serve another. Gwen could definitely see that being stuck between the captain and his mate would have been hard. Without stopping to consider the magnitude of her actions, Gwen put out a hand and laid it on top of one of Zade's.

"Stop the pity party. I would have done what Captain Synar did to save his wife, and I would have kept silent like you did while Synar worked things out. This is a situation where there was never going to be a good enough solution for all involved," Gwen said firmly. "This is not the time to regret. Ania Looren is justifiably angry to find out the truth in such a bad way. But there is a core of extreme good in her despite the demon's presence. That inner goodness will help her survive this."

Dorian lifted his other hand to her cheek, wondering why he had held back his desire for so long. Her honesty was refreshing.

"From the mouth of the infant among us comes the hope that might wash away the lies and deceit. Blessings on your life, Gwen Jet. Thank you for your compassion," Dorian said.

"Come on, Dorian, you know I hate that formal crap," Gwen said gently, not realizing that she had used his given name in her teasing admonishment.

Gwen watched him smile as he bowed his head to her respectfully even though her words had not been nice. She smiled at him before turning back to Captain Synar. Later she would let herself think about how appealing Zade was when he was being nice to her, but there was no time at the moment.

"Can the demon harm without you ordering it to?" Gwen asked.

"No," Synar said coldly. "Malachi is forced by divine contract to comply or what is left of him will be sent to oblivion. Even a demon has no wish for genuine death. Life is about the connections we make, which is a truth even for demons. Without a host, they have no life, so in general they are mostly well-behaved."

"Good to know I won't be risking my life to get involved then. I'll let Ania Looren

cool down for a bit, and then I'll go see how she's coming to terms with the situation. I'll report back to you as soon as I can. It will most likely be tomorrow," Gwen said.

Synar's only answer was a nod.

"Close discussion and seal log," he ordered.

Gwen rose and left. She heard Dorian chastising Synar before the door was closed behind her.

## Chapter 7

Ania heard the rapid knock but ignored it, keeping her eyes fixed on the small portable computer built into the desk. It was close to the time that most crew members would be retiring to their quarters for sleep.

And she had no wish to speak to anyone else today.

"Find all content concerning demon masters and demon hosts. Cross reference with all other symbiotic relationships between demons and any sentient being on any planet registered with the Peace Alliance. Add search terms: power, calling out, and commands. If there is room in the folder to store more, also find any myths or legends about demon hosts controlling demons. Seal research under a private log for Ania Looren and require voice access authorization to open. Process and go to dark screen," she ordered.

"Processing," the computer reported. "Dark screen engaging shortly."

The knock at the door grew louder as Ania resolutely rose from her seat and walked to face whoever was behind the pounding. She sincerely hoped it wasn't Dorian or Synar coming to apologize. Helios would freeze now before she allowed what was left of her will to bend to anyone's ever again—demon or other being.

Synar wasn't the only person with a long buried secret, and hers was awake and ready to fight again. Ania opened the door with warrior eyes blazing at a startled Commander Jet, who took a step back in alarm.

"Hi, I—I just wanted to come by to ch—check on you," Gwen stammered, her skin rippling with a feeling almost resembling fear as she met Ania Looren's fierce gaze.

It seemed preposterous to be afraid of the shorter, cool blonde with eyes the color of the Earth's sky. Unable to stop her reaction, Gwen rubbed her arms, not pleased at all when Ania snorted in derision and turned to simply walk away from her, leaving her standing in the door way. When she didn't slam it closed in her face, Gwen took that as a good sign.

"Synar is yours for bonding," Ania said coldly. "If you are here to seek permission, you do not need it. We are officially unmated. I regret ever setting eyes on him."

"To the best of my knowledge, Synar hasn't done anything with any female in the whole two years I've known him, not even when we took the crew to the Sirens of Rylen. The almost comatose Zade even got off the ship then, but Synar didn't. I won't lie and say I wasn't curious why," Gwen said firmly, walking inside the room. "Your existence has sort of answered my questions."

Gwen closed the door behind her, but not completely. She wanted an escape route just in case the obviously still angry female lost it. She didn't trust the look in Ania Looren's tormented eyes. Gwen had seen her share of dangerous creatures, and Ania had that look.

"If you think any of that matters to me, it does not," Ania said coldly.

"I'm not sharing information about Synar's lack of bonding habits to make friends," Gwen assured her, though it wasn't completely true. She'd be glad if someone shared that information with her about a male she was interested in mating.

"It's a waste of breath to lie to an intuitive, Commander. Your words do not match your feelings of possession about Synar," Ania said, not willing to play games.

The female was fabricating, and Ania was sick of deceit.

"Well I wouldn't call what I feel *possession* exactly. It surprises me you're throwing



that word around given what you just found out about yourself,” Gwen said, risking the insult because it sounded more like her than the cautious questioning she had been trying to do. “My feelings are that of a pissed-off—I mean, a disgruntled first mate who has feared for the ship and crew’s safety all damn day while her captain took time out to have a personal meltdown.”

Ania took a full minute to search the Earthling’s energy for any signs of trickery, but all she saw was evidence of Commander Jet’s concerns about the crew, even if some of it was misplaced. She sighed heavily in resignation, ashamed of herself for arguing about Synar.

“I concede your right to be concerned, Commander, and apologize for my comments. Synar could have avoided this by telling me the truth when it happened,” she said.

“Agreed—though I can’t say much more without risking disloyalty,” Gwen continued, keeping her voice businesslike for now. “For the record, Synar may look like a prime male, especially when he smiles, but I prefer the ones who are actually interested in me. There are plenty enough on this ship that I don’t have to chase reluctant ones. I don’t sleep with officers who outrank me anyway.”

Ania laughed harshly and crossed her arms. “Maybe Synar will be more interested in bonding now that our mating contract is officially severed.”

“Doubt it—he considers himself committed to you. And not to brag, but I’m happy with the three males I’m enjoying now,” Gwen said softly, making sure the female heard the sincerity in her voice.

Ania dropped her arms and sank down into her desk chair, ashamed of herself for bringing the matter up again. What did Synar’s bonding habits matter to her? She could barely remember being intimate with him anyway.

And she shouldn’t spar verbally with Commander Jet just to practice her bravado.

“It serves no purpose to argue over Synar’s actions or lack of them. The past is done. I regret my words of anger again,” Ania said, bowing her head and apologizing. “I do not want a male and never have. The worst day of my life was the day I allowed Liam Synar to first touch my hand, because when it wasn’t abhorrent, I allowed him even more. Now I have his demon inside me when I once thought he might fill me with his child. One male in nine hundred years and it’s worked out worse than I ever imagined. I have no illusions left about mating.”

“Nine hundred years. Damn that’s a long time to be single. Yeah, you’re pretty much a walking testimony to why I never let a male matter much to me,” Gwen said with grin. “I can take them or leave them—and I definitely enjoy being the one who decides.”

Ania shook her head. The obtuse female had no idea about Dorian. No idea what he was or what he could do or how addicted she was going to become to the male who was just biding his time before he claimed her.

“We all have illusions to lose, Commander. Prepare yourself. Your reckoning is not far behind mine,” Ania warned.

“So people keep saying,” Gwen said, picking up a stone from the desk where Ania sat. She tossed the stone from hand to hand while she admitted to herself that she admired the Pleiadian’s directness and honesty.

Ania Looren had weathered a big shock today, but she wasn’t lying across her bed weeping about it. The female was upright, functional, and likely planning how she was going to handle things. The computer was obviously humming and working on

something. Gwen really would like to know what.

"I don't trust intuition—mine or anyone else's. I prefer dealing with what is in front of me and letting the future take care of itself," Gwen said.

"May you always keep your positive attitude for the entirety of your life's journey," Ania said quietly, then repeated the blessing in the ancient tongue to give it life. The words felt good on her tongue.

"That almost sounded like sarcasm, but I'm going to pretend you meant it. You're not really going to ask Synar to kill you, are you?" Gwen asked.

"No, that would be redundant, Commander. I just want him to let the rest of me die. This shell you see sitting in the chair is not powered by me, but rather the demon. If I'm blessed one last time, the energy of my current body will join my spirit as it returns to the creators of all," Ania said.

She leaned back in her chair to look up into the face of the female who was leaning a hip against her desk in blatant challenge. A wave of irritation came and Ania had to fight not to make Gwen Jet step away.

"You look pretty much like a normal sentient being to me. What's your *real* problem? Was Synar a bad husband—I mean, *mate*?" Gwen said, correcting her term.

"Bad and good are not terms that mean anything to a Pleiadian or to a Norblade. He said he had to leave and that he would return for me. Two years went by and he didn't keep his word no matter how much I requested his return," Ania explained. "Now that he has finally come, I find out he put a demon into me. What more reason do I need to be disappointed?"

"At least he's kept his mating vows to be only with you. Males of any planet can be stupid, but most can't find it in themselves to be that faithful," Gwen said logically. "I've been in awe of that since he told me right before we came after you."

"You are an Earthling, and bonding means different things when you are not enlightened. Your species has much to learn, but Synar and Dorian are enough to make any logical female want to go live on a planet without males and bonding," Ania said dryly.

Gwen laughed but secretly hoped she never felt that way. She liked bonding too much.

"Maybe Synar has been feeling guilty that you got hurt, or maybe he's a bit fearful of the combination of you and the demon," she said. "Synar would never admit that, but we've fought enough battles together for me to know what fear looks like on his face. I saw that look today when he couldn't just tell me he was the demon master. Now I figure Synar couldn't admit it to me until he'd finally gotten the nerve to admit it to you."

"Yes, but he mated me without disclosing the fact. That trumps other confessions. Until Synar agrees to allow my death, I consider Captain Liam Synar to be my enemy," Ania said, not softening the statement. "I could have brought any manner of harm to everyone I knew. I can only be thankful that a mere three creatures were killed without my awareness."

"I read the report. Frankly, I was too curious not to after I saw Synar call out the demon. Those males were killing and hurting already. They deserved to die. You needn't feel guilty about their deaths," Gwen said firmly.

"Agreed, but I don't like that I had no say in my body being used without my consent to accomplish those results," Ania stated.

“Look, I won’t say you don’t have the right to be upset with Synar, and I didn’t come to fight about what your mate did or didn’t do right. I came to offer my friendship to you, such as it is. There aren’t a lot of females on the ship. Something tells me you and I could be good friends,” Gwen said.

“Commander, I’ve been on more ships than you’ve ever even dreamed about. Maybe no one has told you, but I’m over nine Earth centuries old. Your loyalty to Captain Synar is commendable, but there’s no need to pretend you’re here for me. You’re here for the good of the ship, and I can respect that. Come back and check on me whenever you like. I am hiding nothing. Monitor me all you wish. I promise it won’t change anything I plan to do.”

“What do you intend to do?” Gwen asked boldly, not really expecting an answer, and surprised when she got one.

“Seek my death,” Ania said flatly.

“That’s cowardly,” Gwen said, pacing closer to the door just in case the insult didn’t go over well.

Ania looked at the abrasive young female, saw the grudging respect in her expression, and felt some true compassion coming off her. It had the effect of making Ania search for words to help Gwen Jet understand.

“Imagine that someone took away your rank on the ship and put you down in engineering repairing wires on circuit boards. How would you handle such a loss?” Ania asked.

“I’d do anything it took to get my rank back,” Gwen said, not needing to think about it.

“Then you can maybe understand that I lost eight Earth centuries worth of rank and I intend to do whatever it takes to gain it back,” Ania said. “You’ll just have to accept my word that being a demon host is much worse than a mere demotion in rank.”

“No, I get that,” Gwen said, running an agitated hand through her short hair. “I just don’t get the whole part about wanting to die. Most people want to live so badly that they will do anything to stay alive. I’ve never met someone so determined to do the opposite.”

“Okay, here’s another analogy. Imagine someone took all your memories of being an officer and of being a first mate on this ship,” Ania said, turning back to the computer, which had given her a notification that the search she’d started was almost complete. “Imagine you looked in the mirror and saw a stranger’s face each day.”

“No, I can’t imagine it,” Gwen said sincerely. “But if that were the case, I’d like to think that I’d find a better solution than death.”

“I spent a whole century fighting and killing as I had trained as a warrior to do, and then I spent eight centuries reforming myself, which was much harder work. I will not allow my body to be a conduit for Malachi’s chaos and destruction,” Ania said, becoming resigned to getting no understanding from anyone.

Gwen went to the door, reluctant to leave and yet desirous of escape. Ania was not an easy person, but she was definitely an interesting one. She could certainly understand what Synar saw in her. Her energy was powerful and yet constrained, but it was the female—not the demon—whom Gwen could see was holding the leash tonight.

She found herself wondering what Ania had been like in that first century of her life. Gwen suddenly had a great desire to find out and couldn’t remember the last time she felt so strongly compelled to pursue something. Maybe when she foolishly offered herself to

Zade—that was compelling—stupid, but compelling.

*Yes, and look how wonderfully that had turned out.* And yet everyone mocked her for shunning her intuition?

Gwen shook her head at the injustice, but found herself opening her mouth foolishly again.

“I work out early in the officer’s training area. You’re welcome to join me if you want to come beat up on someone safe,” she offered. “And call me Gwen when it’s just us. I’ll call you Ania, if that’s okay?”

Ania laughed, but not unkindly this time. The young female meant well.

“Even without the demon, you are no match for me—*Gwen*. The warrior in me has slept for more than eight centuries, but today I felt her wake up. It would not bode well for your warrior ego to be bested in combat by a female you consider your inferior in a variety of ways.”

“Hey—I didn’t say you were inferior. Sure, I may have thought it a time or two—I admit that. You remind me of Earth women who use their bodies to advertise personal hygiene and fashion products. You don’t look like a warrior at all,” Gwen said with smile.

“Thank you. That’s the nicest compliment I think I have ever received from another female. I worked hard to become what you see,” Ania said, smiling at Gwen’s shock. “Didn’t you mean your statements as compliments?”

“Helios no,” Gwen said, grinning. “Come kick my ass tomorrow morning and prove your big talk about being a warrior.”

“Not tomorrow,” Ania said firmly, a bit amused at Gwen’s begging for a fight. Young ones always did. “I am trying to regain my spirituality and I have some reading to do. It may take me a few days. I will look for you at the required evening meal if you wish. I have no desire to converse with Synar or Dorian.”

“Want me to hook you up with a bed partner to clear Synar from your brain? Chiang the Greggors are quite talented with his hands, though he says his tongue is magic. He speaks in poetic statements all the time. You’d probably like him,” Gwen teased.

Ania studied her. So Dorian hadn’t made his move on her yet. Odd though, his energy was already invading Gwen’s space. If the female would just use her intuition, she would easily see Dorian’s energy wrapping itself around her body like ethereal hygiene straps. It was obvious to Ania that Dorian was already starting to warn other males away from a female he considered his.

“When Dorian comes to you, Gwen, will you give him a message for me?” Ania asked.

Gwen considered it odd that Ania thought Zade would seek her out for something since he never sought her out for anything, but she nodded to Ania, wanting to seem friendly. “If I see Zade, sure I’ll give him a message for you.”

“Tell him I am glad he finally found a worthy mate,” Ania said quietly.

“Does this mean you’re done being angry at Zade at least?” Gwen asked.

“Not the way you mean. My trust is broken,” Ania explained. “But I would not dishonor his journey by using my anger to hurt him. I tell you this because Dorian is slow to act even when it is for the good of all. I thought it might be helpful to give him a nudge in the right direction.”

“So Zade’s getting married—I mean, mated?” Gwen asked, the thought bothering

her more than it should have.

Ania shrugged. It wasn't her place to interfere in Gwen Jet's destiny. "His spirit has chosen. That doesn't mean the female he chose will accept him."

Gwen laughed. "Zade's been living like a monk too. I can't imagine what kind of female would tempt him from his chastity."

"What do you see in the mirror when you look at yourself?" Ania demanded, laughing for the first time since Synar walked into the inquiry. "Open your eyes Gwen Jet—all of them."

It was highly amusing to imagine the incredible shock ahead for Gwen just because she couldn't see herself as a potential mate for Dorian Zade. And the controlling Earth female would put the spiritual Siren male through great torment before the two of them would reach some peaceful arrangement in their mating. To see Dorian suffering with a female who would not bow to the Siren's call without a fight was almost enough to make Ania wish to remain corporeal. It had been a long time since she had enjoyed revenge of any sort.

"Are you seriously laughing at me?" Gwen asked, frowning. "What amuses you so much?"

"Destiny," Ania said firmly, refusing to give in and say more. "I will look for you tomorrow at the evening meal. Blessings to you, Gwen Jet."

"I don't normally do that formal stuff, but—blessings to you as well, Ania Looren," Gwen said, opening the door.

As the door closed quietly behind Gwen, Ania turned her still smiling face to the computer. Gwen was quite a change from Dorian's other two females, who had lived only to serve his every need. Not that Dorian had taken extreme advantage, but Ania didn't see that the first two had had much of an effect on changing him for the better either.

Her smile of humor faded as soon as she began to read.

## Chapter 8

Almost a week passed in study after Ania had learned her body was hosting a demon. She had spent most of her days in solitary confinement bent over the computer reading. Nothing she had learned had changed her mind about having her remaining life tied to a demon's.

Yet through her studies, Ania had to admit, she had acquired empathy for the entity she hosted, which surprised her. Malachi was as much a slave to Synar's family as she felt she was to the two of them.

Though as a warrior she had fought and subdued them, Ania hadn't understood demons. Like most, her knowledge about had been from stories. What she had learned from her research was that demons were pure energy, full of power, and even the least one could kill an army alone. Even though most retained their corporeal sensibilities, the entities were scarcely better in energy form than they had been as physically incarnated beings.

Malachi and his original kind had been incapable of progressing past their selfishness and desire for control. From what she read of their history, Ania could understand why the creators of all had cursed them. And though Ania doubted Synar had believed her, she had been alive during the conversion of the last of them. She just hadn't known what their conversions had meant any more than the others training alongside her to constrain them.

They could not be killed, but the Khalsa warriors had been trained to subdue them with magic until their masters retrieved them.

The demon Ania carried was one of the oldest. Before the mists had absorbed him, Malachi had been a powerful leader. When his original kind were turned from their constant warring, the creators of all gave the leaders all the power they professed to want.

Unfortunately for them, unlimited power had come with the price of eternity without a corporeal form. No matter what they did, acquired, or achieved, they never got to enjoy the fruits of it. No treasure. No touching their mates. No life outside a host where the best they could do was share the shadow of living.

It had not taken long for a demon to become the willing slave of any person consenting to house them and share their corporeality with them.

Many planets had myths about demons, stories Ania imagined were specific to the hosts and masters who inspired them. She had learned that not all demons could go into hosts and not all demons had masters. Some demons stayed in mist form, perceived only as evil influences floating in the ether. On Earth, hosting a demon within your body was called "being possessed," a term that Ania thought most apt for her situation. She could readily see now why Gwen had mentioned it.

Linked demons—those with masters—had evolved from necessity. Over time some hosts had proven too weak to fully control the darkness of the demon within them. The hosts increasingly took on the power-mad urges of their demons. That was when the creators of all made one other change to the demon's punishing arrangement.

The most powerful—those like Malachi—were given a *demon master*, another controlling entity with a proven record of doing good. The demons were tied to their masters energetically and by a sacred contract. A few centuries before Ania had been born, Malachi had been tied to the Synar family.

Bound demons became spiritually unable to refuse any request from their master other than those that would harm their host bodies or other members in the master's family. The original demon masters were chosen carefully and given years and years of training by spiritual guides who appeared to them individually. Demons were then passed along through the families from parents to children who were trained all their lives for the task.

This had always happened in the Synar family—until Malachi was passed to Liam Synar.

"Malachi is a rather nice name for a demon," Ania mused out loud.

"Run secondary search on *Malachi Demon*?" the computer asked.

"No," Ania said, quickly touching the screen to close the history file she had been reading. "I've read enough for now."

And she had. Her sympathy was already weakening her resolve to do what was best for herself. It had begun the moment she had read that Liam Synar had not been trained to be a master.

Entering the interplanetary academy almost two centuries ago, Liam had trained to be a pilot. His elder brother Conor Synar had been trained by his father to be a demon master. It was all recorded in the History of Malachi, a registered document which was required by Peace Alliance laws to be kept updated. What wasn't yet recorded though was how the untrained Liam had ended up taking the demon on as responsibility instead of his fully trained brother.

The last entry in the file was made by Liam's father the year before she and Liam met. He made no mention at all of Liam in his final entry, nor about plans for passing Malachi on to Conor. There was just a simple update about some fight, no mention of Jonas Tangier, and then the record was silent.

Yet even suspecting that Liam Synar wasn't a willing demon master didn't explain how as a nine-hundred-year-old intuitive Ania had not seen the truth. Had she been so enamored of the Norblade male that she simply had not seen who Liam really was? It was unlike her to be caught so unaware.

"How did you hide the demon's energy from me, Liam?" Ania asked aloud, musing as she had so often during the week about how that could have happened.

Some part of her wanted to ask Liam to tell her his story, but she didn't want to be distracted by having to figure out what was truth and what was illusion in his words. No, she only wanted the unemotional version, and today she had finally learned how to get information directly from the source.

"Will I be talking to the demon? Or talking to myself?" Ania asked the walls. "Both will probably hasten the demise of the rest of my mind."

Most demon hosts, Ania read, were kept in a state of ignorance, other than knowing they were in some kind of normal service to the master, such as a soldier serves in an army. Her planet's laws forbade the use of a corporeal body without the person's permission. As a result, Pleiadians rarely hosted demons. Ania was only the third one in almost a thousand years.

When she pulled the files from her inquiry, Ania read that the commissioner had forced Synar to give his word to inform her as well as to take responsibility for her condition. Pleiadians thought that when a body was near death, the entire spirit should be allowed to transform together. Lingering in illness or near-death was not seen as noble,

and hastening death was considered wise in many circumstances, especially for those who might live at least two thousand years, and in the final five hundred or so suffer the pain of old age. After death, the corporeal bodies were always completely destroyed to ensure all links to the corporeal world were broken.

Yet her dead body still walked, even though it was an abomination. The demon could not and would not let her die. But Ania thought there had to be some exception and figured that only the entity under the contract would know all the details.

"Ania Looren, this is the craziest action you have taken in your long life," she said aloud, surveying her project as one by one she adhered the silver magnetic mirrors to the metal locker by her desk and chair.

The ship's bursar had looked at her like she was exceedingly vain when she asked for twenty mirrors from his stock. Fortunately, no one questioned the ship's officers, which included the peace keeper evidently. The bursar had just handed them over with wide eyes full of questions that he never uttered.

Standing back once the last mirror was in place, Ania shook her head once more at herself. When voluntary death wasn't an option because of a demon in your body, was there a limit on the other insane things you should try? She was already doing what she considered to be her last resort.

"Now let's just hope this works," Ania said to her reflection in the mirrors.

She bent to the computer, read the recommendations again to be sure she had her intent set correctly, and then faced her reflection with no small amount of dread. Her face was familiar to her, but all her instincts were telling her that what she saw in the mirror was no longer right.

She cleared her throat to make sure her voice was as strong as possible.

"Malachi, Demon of Synar, I am your host. I command you to show yourself to me in the mirrors, but do no harm," Ania said, her voice strong and true, even if her bravery was false.

The same blonde with eyes like the sky stared back at Ania in disbelief and she almost laughed at her own reflection. Maybe she was crazy for even trying this. She didn't know whether to be angry or laugh at herself.

"*Malachi, Demon of Synar, I command you to show yourself to me,*" Ania said more firmly, eyes flashing now in irritation.

Ania saw the anger building in the female in the mirror even as she watched. Then suddenly the image wavered and changed into a dark mist that reformed itself into the same male with dark hair and dark clothing that she had for a moment witnessed talking to Synar at her inquiry.

Ania lifted her chin and waited for his image to completely solidify. Then she watched in shock as the male in the mirror bowed his head respectfully to her as if they were normal creatures meeting for the first time. When he lifted his face to her again, to Ania's utter shock he was smiling at her, or at least she assumed it was a smile.

"I have not been called by a host in many, many centuries. After looking through all your memories, I thought the eight hundred years of spiritual study would have totally precluded this outrageous act. It is not often that I am so completely surprised by a host. It must be the courage of that sleeping warrior you warned the delectable Commander Jet about," Malachi said wisely.

"What is your name, demon?" Ania asked, having read that you needed the demon to



acknowledge who he was and give his identity to you.

“Malachi, Demon of Synar, as you well know. And you are—Ania Looren,” he said, being as charming as possible. “How’s that for a formal introduction?”

“I wish to know how to break this link between us. I wish my corporeal body to die. I command you to tell me how to do this,” she said, keeping her voice as hard and uncompromising as possible.

Malachi said nothing about her tone. He was silent for a few moments, and then Ania saw his willingness to answer her. It was like she could read the nuances of his fathomless gaze.

“You can be killed accidentally, like in a natural disaster that I can’t get out of you fast enough to prevent. You could have yourself shot out of a shuttle tube into space. Pretty much any large catastrophe could destroy your body beyond my ability to repair it. It would be simpler to talk Synar into putting me into someone else—preferably masculine,” Malachi said, grinning at his last statement.

“Is there no other way than by accident?” Ania asked, hating the imploring tone of her voice.

“Well, you know now I can’t let you kill yourself. My cursed contract requires me to do what I can to stop you, including complete reanimation. Even if I’m not completely successful at preserving sentience, we can live forever with you in a coma, though that would be dreadfully boring,” he said. “Can we sit?”

Ania wrinkled her forehead and frowned.

“Aren’t you supposed to be some kind of high intellect after all your studies? Never mind—I forget. *You studied spiritual matters*,” Malachi said snidely, sighing when Ania continued to look clueless. “Okay, let’s just go with this information maybe not being in what you read. This rookie demon communication tool you’ve created is still a set of real mirrors, sweet one. You sit. I sit. But we both have to do the same whole body action for this to work,” Malachi said. “I can have different facial movements, but that’s about it.”

Ania couldn’t say why she conceded so readily to the demon’s suggestion, but she simply sat down in her chair as she continued to look at him in wonder. Sitting, she could see only his shoulders and head, but it was still enough to determine that Malachi must have been a very handsome male in his time.

“You look much more normal than I expected,” Ania said at last.

“I save the scary stuff for fighting. Who wants to go around with pointed teeth and talons all the time? I was just as normal as any other terran being once. And why in the raging fires of Helios do we now use that awful Earth English and their names for everything? Wait—am I babbling?” Malachi asked plaintively. “I am, aren’t I?”

To her utter surprise, Ania burst out laughing, then chided herself about laughing with him, or worse laughing *at* a demon. It was too bizarre to accept lightly.

Malachi arched his eyebrows and looked off as if offended.

“My dear host, I hadn’t spoken to anyone in two years until Liam conjured me up at the inquiry. He said two sentences and sent me away again. My social skills are rusty,” he said, defending himself.

“It is not the state of your social skills that amuses me, but rather my own reaction to the sight and sound of you. You are not at all what I anticipated and yet you are what I have known inside myself. Why have you not absorbed my entire essence?” Ania asked.

“We probably want to save that big discussion for another time—unless you want to

command me to answer, in which case I will have to do so,” Malachi informed her.

“So what I read was correct? I can command you?” Ania asked.

Malachi nodded. “Yes. You can try it now if you like,” he offered. “I don’t mind.”

“No,” Ania said. “I have no wish to be another master for you. I just want some truthful information about our situation. You are as much a part of the greater plan of all as I am. I heard parts of what you and Liam discussed at the inquiry. I heard enough to know you don’t want me for a host.”

“Well, don’t sound so disappointed. It’s not like I got to choose and passed you over. There were at least twelve different male bodies left dying after the attack on you and Liam at your mating celebration. He could have chosen any one of those fine young male bodies as a host. When I realized Jonas was no more, I immediately picked this one male who was at least three meters tall with broad shoulders, long hair, and with the kind of bonding equipment that I would have enjoyed helping him use,” Malachi said fiercely. “But no, little Liam ordered me into his dying mate. It was a spontaneous act on his part, but makes perfect sense if you know him well. No trained demon master would have ever put me into an enlightened female. Talk about incompatibility.”

“I regret our union as much as you do, demon. It is why I sought this discussion,” Ania said gently, unable to be angry with anything he said when she couldn’t blame him.

“Well, in our two years without Liam hovering over me, I had a lot of time to study you, Ania Looren. For some reason I haven’t discovered yet, I actually felt sorry for both of us, but don’t expect me to continue doing so. You are a master now and I’m the demon you control. What is your next wish, oh master?” Malachi asked, teasing her just to see what she would do.

Ania smiled, and she could tell her smile surprised him.

“What?” Malachi asked. “My willingness to answer your questions amuses you as well? Are you trying to purposely provoke me? That does not seem a wise action from you. I could torture your body to the point of death if I chose. It might hasten along your goal to shed me.”

“You would only be doing me a kindness to help kill me, demon. Don’t you know what I’m thinking?” Ania asked, answering his question with a question of her own.

“Not when you have us untethered this way,” Malachi replied truthfully, not stopping to think of how much power he was giving away to her in revealing it. “I can catch up later by scanning your memories. There is nothing you can hide from me except temporarily.”

“Who would have thought demons could be so entertaining to verbally spar with? Are you familiar with the Earth stories about djinn granting wishes?” Ania asked.

Whatever reaction she was expecting, it wasn’t full out laughter. She smiled as she waited for Malachi to recover.

“A *genie*? You think of me as a genie in a bottle. How unique! I don’t think I’ve laughed that hard in four or five centuries,” Malachi said when he had calmed.

“Well I conjured you, and you said *what do you wish*, and I just thought. . .never mind,” Ania said, drifting. “Why am I light-headed?”

“Without me, you return to a weakened state in a short period of time. In order to communicate like this, I have removed a large part of my essence from your body,” he answered. “I tried to leave enough so you wouldn’t get too tired without me.”

“How quickly would I die without you?” Ania asked.

Malachi shrugged.

She looked at him, her gaze communicating her disbelief.

“Honestly, I do not know. You react this way because I haven’t healed you. While in your body, I am merely lending you my life force. Almost no one accepts a demon’s full healing because of the price,” he said.

“*You can heal me?* I read nothing about such healing. Explain this,” Ania demanded, feeling a thump of excitement in her chest.

“I can give you some of my life essence for the duration of your incarnation in your physical form. However, you would also take on some of my less pleasant characteristics in the process, which is why almost no one chooses to do it. We would be more alike than siblings in the same family. I especially don’t see a female who has purposely kept herself as beautifully light as you are being very happy about getting black demon hair, dark skin, and glowing red eyes when the rage is upon you. Also, the constant mental link with me might contribute to—well, let’s call it instability,” Malachi said, grinning at Ania’s look of surprise. “Most people just don’t want to be that much in touch with their dark sides.”

Ania laughed, but there was not much humor in her mirth. “I’m already mentally unstable enough to talk to a demon using a bunch of mirrors. And you already know there was a time when I was very much in touch with the darker side of my nature. Tell me Malachi—once healed, would my body still fall into sleep when Synar calls you completely out?”

“No,” Malachi said carefully, starting to realize how seriously his current host was considering a merger with him. “In fact, you would lessen Liam’s power over me because my first loyalty would shift to you. He could still command me to do things, but only if it did no harm to you. Unlike being in a warrior who served him, I could say no if I thought you were at risk.”

“Would you have less power to serve Liam?” Ania asked.

Malachi snorted. “My power is so infinite even I don’t know how much I have. It is the greatest irony of this situation. I doubt I would miss what I would give to you. You are quite the considerate entity to even ask, Ania Looren. Maybe I should be more grateful that you ended up being my first female host.”

“In seeking my own freedom, I have no wish to enslave you further,” Ania said truthfully. “Is there a benefit to you? I command you to be completely honest.”

“If we were permanently linked in your corporeal body, I would share all your corporeal experiences, which is as close as I can ever get to living again. You will eat and drink, and I will feel satisfied. You will bond, and I will feel the pleasure. In male hosts the demon essence enhances their natural aggressive traits. Since you’re a Pleiadian female. . .” Malachi shrugged because the implication was obvious and he didn’t want to risk offending her.

Ania hung her head because she knew what Malachi meant. Malachi would get next to nothing from her lukewarm responses.

“How long can we continue to co-exist as we are?” Ania asked after a moment or two.

“Probably only a few more centuries at your advanced age,” Malachi teased, trying to improve her mood again, pleased at her irritated smirk.

It had been a long time since he’d conversed so normally with a host, much less so

personally with a female. It was an odd sensation to desire positive emotional reactions from Ania Looren, and yet he did.

“Could Liam tie me to my physical form that long?” Ania asked, unable to imagine her body hosting a demon for centuries. She hadn’t even wanted to host one for a day.

“Liam is probably trying to hang onto the illusion that he can go back in time and change what happened. Conor would have had no problems shucking the guilt of your death. He would have put me in a proper host and used me as he saw fit,” Malachi declared.

“That reminds me of my original reason for wanting to talk with you. Tell me the story of how Liam became your master. I read the recorded history, so I know Liam wasn’t trained,” Ania said.

“No—Liam is no slouch as a master, but he wasn’t formally trained. Conor had more natural leadership ability and received the benefit of his father’s demon master training. The brothers look a lot alike, but inside they are two *very* different men. Their father, Bogdan Synar, was a great warrior. We protected the people. Their planet ebbs and flows with political intrigue. Powers rise. Powers fall. Bogdan and I worked well together. He put me into male warriors, each successive one better than the last—well, except for the very last one which I don’t even like thinking about,” Malachi said, his speech drifting as he got lost in remembering.

“What happened that Conor did not inherit you?” Ania asked, pulling him back on track.

“Most evil is not ugly or even as dark as a demon. It hides in plain sight, serving itself. Sometimes evil even looks just as handsome as Conor Synar,” Malachi said.

“Conor liked to physically torture the females he chose for bonding. Then when the torture got boring, he started killing them to feed the natural darkness in himself.”

“If you think that shocks me, it does not. I have tortured and killed as well, only it was to serve war and not my own darkness. The spirit of many creatures holds a capacity for such abuse,” Ania said, sighing at the truth.

Malachi crossed his arms when she did, fighting not to roll his eyes at the wistfulness in her voice.

“Liam was away at academy when Conor’s true nature was revealed to their father. Conor might never have gotten caught if a set of concerned parents hadn’t come looking for their daughter and caught Conor in the act of hurting her. The girl lived and agreed to not shame the whole Synar family if Conor was punished. The older Synar son was to be exiled to a planet where the struggle to survive would keep him occupied in a healthy way for almost half a century.”

“Is he still exiled?” Ania asked.

“I’m not sure, but I think Conor escaped from exile around the time of your unfortunate accident. While he was not present during the attack, his energy was all over the group who did the attacking,” Malachi said. “Jonas was the prime target. It was an example of me not being fast enough to prevent his death.”

“Where is Conor now?” Ania asked.

“Out there somewhere looking for Liam most likely,” Malachi said. “Or more precisely, looking for you now. Your planet has declared you dead and listed you as my host. The *jig is up*, as the Earth vids would say. It was Jonas and Liam who were supposed to get killed when you were hurt. They got Jonas, but you stepped in front of

Liam and saved his life. The weapon took you down instead.”

Ania rose from her seat without thinking. She had saved Liam’s life and not known it. Why had he not told her that?

She paced to the door, but kept in partial view of the mirrors, not knowing what would happen if she stepped completely out of sight.

“So that’s why Liam saved me? Because I saved him first? He chose that over what was best for you and him?” Ania asked, shock over the real story in her voice. She had no memory of almost dying, no memory of stepping in front of Liam, but she could easily imagine doing so because she would do it again today.

Did that mean she still cared for him as a mate does? Ania didn’t like the answer, but it resonated as truth.

“Well, don’t get choked up and weepy over it,” Malachi joked, laughing at Ania’s sentimentality over what was still a selfish act for Liam.

Ania came back and sat when she realized Malachi was pacing because she was.

“This is all very—illuminating,” she said, feeling more tired now that she was stationary.

“I’m older than even you are, Ania Looren. I have learned to take many things in stride. Besides, you probably saved me from a life that would have caused the creators of all to seek the end of both me and Conor Synar. I would have had fun torturing and killing for the most part—it is a rush like no other—but creating chaos can get just as old as everything else. Conor reminds me of myself before I succumbed to the demon mist,” Malachi said.

“Were you cruel to your victims?” Ania asked, not sure why she wanted to know.

Malachi shook his head at her pleading for a truth she did not really want to hear. He didn’t need a full mental connection to know that. Her displeasure was obvious in her frown.

“I was cruel to some because power and control is useless unless there are victims to exercise it on,” Malachi admitted. “Most I killed quickly. I was an impatient sort.”

Ania tried not to be shocked by how blasé the demon was about killing. “If you and I had a more permanent arrangement, would that stop Conor from being able to get hold of you and use your power?”

“No,” Malachi said firmly. “But he would never have all of me for as long as you existed, and you would always have my first loyalty. Of course, until a few days ago, Conor didn’t really know where I was and would have been shocked at where Liam put me. Conor is smart though. I’m sure by now he’s figured it all, since in order to save you I had to kill yet another group of hired killers he sent.”

Ania sat quietly for a few moments, thinking about what Malachi had told her. She was still angry at Liam, but at least she now knew he had reasons for his actions. She could only admire him for trying to keep his brother Conor from gaining control of Malachi.

But he still should have told her the truth.

“What would happen if we were completely merged and I died?” she asked.

“What I gave you will return to me, and all of my energy would go into a new host to start the process over. Why?” Malachi asked, not able to follow her thoughts on that one. She would be still be dead. What would it matter to her what happened to him?

“And if there were no master to command you?” she prompted.

“Impossible. For a demon of my kind, there will always be a master. It would either be the host or someone of Liam’s intent,” Malachi said, his voice weary. “To the best of my knowledge, no linked demon has ever been freed from their eternal contract. There are always rumors of possibilities, but I don’t know how it could happen. Why are you asking all these questions about what happens to me?”

“It is just the way I learn, and I’m trying to understand all the options,” Ania said quietly. “How badly would you hate to be linked to me for my lifetime?”

“You are a strange creature. Didn’t you read the very definition of a demon? I am controlled evil and must be subdued. I do not hate. I am hated,” Malachi said snidely, puzzled when she just looked more concerned. He had never understood females—never.

Living inside one for almost two years still hadn’t helped. Ania Looren was an especially strange one.

“Look, don’t waste any of your precious emotions on feeling compassion for me. So what if we spend a few centuries together while living out your boring Pleiadian life? I’ve had worse hosts. Of course, I’ve had better ones too. Maybe your advanced age is affecting me and I don’t care as much anymore. Besides, I’ve quite enjoyed our conversation today. We can keep doing this mirror trick as far as I’m concerned. It beats not talking to anyone at all,” Malachi told her.

“On that point we are agreed,” Ania said softly. “I would like to think about what you have told me and talk to you again tomorrow.”

Malachi shrugged. “You don’t need my permission. I’m just the demon. Call me.”

“You are a sentient being and I will respect you as one. Thank you for answering my questions, Malachi,” she said, bowing her head until her chin touched her chest. “You may take leave whenever it suits you.”

Instead of bowing to her in return, Malachi rolled his eyes at her niceness, and it was the last thing Ania saw him do.

In a blink, she was staring at her own cool but shocked reflection again.

## Chapter 9

Gwen walked across the mat, reaching a hand down to her opponent who was wiping a trickle of his blood off his lip.

"Shades of Kellnor, Gwen. You caught me off-guard again," he complained. "You're getting faster all the time."

"Are you tired this morning or just getting old, Jurek?" Gwen teased, tugging to pull her former academy trainer to his feet. "I know Norblades live hundreds of years. Are you out of shape or something?"

She had talked Synar into bringing him onboard a year ago when Jurek had contacted her. Jurek said he was tired of being planet bound and wanted adventure. Gwen had laughed at him then, but was often glad since, to have someone around that knew at least a little about her. She had never been close to her family, but it wasn't great living among total strangers all the time either.

"If all my students had been as vicious as you, I would never have gotten bored," Jurek said on a laugh. "And I don't think four centuries is all that old. There are entities on this ship a lot older than me."

Gwen laughed at his protesting.

"Well I don't think four centuries is old either," Ania said, walking into the training room. She bowed her head to Jurek, and then to Gwen. "Four centuries seems very youthful compared to my nine."

Jurek looked at the beautiful female and smiled. This was the new crew member everyone was talking about, the one rumored to have been Captain Synar's mate.

Stepping forward, Jurek picked up her right hand and bowed low over it, touching his forehead to her knuckles in respect. He felt great power inside her rushing around, waiting restlessly to be used. He straightened without commenting. Searching her sky blue gaze he saw only deep serenity.

Figuring they didn't know each other yet, Gwen turned to her old friend. "Jurek, this is Ania Looren, Synar's—"

"—newest crew member," Ania said firmly, interrupting Gwen's introduction. "Synar has asked me to consider staying onboard as peace keeper."

Jurek let go of her hand and bowed his head. "Welcome, Ania Looren. It is my honor to greet you. Did you come to seek warrior training this morning?"

Ania smiled. "Thank you, but no. I was trained as a Khalsa warrior, and such training stays with you forever. I have spent the last eight centuries training rigorously for peace instead. I have not fought in ages."

Jurek smiled and bowed at her words, not questioning her statements, even though he could not really imagine the female in front of him ever being as fierce as the Khalsa warriors were typically held to be.

Gwen laughed, bringing their joint attention to her.

"*Khalsa warrior?*" she exclaimed, her tone indicating her disbelief. "You said you had training, but that's a pretty big brag for a female who looks like you. How about you show me what you can do so I can believe you?"

Jurek put a hand on Gwen's arm, but his face was turned to Ania. "She means no genuine disrespect. It is her Earthling side. Commander Jet struggles to control her tongue."

“Don’t apologize for me, old man,” Gwen jokingly protested as she brushed off Jurek’s touch. “If I can put you on the mat and bloody your mouth, I’d probably send Ania to medical.”

Ania looked at Gwen. Somewhere in the middle of a mostly sleepless night, she had concluded that perhaps Dorian had been right about there being a purpose other than Liam’s will that her physical form had not been allowed to die.

This morning she’d come looking for the aggressive female now glaring at her in challenge, hoping that time in Gwen’s company would help distract her until she could decide how she felt about what she’d learned from Malachi. Instead, Gwen was trying to establish power over her, a habit she had noticed Commander Jet had with pretty much all crew members. It was the same inclination in every unenlightened being Ania had ever met, but Earthlings were especially bad about it. What Dorian found appealing about such volatile females eluded her.

“Come on,” Gwen encouraged. “It will be over when one of us falls to the mat. I promise not to hurt you.”

Ania snorted. The cramp in her stomach came as no surprise to her and this time she knew what it was about. All her warrior memories rose up fast and complete within her mind and she knew Malachi was encouraging her agree to Gwen’s challenge. But the demon had not been able to undo in her nature all the many centuries of work Ania had done to set the warrior part of her aside.

Her higher nature argued against fighting Gwen and won.

“As much as it might temporarily amuse your trainer to see you defeated, fighting you would not be fair. I mean no insult Gwen, but I must refuse,” Ania said softly.

Gwen snorted. “Even if you actually have the potential to defeat me—which I doubt—I would never allow it to happen. *No insult Ania*, but I’d put your way-too-serene-ass on Jurek’s mat within the first minute.”

Ania watched Jurek cover his mouth to hide his amusement and his dismay at his pupil’s insulting words. How challenging a student Gwen must have been for the Norblade trainer. She was full of arrogance and over-confidence. Ania studied Gwen’s body, smiling at her standing there all loose limbed in her unconcerned stance.

Was part of her purpose to help teach Commander Gwen Jet some humility? Ania smiled, enjoying the thought. Maybe fighting the aggressive female warrior would help her decide whether she could learn to live like that again. If she chose to align herself with the demon, Ania imagined there would be no choice but to revisit what she had been and conquer it a second time in her life.

“Very well,” Ania conceded at last, bowing her head to Gwen. “This must be a life lesson for you to learn. I need a moment to prepare. It’s been centuries since I fought anyone.”

Ania walked to the edge of the mat, closed her eyes, and placed her hands palm-to-palm in front of her chest. She had no problem ignoring Gwen’s rolling laughter, but almost laughed herself when Jurek smacked Gwen hard on the arm.

“Be respectful. As a Khalsa warrior, Ania Looren outranks you,” Jurek said firmly.

“Not in this century she doesn’t. Not on this ship either,” Gwen said confidently, walking to stand across from Ania. “And you mean *if* she’s Khalsa, Jurek. She hasn’t convinced me of it yet.”

Gwen didn’t doubt Ania had some warrior training. Most females on planets other



than Earth did. But like many stories in the universe, Gwen was sure the legends of the Khalsa warriors were more myth than reality. It wasn't like Ania was the first person she had ever met claiming to be a Khalsa warrior, nor was she going to be the first overconfident one Gwen had put down on a mat either.

Regardless of what kind of training Ania had received, all fighting techniques had their strengths and weaknesses. Gwen figured she was at least six inches taller and weighed a fourth more than the smaller female in front of her who looked more like she was praying instead of preparing to fight.

Gwen rolled her eyes, making sure neither Ania nor Jurek caught her. She just had to remember not to hurt Ania. If she did, Synar would have her doing kitchen duty for punishment.

Using all her patience, Gwen waited until Ania raised her head and dropped her hands to her sides. She watched with a smile as Ania took several steps forward across the soft mat. Ania had no idea about the solid thumping Gwen planned to deliver. There wouldn't be a perfect hair left in place when she got done.

"I am ready now, Commander. You may attack me at your convenience," Ania said.

Gwen laughed and charged her. She felt a light touch on her arm, then found herself skidding to stop and looking back at Ania who was still standing serenely in the same spot on the mat.

"What the Helios just happened?" Gwen demanded.

"I used your own force to deflect your intent," Ania explained softly. "You may try again when ready."

It was the snooty tone as much as anything that sent Gwen charging back towards Ania, intending to put the snooty mouth on the mat along with her pretty blonde ass. Three seconds after that thought, Gwen was airborne and on her back staring up into sky blue eyes. Too late, she noticed the glint of determination in them.

"The fiercer you become, the more it works against you," Ania said instructionally, reaching down a hand. "No need to concede this quickly. I wish to continue if you do."

Panting, Gwen let herself be pulled to her feet. Ania wasn't even breathing hard.

"Are you using the demon as a power source?" Gwen demanded.

Ania felt Malachi rage within her and laughed at being caught between an aggressive female warrior and more aggressive demon.

"No. I do not need the demon to fight you. I have not even used all my Khalsa skills. Your attacks are too rudimentary to test them fully," Ania said, irritated by the accusation veiled as a question.

A picture of her using demon power appeared in her head and Ania's whole body shook apprehensively in response.

"Malachi says that I am not using his power unless my eyes are glowing red," Ania said firmly, absolutely sure of it after what the demon had shown her. "Trust me—you do not want to ever fight me when his rage rules. It is best in those circumstances to just stay away until it passes."

Gwen thought of Synar's instructions the day they rescued her and shrugged.

"If you're not using the demon, then how the Helios did someone like you put someone like me on the mat so easily?" Gwen demanded.

Ania motioned her forward. "Take your favorite fighting stance."

When Gwen had done so, Ania placed her fingertips under Gwen's hands, let the

power of Gwen's stance flow into them, then twisted gently and down Gwen went again.

Ania bent over her to peer into Gwen's shocked face. "Whatever you bring to me, I give back to you. The harder you fight, the harder you will lose. I spent fifty years learning to do this. It is extremely hard to master but never fails. Do you concede defeat yet?"

"No," Gwen said, struggling up by herself this time. "What if there were multiple attackers? What if you were hurt? What if you lose your cool while you're fighting? No one stays as calm as you do all the time."

"It is very Earthling of you to doubt even when you have been bested several times. Very well, Commander. This time you can strike me. I will allow you one blow," Ania said. "Make me mad enough and I'll show you how it works under emotional stress."

Gwen shook her head, pacing back and forth while she debated.

"The demon will not attack you for striking me. Malachi is enjoying our fight too much. Just do it. You're the one always bragging about how tough you are," Ania goaded, her blue eyes glittering like chips of Martian ice.

Gwen reacted in anger herself, rounding with a kick that had Ania's head snapping back. It was a move that had toppled a great many seasoned male warriors. To Gwen's shock, the small, fragile looking female did not fall. Instead, Ania's head came forward again, blonde hair messed up, but still falling like silk around her shoulders.

The Pleiadian female was so eerily beautiful with her eyes flashing that it made Gwen want to laugh. The urge was followed by the largest flash of intuition Gwen had ever felt, but she didn't act on it fast enough to save herself.

Ania's tongue flicked out to lick the blood from her lip. She felt a ripple in her belly and had the distinct impression Malachi was highly amused at her pain.

"Consider that my gift to you, Commander. That's all I ever allowed an opponent to harm me," Ania said tightly, charging Gwen this time and using her fingertips to spin and flip her yet again.

This time when Gwen realized she was down, she found herself pinned to the mat with three of Ania's fingers on her chest. Ania spoke a single word that vibrated in the air as she pulled her fingers away.

Gwen struggled against what was holding her, shocked when she couldn't get up.

"What did you do to me? I can't move," Gwen said, even more shocked to discover she couldn't do much more than wiggle her fingertips.

Ania stood and walked around Gwen, looking at her lying helpless on the mat. It brought no huge pleasure to defeat the hot-headed warrior, but it was extremely satisfying to see such enormous shock in her questioning gaze.

Did the foolish young female seriously never consider that she would one day come across a foe she could not defeat? Ania sighed at the arrogance. She supposed there had been some number of years when she had thought the same. Perhaps it even helped when you were that young to think yourself invincible.

She well knew that it was more helpful when you learned your life lessons from a friend instead of a foe. Gwen had been lucky never to have encountered a foe like her in a real fight.

"You are held in place by the force of your own power," Ania explained reluctantly. "Cease struggling and in time you will be able to stand. It requires letting go of all your aggression. Although, from the short time I have known you, that could take all day in

your case.”

“If that’s your idea of joke, feel free to brag. You earned it. I’m sorry I underestimated you based on your appearance,” Gwen said, putting sincere apology in her tone. “I don’t think I’ve ever misjudged an opponent as much as I have you.”

Ania stooped near Gwen and laughed. Humility had softened Gwen’s tone, but not defeated her true nature. She found that very appealing.

Speaking a word to release her, Ania freed the power holding Gwen down.

“Who the Helios are you anyway?” Gwen demanded, rolling to her side and pushing to a sitting position.

“She is Khalsa,” Jurek said respectfully, walking over and reaching down to pull Gwen to her feet. “Remember this lesson, Gwen. Consider yourself lucky that Ania Looren was taught how not to harm her opponents.”

Gwen rubbed her butt. She had landed hard both times. “If that beating wasn’t meant to take me out, I can’t imagine what kind of harm she can do when she gets serious. But that’s okay. I don’t really need to know.”

Ania smiled at the compliment, and it soothed her. Gwen’s graceful acceptance of her defeat and the life lesson accompanying it made her feel sympathetic enough to offer a little more advice to her.

“If you think what I just did was impressive, never challenge Dorian to a fight,” Ania advised.

“Zade?” Gwen asked, the question a tiny squeak of genuine disbelief. “I’ve been fighting alongside him for two years. He’s good, but not *that* good. He’s not like you.”

“No, he’s not like me. He is worse. Dorian has taken vows to not harm more than is avoidable,” Ania said quietly. “He could easily defeat me or anyone I’ve faced, Gwen. I’ve not met his equal. It is a blessing to all creatures that Dorian Zade is devoted to peace now.”

Gwen shook her head. “Okay. Don’t challenge Zade to a personal fight—got it. If you’re going to keep destroying all my illusions today, I’m going to need food to handle it. Come eat with me.”

Ania nodded and bowed her head. “It would please me to do so,” she said.

“You want to join us, Jurek?” Gwen asked.

“I had my morning meal earlier. Thank you for inquiring,” he said, smiling at the two females becoming friends. Gwen could use some female mentoring.

Jurek shook his head sadly at all the changes happening recently. Two years of calm and routine on the ship and now all Helios was breaking loose. Even the less intuitive crew members could feel it coming. He could only assume Gwen blocked it or she’d have been pacing in concern like everyone else seemed to be doing.

As they walked to collect their shoes, Jurek turned his attention to the male who had stood transfixed at the door for the duration of the fight. Jurek watched him glance at the females talking and then silently walk away.

There had been no mistaking the surprise on Captain Synar’s face though. Jurek imagined his captain had probably gone off to wonder how his famous Norblade intuition had failed to recognize that a centuries-old mythical warrior had joined his crew.

## Chapter 10

An insistent and loud knocking on his door roused Dorian from his meditation. Fortunately, he'd been on his way back to consciousness anyway. He blinked several times, pulled himself to stand, and walked drowsily to the door. When he opened it, Synar charged by him uninvited.

Dorian glared at him. He hated rudeness, really he did.

"Why didn't you tell me Ania was a Khalsa warrior?" Synar demanded.

"Because she is not one. She left that profession by willful choice. Why did you not ask her about her past when you first met her?" Dorian asked in return. "Surely your intuition, if not your intimacy, informed you of the ancient power she carries within her."

Synar turned his back to Dorian and closed his eyes in frustration. "I knew only that something in her pulled me to remain with her. That's why I mated her. I did not know what it was. You could have warned me she was a warrior."

Dorian shrugged and firmed his mouth into a tight line of resistance. "It was not my concern nor my business to tell either of you how to live. You did not mate the warrior, Liam. You mated an enlightened female who spent eight centuries cultivating peace in her spirit. Besides, I also did not tell Ania that you were a demon master. If anything, I wronged her more."

"You watched while I put a demon into a creature who can kill by speaking words into the air and now I find out she is Khalsa as well. I thought her magic was merely Pleiadian spiritual training, and you didn't correct me," Synar said harshly. "Why did you not stop me from saving her?"

"You put the demon in her before I had any say in the matter. Nothing could have stopped you when you realized Ania had taken a hit to save your life. She was my spiritual teacher for more than a century," Dorian said, walking to his bed and dropping his robe, smiling when Liam turned away from his nudity. "I wanted her to live as much as you did, just for different reasons."

"She pinned Gwen to the mat with a couple of fingers and a single uttered word," Synar bit off. "I knew she could bless or curse with the ancient tongue of the Pleiadians, but not that she was Khalsa."

"Demons always go into warriors," Dorian said reasonably, resigned that his peace today had ended. He stepped into uniform pants and pulled a tunic shirt over his head. "Don't be emotionally naïve, Liam. That's not why you are angry with yourself or me. You're wondering why the Khalsa warrior in Ania never wanted you back even though you desired her fiercely. You and I both know you were never sincerely attracted to the spiritual version of Ania."

"That was because she merely tolerated our bonding," Synar admitted tightly, irritated that Dorian couldn't just once let him vent on what he considered the problem. No, Dorian had to always throw the hardest truth in your face and follow it with a verbal smack.

"Ania cared for you enough to break her vows of chastity, yet you did not honor her for that sacrifice, which was much more brave than anything she'd done as a Khalsa. I knew she did not completely trust you then, and you proved that she was right when you refused to go back for her," Dorian said without judgment. "While I was truly surprised that she conceded to an official mating in the first place, I took her agreement to mean

she really loved you. I took your desire to mean that you at least knew her, even if you did not love her for who she truly was. You are Norblade. Your intuition exceeds that of all other creatures. How was I to know you were simply refusing to see the truth about the female you professed to love.”

“Love is a human word, Dorian. It hardly covers my connection to my mate,” Synar said.

“Yes, love is a human word, but one that sounds exactly right to all ears,” Dorian said harshly. “If you would have faced Ania with the truth right after it all happened, you might now have the relationship you initially sought. Now too much time has passed, and Ania faces another destiny, one you will never share completely, though you never will escape it either.”

“Stop talking in riddles,” Synar said. “If you see what’s coming, tell me so I don’t make another mistake.”

Dorian stopped dressing to look at Synar. “Fine. If you wish to know, I will tell you. The Ania you mated is soon to be no more. Nothing you do can prevent her change. I suggest you say your goodbyes to her quickly. She has found her escape from your control and plans to follow it through.”

“Tell me what she plans,” Synar demanded, panic sickening him. *She could not die. Too much was unsettled. Dorian has to be mistaken.*

“I am not mistaken,” Dorian said firmly, bending to secure his boots. “And I didn’t intrude. Your thoughts are screaming at me, Synar.”

“I don’t care what you do to me, just tell me what Ania plans,” Synar said.

“Not this time,” Dorian replied fiercely, facing off with one of the few males his Siren nature allowed him to genuinely care for. “I sided with you two years ago, and that has not accomplished anything good. Now I honor Ania’s right to make decisions for herself about her own future. She may be a slave body to your demon at the moment, but that was never meant to be her destiny. Her spirit is too large to be constrained in such a manner, especially by her mate.”

“I have to know what she intends. I cannot read her anymore, Dorian,” Synar said sadly. “No matter what she denies, Ania Looren is still my mate.”

Dorian walked to stand over Synar and look down into his face. “No. That is not a truth. Ania is not your mate. But it was not the documents she filed on Pleiades that changed your status with her. You wounded Ania’s spirit when you left her to face her fate alone. She ceased to be yours in any real sense of the word the day you abandoned her.”

“I did not abandon her. I left to keep my brother from knowing she had Malachi in her,” Synar said fiercely. “You know why I left her.”

“You could have taken her with you—with us. We would have protected her. Stop lying to yourself, Liam. You left her because you were avoiding the very demon you put in her,” Dorian replied. “You refuse your legacy.”

“Do not mock me,” Synar yelled.

“Then be her mate as you desire to be,” Dorian yelled back. “But you will have to confront the demon and deal with him as well. Both are now Ania.”

“I cannot touch her without dealing with the demon,” Synar said. “How am I to know what is her now? I still want her, but I want Malachi out of her.”

“You remind me of a male who has put his offspring into a female and doesn’t want

to claim it's his," Dorian said, disgusted.

"I'm not the only one not claiming what's mine," Synar challenged, lacking any other way to get Dorian to see his point.

"Agreed. I'm about to rectify that mistake too," Dorian said ominously. "You might have to find a new first mate if it goes as badly as I have seen."

"Or I might have to find a new spiritual counselor. Maybe even a new friend," Synar said, threatening an action he would never take. Dorian would be welcome on any crew. Synar knew Dorian travelled with him only out of friendship.

"Any alternative is preferable to what it has been like to do nothing but wait for you to finally decide to do what is right," Dorian said firmly.

"Do you think any of this is a simple for me?" Synar demanded.

"No, but you suffer from doing nothing. Ania's spirit is now freed by the truth and longs to take back control of her life. All the demons in existence could not keep her from her destiny, nor would they want to," Dorian said, gesturing widely with his arms. "We are done with this discussion, Liam. I will advise you no more until you act correctly towards Ania Looren."

Dorian watched Liam charge past him and heard the slam of his door shortly after.

Heaving a sigh, Dorian looked at his fully dressed body and wondered where in Helios he intended to go. He wasn't reporting for duty for another four hours. He would still be happily nude if it weren't for his fight with Synar.

His empathy for Synar was growing though. Females were as much trouble as they were a source of pleasure. However, he had avoided his fate long enough. Synar was right about that. Perhaps it was time to take his first step to straightening his own path.

Dorian walked to the ship's computer port on his wall and touched the screen.

"How may I assist you, Lieutenant Zade?" the computer asked.

"Report present location of Commander Jet," Dorian demanded.

"Commander Gwen Jet is in the dining hall," the computer reported.

Dorian removed his hand from the screen and walked determinedly to the door.

## Chapter 11

Sleep wouldn't come to Ania no matter what she did. She hadn't been able to bring herself to call out Malachi again when she was still processing what he'd already told her. Malachi was still not releasing the memories to her, but it was not difficult for Ania to imagine a shocked Liam catching her dying body in his arms.

What would she have done if their situations were reversed?

Seeking her death had seemed the only answer several days ago, but now Ania wasn't sure anymore. If she sought her death, then what good would be served? Hers? Would Malachi be better off in a person who might not have her value for all life?

What if Dorian was right? What if there really was some higher reason that Liam had acted to save her? Did she have the right to decline her responsibility to the demon? Wouldn't that make her as bad as Liam?

Sleep was obviously not coming while all the questions swirled inside her. Meditation was still not possible either. Ania dressed in loose clothing and made her way to the training room. Maybe if she spent some time exercising, her body at least would find some peace.

Late as it was, Ania hadn't expected to run into anyone or to have to share the room with another sleepless spirit. Yet the light was on when she got there. She hesitated for a bit, but decided to see who it was. Perhaps the person was close to finishing, she thought.

Maybe she'd take a walk while she waited.

Anything was better than going back to her tiny room to stare at the walls.

Pushing open the door, Ania first saw only the sweat glistening along the muscles of his broad shoulders and arms. His back facing the door, Synar was hooked to the weight machine, arms straining with the effort to lift all the weight he had chosen. The room normally smelled of straining muscles, but the familiar scent of this specific body had Ania crossing the room to him. It had been a long time since she'd been comforted by a male scent that wrapped around her like a bed cover.

"I couldn't sleep," Ania said, trying to make casual conversation. "What's your reason for being here so late?"

"You know I'm not a morning person when it comes to physical activity," Synar said, never breaking his count as he pulled the heavy weights along their path. "I come here when I know everyone else is asleep. Second shift crew is on duty. It's the perfect time to be alone."

"Do you wish me to leave?" Ania asked.

"You already know the answer to that, and I'm not just talking about the training room," Synar said, his voice straining with the effort of what he was doing as much as what he was saying.

"I didn't come to debate my existence. I came to find some physical peace in my body so I can sleep. Do you care if I use the mat?" Ania asked.

Synar pulled a couple more times before he answered. "If I won't distract you, go ahead."

"Distractions never bother me," Ania said. "Even if they did, I would consider it good practice to ignore you. We're going to be doing that a lot until I am gone."

Synar snorted, then met her gaze directly. "I'm starting to think you did a good job ignoring me even when we were together. Why did you never tell me you were a

warrior?”

“It never came up, and you never asked. You never even let me tell you how old I was, much less talk about my past. Instead you convinced me nothing I did before we met mattered,” Ania said. “Did you speak an untruth?”

“No. I didn’t ask because I always knew how old you were. If you were Norblade, you’d probably still be older because I like seasoned females. I never had a problem with your age. I accepted long before we mated that you’d probably outlive me,” Synar said.

“It is the way of my kind. It is not something a Pleiadian chooses. We believe long life spans are the gifts of the creators. The more enlightened the species, the longer they seem to live. This has not been proven, but my species has long thought it to be the case,” Ania said. “So how did you find out about my age?”

“I’m the captain of an Alliance rescue ship. I looked up your records when you came onboard the first time. Your official file never said you were a warrior, just mentioned you’d had the standard defense training. It for sure never mentioned you were a Khalsa, which most think are as mythical as demon masters. Why was that missing from your file?”

“When I took my vows to give up being a Khalsa after two centuries of spiritual training, I asked to have my warrior record stricken from my biography so that it would never be weighed against my work for peace. I had worked very hard in those first two centuries of spiritual training to put all memories of the Khalsa away,” Ania explained. “I would have told you if you had asked more questions about my life. I remember it all now only because your demon has given me no choice. He sends me the Khalsa memories as he sees fit.”

“Malachi has his own agendas and it’s hard to know what they are at times. I happened to be passing the training room when you were fighting with Gwen. Being a Khalsa seems like a pretty important thing not to tell a mate,” Synar said tightly, switching his weights to the other arm.

“You mean important in the same way as neglecting to tell me for two years that you put your family’s hereditary demon in me is important?” Ania challenged.

Synar stopped pulling on the weights to answer. “Yes. I guess that’s what I meant. I have truly learned not telling you was a bad decision. Since I can’t change the past, all I can do is worry about living with the consequences.”

“Tell me, Liam—are you more worried about my angry reaction to walking around knowing I’m hosting Malachi? Or just worried that you put a demon into a Khalsa warrior?” Ania demanded sharply.

“Both are equally bad,” Synar said flatly, pulling the weights again. “Demons are always put into warriors, but never into someone like you by a simple mistake of not knowing. I never meant to put a demon into an advanced warrior.”

“Would you have let my body die if you had known I was Khalsa?” Ania asked.

“I don’t know what I would have done now. You stepped between me and my certain death. For two years I wondered why, and now I know. You did what any warrior would have done. You sacrificed yourself,” Synar said. “It wasn’t just me you saved though. You kept my brother Conor from gaining control of Malachi. The demon would have sought him out if I had died. I would thank you, but I’m too full of shock still. I mated someone very different than I thought I was mating.”

“I could say that as well,” Ania replied. “Norblade fidelity is legendary. I probably



married the only disloyal Norblade that ever walked.”

The weights hit hard, and their clanging echoed in the room. The machine issued a warning to Synar, who resumed his workout as calmly as he could with an infuriating female torturing him with her words.

“I was not disloyal. I made a decision that might not have been the best one, but it seemed to be the only reasonable one at the time. I appreciate your sacrifice for whatever reason you saved me,” Synar said resentfully.

“I was no longer Khalsa when we mated. I was exactly the female you met. I was what I had made of myself, just a normal entity living a life devoted to peace,” Ania said quietly.

“You know it doesn’t work like that. Once a warrior—always a warrior,” Synar said, his voice hard with the truth.

“You were always skeptical of a person’s ability to control their life,” Ania said. “One would think you were a fatalist.”

“Just a realist, that’s all. It does not bother me to discover you are a warrior. It bothers me to know you never intended to tell me. It changes how I view putting Malachi in you. It changes how I see your actions in saving me. It changes a lot that might have made taking you with me a good idea two years ago if I had known,” Synar said fiercely, hearing his voice grow louder and more angry with every statement.

“So that’s what this is,” Ania said sadly. “You feel guilty for making the wrong decision. Instead of just admitting you made an error, you would rather shift the blame for your mistake to me for keeping a secret. Face it, Synar—you wouldn’t have believed it back then even if I had shared that I was Khalsa.”

She glared at him. His jaw was clenched. His mouth was tight. Resistance was in every tiny nuance of his body. His mind would have never been able to shrug off that much body pain to see the truth of how much he had meant to her—still meant to her, though Ania was working hard to set her caring aside.

How could any female continue to care for a male so determined to excuse himself from all his wrong actions?

Ania sighed with resignation. It hurt her to think Liam actually believed the Khalsa in her had caused her to save him. Was he really so blind to her feelings?

“I realize that I am not the most passionate female to ever exist, and never have forgotten your hints about always finding me lacking in heat when I shared your bed,” Ania said as stoically as she could. “But I insist now that you stop creating false reasons to assuage your guilty conscience for abandoning me. I gave up eight hundred years of vows to let you into my body and my life, Liam Synar. Think about the significance of that the next time you start asking yourself questions about why I might have done what I did. Maybe in a couple centuries you’ll be mature enough to see the truth. I didn’t save you because I was a warrior.”

“You know I honor all the sacrifices you have made for me, whatever your reasons,” Synar said roughly, meaning it more sincerely than Ania was capable of believing in her current agitated state.

“Honor them? You don’t even understand them. Agreeing to be your mate for life was a much bigger sacrifice for me than any single instance of my death would ever have been. I was going to share centuries of my existence at your side instead of pursuing what I wanted. Why was I willing to change all I was for you? I’ll tell you why—because I

thought you were my destiny,” Ania said.

“*I am your destiny*,” Synar said fiercely, hope lighting all kinds of fires inside him. “And you are mine.”

“Not if you think it was the Khalsa in me that stepped in front of you. I was never that kind of warrior. I did not use my training for good. Malachi will not show me the day of my almost death, but I don’t need that memory to know which part of me would have sacrificed itself to save you,” Ania said sadly. “We are done with this conversation.”

Ania made herself walk away from him before she gave in to her sudden urge to whisper words into the air to render Synar unable to continue pulling on weights.

His continued refusal to own his mistakes made her angry. She didn’t like being angry. Anger was a state of being that she didn’t visit often because she didn’t handle it well. There was a time when creatures around her got hurt or died when she got this upset.

Synar’s weights hit too hard again, and again the machine issued the standard warning. Anger rolled off him as well. Ania ignored it.

“Walking away doesn’t mean the conversation is over. You and Dorian both have a tendency to want to get to utter the last word in every argument,” Synar said fiercely.

“Probably because we both get tired of explaining everything to unenlightened children who should be confined to their own planets until they mature,” Ania said just as fiercely.

She grabbed a wooden bo staff and marched to the center of the mat. She liked the feel of wood in her hands. It was one resource from Earth that she enjoyed very much. Gwen had shown her a training exercise she did using the fighting stick. Ania copied it now, needing the physical release of following the staff’s slicing through the air.

As Ania moved through stance after stance, she focused on her body and made herself forget the male watching her.

Let him watch, she decided. It changed nothing. She would no longer care about his thoughts. Synar’s unrepentant attitude was making her even more determined to liberate herself from his control.

She moved through the exercises, repeating the motions as she remembered them, improvising the ones she had forgotten. So what if her gaze drifted occasionally to the male who studied her discreetly? It was always wise to keep an eye on even the friendliest of enemies.

Synar watched Ania move through Gwen’s warm-up exercises with the grace of a Zorgonian dancer. Each movement Ania made was smoother than the last, and he could tell she was making progress at removing him from her range of awareness.

He could also feel Ania building walls around her thoughts to shut him out of reading her. He let go of the weights with one last massive yank and drop. His muscles were protesting, but no louder than the rest of him.

Watching her now, the truth caught up with him as his body clamored to go to her. Demon or not, he still wanted Ania Looren with the same raging need he had felt the first time—and just as desperately after all the time they’d been apart.

Shades of Kellnor, why couldn’t he have realized this was going to happen two years ago?

Ania stopped when she felt Synar’s thoughts.

“You didn’t figure it out because you only allowed yourself to think of one option,

which was staying away,” she said firmly. “You accuse me of hiding truths, but you lied about coming back for me. That’s why I filed the mating dissolution form. I no longer wish to be at the mercy of your indecisive mind about me that changes like the shifting winds of Terlon.”

Synar walked to the wall, picked out a bo staff matching hers, and walked to the mat.

“Fine. You think you know my intentions and true feelings. If you don’t want me to try to win you back, make me leave you alone,” Synar said. “I will eventually figure out how to appease you, Ania. Maybe I do deserve some of your wrath, but I warn you I’m not going down as easily as Gwen. If you defeat me fairly, I’ll apologize. If I win, you must agree to forgive me.”

“You’ll never win against me, Synar,” Ania said. “Have you ever won a fight with Dorian?”

“Dorian isn’t here, and he isn’t you,” Synar said sharply, smiling at her confidence and getting excited at the prospect of getting his hands on her. “He says I’m getting closer to defeating him. He says I’m faster than I used to be. After centuries of not fighting, you’re way out of practice. I figure that gives me a fair chance of winning against you.”

Ania snorted. “How can you talk about being fair? You tricked me into your bed the first time with promises of affection and declarations of need that would have wooed any female.”

When Synar smiled wickedly at her confession, her body shivered. A frisson of awareness zipped along her nerve endings, and what followed was so unfamiliar Ania almost didn’t recognize how aroused she suddenly was. The feeling was so disconcerting that it felt like illness to her.

“I remember the first time like it happened only a moment ago. I was just as desperate for you then as I am now,” Synar said, walking closer. “I still want you the same way I always have.”

Her life force pushed and pressed against every cell until Ania spun her bo staff with a deadly accuracy. It was a reminder to her body not to betray her to this male and a reminder to him that she wasn’t receptive to his words.

“Speak with Dorian. He can help you get some relief,” Ania said, lifting her chin.

“So can you,” Synar said, smiling again.

Ania narrowed her eyes at Synar’s smile. Were there any sacred contract rules about punishing a male for lacking faith in his relationship to you? If she tried to kill Synar, Malachi would stop her. He had said as much. But maybe the demon would let her beat Synar up a little. The thought of making Synar suffer as she had for two years was far more appealing than it should have been.

“Okay, Synar. Let’s fight. In the interest of being fair to someone as young and unskilled as you are, I will even grant you one concession,” Ania said.

“I accept. My concession is that you are to defeat me with only your own agility and strength, not with magic or using the demon,” Synar said. “No pinning me to the mat like you did Gwen.”

“Agreed,” Ania said easily, uncaring of what he asked of her when her blood was starting to hum and her mind was seeking revenge. If there was any kind of chance to wipe the condescension from his smile, she was taking it.

“I will even allow you one strike if you want. It is what I allowed Gwen,” Ania

informed him.

Synar laughed and shook his head at her over-confidence. "I could never purposely strike you, nor allow you to strike me on or off this mat. How about you allow me one kiss, one embrace instead? I know that would be as heinous and insulting to you as any blow. I haven't held a female in a long time and I want you more than I realized I would after two years. My body recognizes you Ania. It already prepares."

"When you left me, Synar, you gave up your bonding rights. That means you are never touching me intimately again," Ania said calmly, tossing the staff from hand to hand. "You are welcome to try, but I wouldn't recommend it. I haven't heard a single word of apology or regret cross your lips."

Her accusation lit up every cell within him. He had assumed she had read him enough to know his regret. He never expected Ania would need the words.

"A hundred apologies will never undo my wrong. I never wanted to leave you, but once I was gone, I was afraid to return as well. I guess to a female that is maybe a greater wrong than forcing the Demon of Synar to save your life," Synar said.

"You abandoned me and broke your word, only returning under duress, not by choice. Regret insincerely offered—and apology now firmly rejected," Ania answered. "Want to try another? Maybe try one with some genuine remorse this time? Or shall we just get to the part of this debate where I make you sorry you challenged me?"

She surprised him with a sweep of her staff, and Synar barely managed to block it. Swinging out her staff in the other direction, Ania used it to trip Synar until he fell solidly on the mat.

Not trusting his reflexes, Ania kept her distance as she paced.

"I thought you said you were getting faster. Dorian must be slipping if he thinks that's fast," Ania said, walking a short distance away as Synar climbed to his feet.

Synar looked at her and took his stance again. His body was already struggling with the first wave of his arousal. He was going to send it into Ania first chance he got his hands on her again.

And the female he had mated was damn well going to give her pleasure to him.

Malachi be damned now. They could all be damned for all he cared.

His worries about Malachi faded as he drew in the scent of her excitement once more. Whether it was for him or their fight, Synar didn't care. Bonding with Ania again was his primary goal. If he found out later the demon was using him and Ania for his own sick purposes, he'd make sure Malachi suffered. Right now, he didn't care if the whole crew showed up so long as he got to touch her once more.

Many things had become clearer since he had watched her fight Gwen. One of the biggest was that he had always sensed something fierce inside Ania fighting for freedom. Synar understood now that he had instinctively mated her to have the right to become the one who helped release it.

Now he planned to spend the rest of his days enjoying his warrior wife—as soon as she forgave him. Ania could file mating dissolution paperwork with every planet in the Alliance, Synar decided. Nothing she did was going to change the fact that she was his mate.

Dorian was right. He truly made a mistake leaving her alone for so long, but Ania was just going to have get over her anger because Synar couldn't undo the past. All he could do was offer Ania a future where he tried to do better. The symbol of it was waiting

for their embrace.

She glared at him as they circled each other, and Synar saw hurt as well as anger in her gaze. Only desperation made him able to ignore her pain.

Maybe he didn't deserve a second chance, but he didn't intend to watch his mate give herself to another male. It was simply not going to happen. If he'd been a Siren like Dorian, he'd have already bound Ania to him so strongly that even Malachi's control over her would be minimal.

Norblade males had no such abilities to claim mates. They had to win their mate's loyalty the old-fashioned way. Since faithfulness and ardent affection weren't going to work on a female he'd sorely disappointed for his own lack of those things, Synar was running out of good options and moving quickly into desperate acts to keep her no matter what the cost.

"Are you afraid to attack me?" Synar demanded, watching her circle him slowly.

"Does Dorian attack you?" Ania asked.

"No, but you're not Dorian," Synar answered. "Your anger is so great, I can practically touch it. Attack me and release it."

"No. Attacking you would be a waste of energy. I do not waste energy. Who in the Helios do you think trained Dorian to fight?" Ania asked. "You weren't even born when I trained him."

"Are we back to the age difference again?" Synar sighed in frustration, his breathing ragged with caged emotion threatening to break free to get to her. "Ania—I want you in my arms again, in my bed again. I want another chance with you. I'm sorry I left you alone. Give me a task of repentance. Anything. Name the cost and I will pay it."

"*Task of repentance?* Do you think what we had was a simple argument among normal mates? Well, it wasn't a simple argument and you are no longer my mate, Liam Synar," Ania said.

Her words were cut off when Synar charged her, lifting her off the mat. Their bo staffs both went flying outside the mat boundaries, the wooden sounds of them hitting the floor echoing in the room.

Synar's arms held hers, pinning them to her sides, his embrace as unbreakable as he could possibly make it. She could have broken free, but it weakened her resolve to feel the desperation in Liam. On his face, Ania saw his intention to get physical with her, but when she braced herself for his intimate attack, his eyes gentled.

"Ania," Synar whispered, her name a prayer as it left his mouth. "I never want you to fear me. I don't want to trick you into anything this time either."

He felt all her emotions rippling through him unchecked. Her resistance to him had been expected, but her fear of him cut like a knife through his determination.

Synar found he couldn't force her, couldn't conquer the warrior after all. He could only woo the female inside and hope she eventually opened her spirit to him again.

Leaning his forehead against hers, Synar whispered the only words he had left. "I beg you to forgive me for the pain I have caused you. There can be no one else. There is only you. Please give me another chance."

Synar's arms loosened as he let Ania slide to the mat, his body shaking against hers at the bliss it was to hold her again, to feel her physically and emotionally. But he needed something to stop the madness of his desire, something to make up for the lonely time without her.

So even though Synar knew full well that Ania didn't like kissing, his mouth desperately sought hers anyway, becoming feverish and untamed as his tongue conquered hers. He felt her quiver in his arms, her whole body a vibration.

Raging fires of Helios, he'd missed her, Synar thought. And he didn't remember Ania ever trembling with need in his arms before. It had always been his need that drove them.

"I'm sorry for kissing you but I needed the contact, the intimacy. Do what you will to me, but first—please accept this," Synar said, kissing her again with more raw need than the first time.

He lifted her hips high against him until her legs had no choice but to wrap around his hips. Her resistance to doing so bothered the mated male in him, but Synar couldn't seem to hold back his actions to give her more time.

"You are the only one I want to share my vibrations with in this life or any other. Nothing has changed that. I don't think anything ever will change that. I have never spoken a more profound truth," Synar said roughly, feeling her groan echo inside him.

Ania's arms tightened on him as last. He felt her hands exploring his shoulders with a relief so painful Synar weaved trying to keep them upright.

When his mouth closed over hers again, the vibration of his devotion to her went out of him, not just through their mouths, but through every place they touched. Synar weaved again as Ania drew in a ragged breath and shattered in his arms, returning the vibration of her pleasure to him until he felt drunk.

Falling to his knees with her wrapped around him, Synar was a truly penitent male at last. He saw himself for the fool he had been. He had saved her to be with her. He had saved her because he cared for her. He had saved her to share this with her.

And he at last believed that Ania had saved him for the same reason. The truth was in the tightness of her arms around him.

There really would never be anyone else.

"I can still feel your anger, and I understand it. What must I do to redeem myself to you?" Synar asked, hearing true regret in his tone and hoping his mate did too.

Ashamed and shocked at her reaction which had held nothing back, Ania pushed against Synar's shoulders until he allowed her to slip off him. She weaved as she sought to make her legs hold her up without his support.

"Come with me to my room. Put the past behind us. I will do anything you ask to make it work this time," Synar said.

"And then what happens when another test comes along? Malachi is still in me. You'll remember that tomorrow when your mind clears of bonding lust. Will you still want me then?" Ania asked.

Synar looked at her, unable to promise, but willing to risk finding out the truth.

"What about what we just shared?" Synar asked.

"I lived eight hundred years without sharing myself with any male," Ania said, tired of trying to spare Synar's feelings. "I followed those kind of instincts only once in my life, and look what happened. The male I bonded with abandoned me when I needed him most."

Synar climbed to his feet, resigned that little true progress had been made by their fight. "Do you have so little faith in me now? No—don't bother answering. I can feel your disbelief. Did what we just shared really mean so little to you?"

“No—I actually enjoyed it for once. I’m even thinking I should be able to sleep now. I thank you for that,” Ania said numbly, walking to retrieve their staffs. “If I ever have the need for relief again, I’ll keep your offer in mind.”

Ania tossed his staff to him, reluctantly admiring the way Synar caught it while still holding her gaze.

“You can treat this event as casually as you want, but no amount of ignoring it will make you less my mate,” Synar told her.

“Stop pressing for what I can’t give you,” Ania ordered, walking past Synar to return her staff to the wall. “Other females can provide you with physical release. The only real use I am to you is as a host body to your demon. For whatever reason he has left my mind intact, I am convinced it was not to concede my free will to someone who despises us both.”

“The Demon of Synar cannot have you either,” Synar said fiercely. “Malachi’s presence won’t keep me from you again.”

“You’re two years too late with that noble sentiment,” Ania said, not bothering to shield her hurt from him.

“This is not over, Ania,” Synar called out, the words bouncing off her still angry retreating back.

“Of course not—everything changes,” he heard her say, and had no choice but to accept it as a profound truth.

Synar stood where Ania had left him and closed his eyes, focusing on his thoughts and sending them following her down the halls of the ship as she made her way back to her quarters.

*Malachi—take care of her, Synar ordered.*

*What do you think I’ve been doing these last couple of years? And it was not just because you ordered it. Ania Looren has already begun to earn my respect, Malachi answered sharply. When are you going to care about doing the right things as much as she does, Liam? It’s quite admirable if you are a creature who seeks the good of all. I don’t, but she’s quite determined. You at least picked a worthy female for me.*

*I did not pick her for you. She carries you out of necessity, not choice. Respect me or not demon, you will always do as I ask where your host is concerned, Synar replied, his mind in turmoil over the demon’s stinging words.*

What was he missing? What could Ania need from him that he wouldn’t give her? Nothing, Synar decided, nothing except her death.

*Ania Looren is my mate. She may not accept it yet, but I command you to do so, Synar sent, his thoughts going to Malachi as uncompromising as his spoken declarations to Ania.*

*Well, I’m glad you finally got your love life sorted out at least. I had just about given up hope that you’d ever fully appreciate what an interesting female you chose, Malachi sent.*

*Just attend to Ania’s needs and don’t concern yourself about me. I tried not to fight her, but she insisted. I don’t want Ania suffering for what we did tonight, Synar sent, his anger reduced to concern.*

*Are you referring to the fight or to the bonding attempt afterwards? I tried to tell you before that I was forbidden to interfere in a host’s intimacy choices. You really need to*

*learn to listen more, Malachi sent.*

*If Ania's life were not at risk, I would put you in the amulet for the rest of my existence, Synar sent, hating that Malachi even knew what they had done.*

*There's no need to get mad at me for offering you information. I am the Demon of Synar, and I will honor my sacred contract to you and your family. I swear by the creators, you can trust me to care for your mate, Malachi sent, his voice grave as it always was when he felt compelled to promise anything by the beings that had cursed him.*

*If you truly do that, then you will have at last earned my gratitude, Synar returned.*

When Malachi's energy no longer reached out to him, Synar walked to the wall and hung up his staff. He turned out the lights and headed to his bed alone.

At least tonight he had the memory of Ania shattering in bliss with him to keep him company. He couldn't remember his formally cool mate ever reacting so strongly to his bonding vibrations before.

If that's what came with the warrior, Synar decided, then he was glad Malachi was forcing it back on her. He had felt honest desire in her for him and now wondered how much more was waiting.

Maybe Ania's mating heat had been sleeping along with the warrior. If so, Synar looked forward to waking it up.

The single vibration they had shared tonight had just been a small reminder of what once had been a sacred promise between them. He was not going to stop until his mate was back in his arms and his bed where she belonged.

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## EXCERPT: Chapter One from *The Demon Master's Wife* (Book Two)

"So who won the fight?" Gwen asked, pushing open the door to the training room.

"It was not a true competition. What is more important is that Synar surprised me and I let him get by with it," Ania said with a frown. "That's what should matter to you from a warrior perspective."

"Much of what Synar does these days surprises me. Before you got here, he was the most stoic male I had ever met. Now he's as anxiety ridden as any other creature. When I reported to him last, he actually yelled at me. So quit stalling and tell me who won the fight," Gwen demanded on a laugh, removing her shoes and tucking them under the bench. "Did you beat him as badly as you do me? And can I watch next time?"

"Your competitive nature screams 'Earthling' to everyone who gets to know you," Ania chastised, even though she also paused to think about Gwen's question as she slipped off her own shoes.

Truthfully, she hadn't really thought of what happened as her losing to Synar or either of them winning. She didn't even think of fighting Synar the way she thought of fighting other people. Probably because Liam Synar was the first opponent of any sort she'd conceded control to in her entire life. But that was a totally private matter for her to contemplate, not one to discuss with Synar, much less Gwen.

"Winning is relative, but by your standards I would say I did. My body never hit the mat," Ania said with a shrug.

Gwen snorted, examining the smaller female's skinny frame and lack of roundness with a trained warrior's eye.

"Synar is not all that tall for a male, but you're at least five inches shorter than him. I know because I'm as tall as he is. Are you telling me Synar kissed you and your feet never left the mat?"

Remembering his fierce embrace and her legs wrapped tightly around him, Ania sighed. "I concede your point. Perhaps the fight ended in a draw."

"Too bad for you both that it didn't end in one of your beds," Gwen teased, laughing at her own joke. "If it makes you feel any better, right now I'm running from Zade. He keeps asking to speak to me privately. My instinct is to keep away from him, so that's what I've been doing. You want to help me out by telling me what's going on?"

"Why should I tell you what I see intuitively when you are able to see for yourself? If you are concerned, use your intuition and discover it," Ania ordered.

Gwen ran a hand through her hair. "Not going to happen—I'm not sure I want to even know. Zade and I—*Shades of Kellnor*—we have a history, okay? Or at least we could have had one. I sort of threw myself at him when I first met him. I hadn't felt that way about a male before and haven't felt like that for another since. He refused me very politely which has worked out fine. Now I think he wants to break the news to me about the mating thing you mentioned. I'm just not up for all that awkward stuff," Gwen protested.

Ania studied Gwen, blinking in disbelief. Dorian was finally chasing and Gwen was now running. They had traded places, but the end result remained their continued avoidance of involvement with each other.

“You really need to learn to use your intuition in better ways, Gwen. It rules you anyway. I suggest you concede to it as soon as possible,” Ania advised.

“Really? Well, what’s so great about knowing the future? Zade can just go do what he needs to do. Let him mate someone. He doesn’t owe me any explanations. I admit I felt a twinge when you first mentioned it, but no male is worth dwelling on forever, no matter how nice they look,” Gwen announced.

Ania rose and took a deep breath, wrestling with the decision of telling Gwen or not telling Gwen about Dorian’s intentions towards her. When a creature rejected their intuition so adamantly, it had always seemed wrong to her to force them to epiphanies they did not seek on their own.

Besides, Ania thought, who was she to put herself in the middle of Dorian and his mate? Deciding to let it happen as it would, Ania only smiled and gestured at the mat.

“Let’s go. I’m feeling lucky today,” Gwen told her, looking down on the top of the smaller female’s head.

“Good for you. I’m feeling like you’re going to be on the mat in the first two minutes again,” Ania teased back. “Unless you’ve magically learned some patience since last time.”

“Very funny,” Gwen said, taking her stance.

An hour later her top was drenched in sweat while Ania was completely dry still. And it wasn’t because Pleiadian females didn’t sweat. Ania just didn’t sweat when fighting with her. From her hated position of being flat on the mat, Gwen sighed hard and promised herself she would change that in time.

Reaching down, Ania pulled her determined pupil to her feet. “You did better today,” she informed her, grinning when Gwen rolled her eyes.

“How many years did you say it took you to master your moves?” Gwen demanded.

“At least fifty Earth years,” Ania said.

“No wonder Earthlings don’t become Khalsas. None of them live long enough. My father says members of his family live on average around three hundred years. With my genetic heritage, I could die tomorrow or live a few centuries. I’ll keep training though if you’ll keep teaching me,” Gwen said.

Ania bowed her head to Gwen respectfully, pleased when her new pupil returned the gesture to her naturally. There were some things in Gwen that were changing rapidly. Then there were others that would probably never change, Ania decided, smiling about several of them.

“Let me phrase my answer in your favorite terms. I have no problem kicking your ass every day, though fighting you so often makes me want to engage Dorian for a proper workout,” Ania bragged.

“Now *that* I look forward to seeing one day—you and Zade going at each other. I’d love to see him kick your ass,” Gwen mused, putting her shoes back on again.

Ania laughed. “Well, that would probably not take much in his case. He’s been practicing for centuries. I haven’t.”

Gwen snorted. “I’m trying to imagine a whole military group trained like you. Who did the Khalsas fight?”

“Demons—for one,” Ania said easily, standing and stretching.

Gwen sighed and shook her head. “Does that help you deal with your situation any?”

“Not really,” Ania admitted sadly. “But I do understand Malachi better because of it.”

I have been reading about demons. There were many things I did not know, that my training never covered. He is not the scary ‘unknown’ entity in me now. He is Malachi and I think of him that way. He is bowing to the will of the creators of all just like the rest of us.”

“You trying to make friends with him or something?” Gwen prodded as they headed back to their rooms.

“I guess something like that,” Ania said finally, stealing a full look at Gwen as walked. “If I can find ways to deal with your volatile Earthling nature, dealing with a demon can’t be much more difficult.”

“That was an unprovoked insult,” Gwen said, reaching out a hand and shoving a laughing Ania lightly into the nearest wall. “Not so tough off the mat, are you?”

“I’m starting to like you, Gwen. I don’t want to hurt you,” Ania said truthfully, rubbing her arm as she veered off to head to her room. “Enjoy your day off.”

“Thanks. Maybe I’ll see you at the meal this evening,” Gwen said, breaking into a quick jog to cover the distance down the hall faster.

She was looking forward to a relaxing afternoon with Chiang. It was rare when they both got the same day off.

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Dorian paced the room as he dressed. So far he’d let Gwen get by with ignoring him, now his patience had reached it’s limit. When he heard the knock on his door, his spirit leapt inside him, then quieted immediately as he realized it wasn’t her.

He opened the door to Synar who—shock of shocks—waited for an invitation before bursting in this time. Sighing in resignation, Dorian gestured his friend inside with a sweep of his hand.

“Are you heading somewhere?” Synar asked, looking at Dorian who was dressed in more clothes than usual.

“To claim my mate, if I can catch her alone for two minutes,” Dorian complained. “Gwen has been ignoring me for several days.”

Synar smiled. “Maybe she’s finally using her intuition.”

“Very funny, but not helpful. Where did Ania sleep last night?” Dorian asked.

“Do not project your bad mood onto me. You’re very tense Dorian. I haven’t seen you this way in many years. Did you really think that when you were ready, Gwen would just go along your mating plans without objection?” Synar asked.

Dorian knew Synar would think him completely arrogant if he answered yes, but actually he had figured that Gwen would at least be open to hearing his offer. She was in most ways a logical being. He knew he still affected her as a male, knew she felt desire for him. Claiming was only a matter of connecting all the dots that were already there.

Sirens weren’t the only species to have figured out the energy settings of mating. They were just the only ones that truly respected the enormous power of such intimate connections.

“Gwen Jet is my mate. That’s just an energetic fact. If she is not yet consciously aware of it, I intend to inform her. I could release my mating vibrations and draw Gwen to me without appealing to her logic, but I do not want to force her to be my mate. It is preferable that she choose me,” Dorian said tightly. “I should never have turned her away in the first place. I made a mistake. Now all I can do is try and rectify it.”

“Do you think admitting your mistake is going to win Gwen’s support?” Synar

asked. "If so, I hope you have better luck than I did apologizing to Ania."

"Something must have worked for you, Liam. I felt your bonding vibration with her. You know how sensitive I am to those things," Dorian said. "I'm aware when anyone on this ship bonds with anyone else. It is a bloody curse when I'm trying to abstain."

"Thank the creators I'm not a Siren then," Synar said, grinning at Dorian's pained expression. "My time with Ania was two minutes and one vibration long. She assures me she doesn't need anything physical from me, but she'll let me know if she does."

"Ania lies to you and to herself. She's just hurt still. You wounded the female part of her when you stayed away," Dorian said, relenting to pat Synar's shoulder in comfort. "Don't lose faith. I have seen your relationship with her is meant to be, but to have it, you will have to compromise more than her. Be prepared."

Synar snorted. "I advise you to have faith also, my friend. Gwen has shut you out of her spirit and now guards the keys to herself with a warrior's mind set against an enemy. Don't turn your back on your mate."

"I can be a formidable enemy, so in that she is wise. I can also be a determined mate. The centuries are very long without a female to warm your bed and I am done being alone. Gwen will warm my sheets shortly," Dorian said with confidence.

"Well, I guess I will believe it when I see it happen," Synar said walking to the door.

"Did you just come by to offer your poor encouragement to me or did you have another purpose?" Dorian asked, letting his tone indicate his tiredness with the subject of Gwen rejecting him.

Synar laughed softly, but with little enjoyment. It was more fun to tease about Gwen and Dorian fighting than to have to inform Dorian about the real reason he'd sought him out.

"The documents from Ania's inquiry were filed today. They announce she is Malachi's host. It won't be long before Conor starts trying to find us again," Synar said.

Dorian shrugged. "It was always inevitable that your brother would come after you as well as the demon. You need to tell Ania about Conor so she can be aware."

"Ania has enough to worry about," Synar said, opening the door.

"You still underestimate her," Dorian warned.

"How many more secrets do you think she can have, Dorian?" Synar said on a humorless laugh. "I just hope she'd not going to ask me for her death again. I'm running out of ways to say no."

"There are many circumstances worse than death, Liam. Keep strong where Ania is concerned. She will always need you," Dorian told his friend who he could see had already tuned him out.

"Let me know when you finally confront Gwen. I'll send someone to mop up the spilled life force from the floor," Synar joked.

When the door closed behind Synar, Dorian walked to the ship's computer port on his wall and touched the screen.

"How may I assist you, Lieutenant Zade?" the computer asked.

"Report present location of Commander Jet," Dorian demanded, as he had several times over the last few days.

"Commander Gwen Jet is in her quarters," the computer reported.

Dorian removed his hand from the screen and walked determinedly to the door.

This time he was not going to be put off.

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