

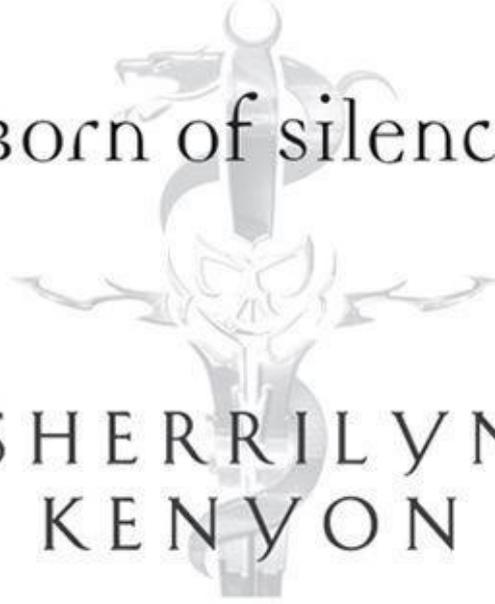
#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SHERRILYN KENYON

A LEAGUE NOVEL



Born of silence



Born of silence

SHERILYN
KENYON



GRAND CENTRAL
PUBLISHING

NEW YORK BOSTON



[Begin Reading](#)
[Table of Contents](#)
[Copyright Page](#)

In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), prior written permission must be obtained by contacting the publisher at permissions@hbgusa.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

For my friends who keep me sane in the midst of utter insanity, and to all of those intrepid warriors who don't live their lives by the standards of others. Those fearless souls who know the price of independent thought and individuality, and who are willing to pay it. Vive la différence!

For those who have walked through the fires of hell and rather than fall to its flames, have emerged battered, but victorious. In the immortal words of Ovid: Quin nunc quoque frigidus artus, dum loquor, horror habet, parsque est meminisse doloris—Even now while I tell it, cold horror envelops me and my pains return the minute I think of it. We can never escape the pain of our pasts, or the flashbacks that assault us when we dare to let our thoughts drift unattended, but we can choose to not let it ruin the future we, alone, can build for ourselves.

And for those who are currently trapped in a bad situation. May you find the resolute strength it takes to free yourself, and to finally see the beauty that lives inside you. You are resplendent, and you deserve respect and love. Don't let the minions of hatred or cruelty define you, or steal away your own humanity. When our compassion and ability to love and appreciate others go, then our bullies and oppressors have truly won, for it is not they who are harmed, but rather we who lose our souls and hearts to the same miserable bitterness that caused them to lash out against us. The cycle can be broken—it must be broken, even though the path is never easy or without cost. Yet victory is made sweeter when you know it came from within you, without violent retribution. The best revenge is to leave them mired in their hateful misery while you learn to bask in the warmth of self-esteem and happiness. Never forget that broken wings can and do heal in time, and that those scarred wings can carry the eagle to the top of the highest mountain.

Most of all, for my wonderful boys who have filled me with more love than I ever imagined possible. You are the greatest gift I have ever known. And for my husband who dared to fight my demons with me and prove to me that there really are people out there who can find the lotus even when it's drowning in mud. Thank you for being the man I only thought existed in fairytales and dreams. I love you all! May the best day in your past be the worst day in your future.



PROLOGUE

“You have got to be the biggest manwhore in the entire universe. What are you trying to do? Tie Caillen for the record on how many people you can sleep with in a single month? And just so you know, his is twenty-two.”

Maris Sulle, Darling’s oldest and dearest friend, laughed at his dry tone. “You’re only jealous *you* didn’t get the waiter’s digies.”

Leaning back in his ornately padded chair, Darling snorted in response. He swirled the wine in his crystal glass while they finished eating lunch in one of the most exclusive restaurants in Perona—the capital city of the southern part of the Caronese Empire where Darling’s family had ruthlessly ruled for more than three thousand years.

After the brutal suck-ass morning he’d already had, he really wanted something much stronger than this weak shit to drink, but his public persona kept him from ordering the hard liquor he craved.

He could only drink that whenever he was alone. Even then, he had to be careful no one found out lest they discover who and what he really was.

“I thought you were still involved with...” Darling paused as he mentally sorted through the lengthy roll of men his best friend had been with over the last year. “I can’t even remember his name now.”

“Gregor?”

Darling shook his head as he finally recalled the last boyfriend’s name, and it wasn’t Gregor. He’d fear senility had already set in, but it was more he had a lot of other things on his mind. Besides, no one could keep up with Maris’s ever revolving list of boy toys. “I’m behind apparently. The last one I remember was named Destin.”

“Drustan,” Maris corrected. “And yes, you are. You really should try to keep up. That was a good two months ago, and I’ve had three since then.” He looked down at the number on his mobile and smiled as he stored it. “Soon to be four.”

“Does Gregor know he’s being replaced?”

“Oh don’t get me started on that repulsive ape. I caught him in flagrante delicto with his personal secretary. His secretary... really? If you’re going to be such a slut, the least you could do is not be a common, clichéd one. Right?”

Darling laughed, then took a deep drink of wine before he spoke again. “I’ll keep that in mind for future reference. The last thing I’d ever want to be accused of is being a clichéd slut.”

“Oh please. You’re such a monk. I’m not even sure you’ve lost your virginity.” With a deep, horrified expression, Maris looked up from his mobile and slapped his hand over his mouth as he realized what he’d said and the land mine of pain he’d unintentionally exploded all over Darling. “I’m so incredibly sorry, Dar. That was so

insensitive of me. I didn't mean it. Gah, I can't believe I said that to *you*, of all people. I wasn't thinking, sweetie. You know I would *never*, ever hurt you. Not for anything... You can punch me if it'll make you feel better." He clenched his eyes shut and tensed, waiting to be hit.

It took Darling several more seconds before he could club the monster from his past back into the closet, slam the door on it, and then speak over the surge of barbed emotions that gutted him.

"It's all right, Mari," he said finally, his voice deceptively calm as he stroked the crystal decanter on the table. "I know you didn't mean anything by it."

Still, that didn't stop it from cutting all the way to the marrow of his bones.

Darling set the glass on the table and wished he could rip some of his memories straight out of his brain. Most pathetic part? As horrifying as *that* had been, it wasn't at the top of the list of things he'd kill to forget.

Opening his eyes, Maris reached out and covered Darling's hand with his own. "You're the strongest person I've ever known. You know that, right?"

Strange, he didn't feel that way. Most days he felt even more battered inside than he was outside. And here lately those feelings of rage and resentment, of unrelenting hatred and vengeance, were forcing him into a place of darkness he wasn't sure he could come back from.

Before Darling could stop himself, he pulled away from Maris's touch and brushed his hand over the latest bruise on his cheek. Luckily the long hair he wore covering the left side of his face concealed it and the deep, rancid scar no amount of plastic surgery could get rid of.

Another pugnacious memory he could do without, and a perpetual reminder that he really was in this world alone. Friends were friends, but at the end of the day, they all went home. Not even Maris could be with him 24/7. And though he might have tiny slices of freedom for a while, sooner or later, Arturo got nervous and had him hauled back to hell.

His mobile alarm chimed.

That's what you get for thinking about the bastard. Nothing like summoning the dybbuk up from his stygian hole.

Maris scowled. "What's that for?"

Darling cut the alarm off, then slid his mobile back into his pocket. "My uncle's activated my chip." A lovely nano tracking device that was so microscopic it couldn't be located, removed, or jammed. But the one thing Arturo hadn't counted on was Darling's ingenuity in writing a program that would intercept his uncle's access to the chip. "I set the alarm to notify me whenever he sends his goons out to drag me home." A constant in his life that always firebombed his temper.

How the hell could he still be deemed a minor when he was twenty-eight years old?

Only by something as backward as Caronese law...

A law originally designed to protect his people from the reign of an immature monarch. Instead, it'd proven to be a prison sentence that had hung around his neck like a perpetual noose.

And honestly, he was getting really sick of all this shit. Kere, his Sentella alter ego, wanted blood. Any day now, he expected that darkest part of himself to take over, forget all consequences, and lash out against the world. May the gods help whoever

was in the line of fire when that happened.

In the past, he'd been able to quell his outrage with cold rationale, but every day his fury was getting harder and harder to harness. No amount of logic soothed him anymore. If anything, the attempts to rationalize his situation and the injustice of his life only provoked him more.

He felt like he was starting to go insane from it all.

Daintily, Maris wiped his mouth with his linen napkin. "We should get going, then. I don't want you in trouble."

It didn't matter. The fact he breathed got him in to trouble.

I can't take this much longer...

But he had to. It wasn't just his life on the line. It was his mother's, brother's, and sister's. And unlike his older brother Ryn, he wasn't about to turn his back on his family. Ever. Even if he hated his mother more than he loved her, he couldn't sacrifice her to his uncle.

He would never spit on his father's memory that way.

But he was getting really tired of holding that line. Sixteen years of utter bullshit had taken its toll on him. Not just physically, but mentally.

C'mon, Dar. Just eighteen more months. You can do it.

Then he'd inherit his father's empire and finally be in control of his own destiny.

You don't really think that'll happen, do you?

He had to. Even though his gut told him that he'd most likely be murdered between then and now, it was all that kept him sane these days. That and the one person he couldn't talk about to anyone.

Not even Maris.

That secret was currently the only lifeline he had.

Darling lifted his hand to signal the waiter that they were ready for the check. If his uncle's men followed their usual routine, he only had about fifteen minutes before he was dragged out of here by royal guards.

That was the last degradation he needed, especially after this morning's round of Humiliate Darling in Front of the Ruling Gerents.

Don't think about it. He would be governor soon and then they'd all learn just how not weak he was.

He pulled his card out and laid it on the table. He didn't need to look at their bill. It didn't matter to him if it was right or wrong. Time meant more to him than money.

The waiter came by, flashed a dimpled smile at Maris, and took the check and card.

He was back in record time... with a small container of the cake Maris had started to order, then changed his mind about. There was something to be said for Maris's outrageous flirting. They always received the best service in the United Systems.

Darling pressed his thumb against the scanner, then signed his name on the electronic ledger. As soon as the payment was accepted, he got up and followed Maris toward the entrance.

"Where are you heading after this?" Maris asked as he held the door open for him.

What Maris really meant was where would Darling try to hide to keep from being dragged home like a felon, and beaten because he'd dared to have an afternoon of peace out of his uncle's sight.

"I'll grab my fighter and head over to Caillen's for a while. I haven't had a chance

to see his daughter since she started walking. What about you?”

Maris glanced back into the restaurant. “I want to grab something, all right. But it’s not a fighter... Or maybe he is. With that tight body, it is possible.”

In spite of his disgust at having to leave so abruptly, Darling smiled. It was what he loved most about Maris. No matter how bad he felt, Maris could always amuse him. “Seriously, you want to come with?”

“Sure. I can always stare at Caillen. That man...” Maris bit his knuckle with lustful glee.

Darling laughed as they joined the huge crowd on the street and had to push their way through the sea of shuffling bodies. “Better be careful, his wife might get jealous.”

“True. And I’m not dumb enough to upset a woman who knows how to use a blaster and a blade. I like my body parts attached.”

Darling didn’t respond. Damn, the crowd was always thick this time of day, but this was ridiculous. He could barely move.

Then again, he should be grateful. It would slow down his uncle’s men and help conceal him from them.

His alarm buzzed again.

“Bastard,” he snarled under his breath before he looked down and reached to silence it.

“Dar! Forward front! Point one!”

With reflexes honed by the best assassins in the business who’d taught him to protect his vital areas, Darling turned at Maris’s military command that warned him of an imminent attack. The instant he moved, he felt the sting of a knife sliding into his flesh, just below his shoulder blade.

A knife that had been aimed at his heart.

Cursing, he reached around to catch the assassin’s wrist. For several seconds, Darling’s blue eyes glared into those deadly gray ones that were too stupid to realize their owner had just made a fatal mistake.

The assassin yanked at the knife.

Grinding his teeth against the pain that rushed through him, Darling let the assassin pull it free of his flesh. But the moment the blade was out, he tightened his grip on the man’s wrist and head-butted him. Wrenching the assassin’s arm, he heard the bone snap before the knife fell from his broken hand. The assassin came at him with another knife he’d pulled from a sheath on his leg.

Bring it...

Darling jumped back, out of his reach. Stomping his left heel on the pavement, Darling ejected the blade in the toe of his boot and used its sharp point to catapult the fallen knife on the street up so that he could catch it with his hand.

The people surrounding them realized what was going on and began to scatter, screaming in fear of being accidentally injured or killed in the fight.

His attacker charged again.

That cold, repressed demonic part of Darling salivated for retaliatory blood. He gave the assassin an insidious smile as he twirled out of the assassin’s reach. He rolled around the man’s back, then turned and stabbed him in the shoulder.

His attacker screamed out and whirled to lunge at Darling. Smiling, Darling

motioned at him with both hands, daring him to come closer. The assassin scowled at the knife Darling had cradled in his palm—the way he held it let the bastard know that he was as proficient with a blade as the assassin was.

Probably more so. Had Darling made a bill-kill attack, his victim would have already been dead and not fighting him.

For the first time, fear darkened the assassin's gray eyes as he finally realized he was in over his head. He dropped his knife and reached for his blaster.

His mistake.

Not wanting to chance an innocent getting shot and killed by a moron's incompetence, Darling grabbed the assassin's arm and twisted until he was at the assassin's back. Before the assassin could recover, Darling grabbed his chin, lifted it up, and made one hard slash across his throat.

Darling shoved him forward.

Choking, the assassin fell to his knees on the sidewalk. He clutched at the gaping wound, trying to block the blood that flowed between his fingers.

His anger boiling, Darling stood back to watch. The decent part of him wanted to finish the assassin off and end his suffering. But the part of him that was slowly devouring his conscience, enjoyed seeing the paid assassin's struggle to live.

Let him die in utter agony. It was what he deserved.

Better him than me.

Darling quickly glanced around to make sure there was no other threat coming for him. His gaze met Maris's and he saw the horror in his friend's eyes. He thought it was over what he'd done, until Maris stepped forward.

"You're bleeding really badly on your back. Are you okay?"

Only then did Darling feel the pain again. "Yeah. It hurts like hell, but I'll live." He'd had far worse wounds than this. And those given to him by people who supposedly loved him.

The assassin continued to writhe on the ground, begging for mercy in a black jacket that held over three dozen hash marks on its sleeve—a sick accounting that bragged about how many people he'd murdered. And the killer had intended to add another for Darling's life.

But the marks that truly enraged him were the seven that had dots over them.

Murdered children.

Darling curled his lip at the repugnant bastard as his blind fury took him over.

His handful of friends who ran the Sentella with him had dubbed him "Kere" as a joke. The Caronese god of death and caliginosity who ruled in their version of hell, Kere was said to pull all of his sustenance from the blood of his enemies. The darkest of gods lived to fight and drew vim from those who begged him for clemency. Since Darling was normally even keeled and easygoing, his Sentella partner Hauk had thought it funny to label him that.

But now...

There was no pity or compassion as he stared at the killer who was dying from the vicious wound Darling had given him. In fact, he only felt one thing...

Would you die already, and shut the fuck up while you do it?

Before he even realized what he was doing, Darling grabbed the man's blaster from his holster and shot him with it.

A single shot through the back of his head.

Darling stood there on the street with the blaster smoking and his hand as steady as it could be. Worst of all, he felt nothing about his actions. No regret. No remorse.

Total emptiness.

He wasn't sure when it'd happened, but he'd become as callous and numb as any assassin he'd ever known. His emotions were now strangers to him.

There was only one person who could still reach past it and make him feel something other than his own bitter pain and rage.

Please God, help me...

This time, he knew the horror in Maris's dark eyes was definitely over his actions.

"You're really beginning to scare me, Dar."

Yeah... I'm beginning to scare me, too.

There's an intruder here...

Zarya Starska froze in her living room as she felt the subtle shift in the air around her. Most would ignore it, but after she'd spent her entire life on alert for those out to attack or kill her, she instinctively knew whenever someone had invaded her home without an invitation.

Flinging her hand down, she felt the throwing knife she hid in a spring-loaded sheath inside her sleeve slide into her palm. Whoever was in her house was about to learn an important lesson in manners.

Bring it, punk.

Prepared to tear the intruder apart, she tilted her head down and listened carefully.

It was barely a whisper of fabric. But it was enough for her to locate the interloper. With the skills honed from a thousand battles, she lunged at the shadow in the corner.

The moment she did, he sidestepped her and disarmed her so fast, it left her breathless. The knife hit the floor with a sickening thud.

Her intruder pulled her against his chest and held her fast against a body that was rock hard and toned.

A body she knew as well as she knew her own.

"Sh, Zarya," he whispered in her ear. "I didn't mean to startle you."

She let out a relieved breath as she recognized the electronically distorted voice that kept anyone from identifying him. His entire head was covered by a black crash helmet that gave no indication of his race or species. Not that it mattered. She didn't care what he looked like.

She only cared about his heart.

And that was the part of him she craved most.

Smiling, she reached up to lay her hand on the side of his slick helmet. "Kere. What are you doing here? I thought I wouldn't see you for at least two weeks."

His arm and hand brushed over her breast making her even more breathless as he released her. "I had to see you before I left."

She felt the same way about him. Every minute they were apart was agonizing.

And speaking of, he was gone again from the room.

Zarya searched the shadows for some trace of her illusive phantom. "I swear I'm going to tie a bell to you." There was absolutely no sound of any kind to betray his movements or current location in her home. Never had she known anyone stealthier.

Not even an assassin.

The lights went out, bathing the room in utter darkness. She didn't know how he did it, but he could override any system or computer. Sadly, her own security, as high tech as it was, posed no challenge to him whatsoever. She took comfort in knowing that he'd breeched far better systems than hers with even less effort.

Still...

Her mysterious shadow was amazing.

Unable to see anything at all, Zarya smiled at his usual precaution to maintain his

anonymity. This time, she heard him drop his helmet on the floor by the wall switch. “You know, my sister thinks I’m insane.”

“Sisters usually do.” Oh yeah, there was the sound she coveted above all others... That deep, rich baritone of his true voice that never failed to bring a smile to her lips.

He was right behind her now.

How had he gotten there so fast?

Kere turned her around and captured her lips with his. Zarya groaned at the way he kissed her. Like he wanted total possession of her entire being and she was more than willing to give it to him. No one had ever kissed her the way he did.

Like she was the air he breathed, the nourishment he needed to feed his starving soul. Like he would die if he wasn’t touching her.

He nipped her lips, then pulled back. “You were telling me about Sorche.”

It took her a minute to catch up to him after a kiss that hot. Her whole being was already on fire and she couldn’t think past wanting to lick every inch of his lush body.

“Wha... oh, yeah. She thinks I’m crazy for having a relationship with a man when I don’t even know what his hair color is.”

He buried his lips at the base of her throat where his breath scorched her skin. “So what did you say to her?”

She cradled his head and slid her fingers through his straight shoulder-length hair. She always imagined it black, but to be honest, she had no way of really knowing since she’d never seen any part of his body in the light. He just seemed like he’d have black hair for some reason. It would match his ruthless battle skills and his near suicidal antics.

“When you’ve seen someone’s soul, you don’t need to know his hair color.”

He nuzzled her skin, raising chills all over her, before he pulled back. “You’ve known a lot more of me than that.”

It was true. While she had no clue as to his race or physical looks, she had licked every part of him enough to know he was at least humanoid, ripped, and that he tasted divine...

He opened the front of her battlesuit and slid it slowly down her body, pausing only to nip at her hipbone—an action that made her crazy with lust.

Kneeling in front of her, he helped her step out of her clothes and weapons. She could feel his hot breath against her thigh. Something that made her wet as her heart raced even more at the prospect of what he’d be doing to her shortly.

Suddenly, his hand brushed against the center of her body, causing her to throb terribly as he removed her panties.

Then he rose slowly, dragging his hand up the inside of her calf before he brushed his fingers through the hair at the juncture of her thighs. “Have you eaten?” He cupped her between her legs.

“I... I... um...” She forgot the question as he deftly fingered her with a rhythm so perfect it left her weak and trembling.

He paused his play to whisper in her ear. “Food, Zarya. Have you eaten?”

She smiled. He always worried about her. “On the way home. I stopped by Ture’s restaurant.”

Kere returned to his sweet torture, his rhythm faster this time while he stroked her with his thumb and buried two fingers deep inside her body. “Good.”

And before she could translate that one word, she cried out as she came for him.

Kere caught her against his chest as he continued to wring even more pleasure out of her, until she was shuddering so hard she would have fallen but for his hold on her. She never understood how he could do that to her so fast. It was like he knew exactly where and how to touch her to set her senses reeling.

He swung her up in his arms and carried her to the bedroom so that he could lay her down on her bed.

She laughed as he pulled back to undress. “The bed? How extremely atypical of you.”

“I told you I could be civilized.”

Only his lilting, accented speech was refined—and even that, only sometimes. The rest of him...

He was always feral. Terrifying.

Lethal.

And she loved him that way. Being with him was like lying down with a wild animal you knew could rip you to shreds if it wanted, and yet it purred only for your touch. That knowledge made being with him all the more alluring.

All the hotter.

She tried to find him in the darkness, but there was no trace. She knew he could see her though. He never had any trouble seeing in the darkest places. She’d asked him once if he was Ritadarion or Trisani—two races known for their abilities to see in the dark without light. But he’d refused to answer.

Then again, he wouldn’t tell anyone anything about himself that could be used to identify him. As an outlaw herself, it was a precaution she well understood. His wasn’t the only life on the line. If he were ever identified, every member of his family and all his Sentella allies and friends would be executed, too.

Not that she would ever do anything to threaten or harm him.

He meant too much to her for that.

Wanting to please him as much as he’d pleased her, she spread her legs and bent her knees in silent invitation. “You know, I was only teasing you when I sent that text.”

“You want me to leave then?” he asked in that wonderful baritone that had a way of sending chills over her. Gods, how she lived for the sound of his true voice...

Most of all, she loved to hear him laugh. It was the most infectious sound that seemed to come from some place deep within him.

“No,” she said quickly. “But you didn’t have to come here tonight. I wasn’t trying to be clingy. I just wanted you to know that.”

“I’m already away from you more than I like.”

It was true. They only saw each other maybe two or three times a month, *if* they were lucky. The rest of the time, they were relegated to texting and scrying... at least *she* scried so that he could see her while they talked. He, on the other hand, was only a deep, sexy voice with no face. But she cherished every piece of contact she had with him.

Even when it was at a cloaked distance.

Reaching down, she opened herself up even more so that he could have all the access to her body that he wanted.

He sucked his breath in sharply. “Woman, you know what it does to me when you do that.” The bed dipped under his weight as he crawled up from between her feet. “Now what have we here?”

She hissed as he took her into his mouth so that he could tongue her into oblivion. Biting her lip, she buried her hand in his soft hair and lifted her hips for him.

Never in her life had she been so open with or reliant on anyone, and she’d done things with him that she’d have never thought herself capable of. Things that should have shamed her to the core of her soul, but she’d learned to trust him implicitly. And it wasn’t just the sex. She held a faith in him that defied explanation. For the first time, she understood what it meant to share herself with someone. To need a man by her side.

As far back as Zarya could remember, she’d always held a piece of herself away from other people. She’d only been a child when her father had been branded a traitor and her mother and sister brutally murdered. In that one instant, she’d been forced to grow up and had learned to trust no one. Ever. Not with her safety. Not with her secrets. And definitely not with her heart.

But from the moment she’d met Kere, it’d been different.

Unlike the other men in her life, he’d never once hurt or betrayed her. Never walked out on her at a critical moment. If she needed anything, he was there without fail, or complaint, or hesitation. No matter the time, day or night.

Even if it was nothing more than appearing in her home after a simple text that had said her heart would break if she had to wait two weeks to see him again.

In spite of the fact that he was one of the most wanted outlaws in the United Systems, he was the most attentive lover she’d ever known. He seemed to take as much pleasure from watching her climax as he did from experiencing his own.

And she couldn’t bear the thought of living a life where he wasn’t a major part of it. “Kere?”

“Mmm?”

She gasped as he slid his tongue deep inside her body, sending a shiver over her. It was hard to think whenever he touched her, but *this* she couldn’t forget about. “I heard the League was stepping up their efforts to go after Sentella members, especially the High Command”—Kere was one of their five leaders—“and that the Caronese Grand Counsel has tripled the reward he’s offering for your capture in particular, and quadrupled the one for your death. He’s ruthlessly determined to end our Resistance and assassinate all of us in leadership roles. You are being extra careful, aren’t you?”

“Always.”

Good, because she knew she couldn’t live without him. The thought of his being hurt...

She choked on a sob.

“Hey,” he breathed, sliding up her body to cup her cheek. “Shh... no tears, Zarya.” He brushed his lips against her cheek to kiss away the tear that had fallen. “They’re not going to get me. I swear it to you. I’m not afraid of the Grand Counsel or anyone else.”

“I know. I’m being stupid. I’m so sorry.” The last thing she wanted was to taint or spoil what little time she had with him.

“Never apologize for loving me.”

She nodded as she struggled to stop her tears. But it was so hard. It seemed like everyone she'd ever loved had been violently ripped out of her life. Most of them right in front of her. "I've buried too many people I care about to lose you, too." She'd worn their blood on her clothes and had watched as the life drained out of their bodies...

Her own brother had died in her arms...

"You won't bury me, Z."

Yeah, because his enemies, who were too numerous to count, would probably blow him into so many pieces there wouldn't be enough left for a ceremony.

At times, she wished she could have fallen in love with some businessman or cook or anyone who didn't live in their violent world.

But fate hadn't been that kind to her.

She loved one of the three most wanted men in all the universe. The other two being his closest friends.

If one of them went down, it would most likely take all three. *Don't think about it. But it was so hard when all she could see was Kere lying dead on the ground.*

"The League raised the bounty on your head, too."

"It's okay, Z. I knew the minute they posted it. They're not going to get me, either. I promise."

That was what her father had told her, over and over again. And where was he?

In his grave. Ruthlessly murdered by his own best friend.

Kere rolled over onto his back and pulled her on top of him. She savored the feel of his hard body under hers as he teased her lips with his. He was nothing but a solid wall of scarred muscle. Scars that reminded her that no matter how strong he seemed, he wasn't invulnerable or invincible.

Terrified of losing him, Zarya breathed in his warm masculine scent. He always smelled delectable and that went a long way in soothing her fears and terror.

She dragged her fingers down his whiskered jaw. "You need a shave."

"I thought you liked it when I let my whiskers grow."

That was because he did things to her with those whiskers that always set her on fire.

Her smile died as she touched his back and found...

Was it a bandage?

"You're wounded?" Pulling him to his side, she ran her hand over the coarse material and found where it was wet with fresh blood. The smell and feel of it was unmistakable and undeniable.

"It's not bad. Just a flesh wound."

Was he serious? It was an awfully large bandage for a mere flesh wound. "Shot?"

"Stabbed."

"Oh my God!" She scrambled off his hips and forced him to roll over so that she could gently probe his wound with her fingers. "I wish I could see it."

"Nothing but sutures to see."

She gentled her probing so that she wouldn't hurt him, but it bothered her that she had no real idea how big or deep it was. "Was it an assassin?"

"Yeah."

"Where?"

"My back. Obviously."

She rolled her eyes at his sarcasm. He could be so damned impossible at times. “No, goofball. Where were you when he struck?”

“Coming out of a restaurant. The crowd was thick and I know better than to get distracted. It was stupid and it won’t happen again.”

But it’d already happened. A few more inches and it would have punctured his lung and killed him. The mere thought of it made her light-headed and shaky. “Where’s the assassin now?”

“Hell’s gates most likely, though I guess there’s a slim chance he might be in paradise.”

She flicked her fingernail at his bandage. “You’re not funny.”

“Zarya, it’s all right.” He rolled back over and pulled her into his arms. “It’s why I wanted to see you. Why I’m here with you tonight when I’m supposed to be halfway across the universe. It made me start rethinking some things.”

But she wasn’t ready to listen to him yet. “Where was the rest of the Sentella when you were attacked?”

“No idea. We don’t live together. And they’re not exactly my keepers.”

“They should be... Are you laughing at me?” She had the distinct impression that he was.

“No, love. Never. I’m just amused by your outrage. No woman has ever given a single shit when I’ve been hurt.” This time, she heard the thick emotion in his voice as he brushed her hair back from her face, then laid a very tender kiss on her cheek.

She savored that touch so much. Her worst fear was having to live in a world where she felt it no more. “Don’t die on me, Kere. Please.”

“I don’t intend to. In fact...” His voice trailed off.

She had no idea what he intended until he slid something cold onto her finger.

Her heart stopped as she covered it with her hand and felt the contours of it.

No, it couldn’t be.

Could it?

No matter how she tried to rationalize it, there was no mistaking the huge stone that was set in the middle of two smaller ones. “Is this—”

“I want you to marry me, Zarya,” he said, interrupting her. “I need you in my life. Every day. By my side. I know it sounds strange, but when I’m with you, I’m the man I always wanted to be. The one I feel I was born to be. And when I’m not, it’s like I’m lost to someone else... and I don’t like him anymore—not that I ever really did. But since I’ve known you, I’ve learned to detest that part of me with a passion. And I can’t keep living the lie that was forced on me.”

“What lie?”

He was silent for several seconds before he answered. “My whole life is a lie. From beginning to end. I have to be so careful with everything I say and do. I can’t drop my guard for even a heartbeat, and I don’t dare let anyone see the real me. Ever... except for you. You are my only truth. The only one who knows who I really am and what I really think. And I have to have you with me before I really do go insane. I can’t stand being without you anymore. Please say yes.”

Her heart soared until she remembered one small fact.

He refused to let her see his face or body.

Ever.

“I’m going to look really strange blindfolded at my wedding.”

He laughed. “You won’t be blindfolded.”

“You’ll look strange, standing there in your full battle gear.”

Kere kissed her lips and this time, she felt his smile. “I won’t be in battle gear.”

Her breath caught at what he was implying... Could it be? “You’re going to let me finally see you?” She reached for her lamp switch.

He caught her hand before she could turn the light on. “Not yet. I have a few things I have to put in order first. But I promise you, the next time we meet, you will see me for who and what I am. *All of me.*”

“I know who and what you are.”

His grip on her hand tightened ever so slightly. “No, you’ve only seen my soul, never my face, and I need a promise from you before you do.”

“Anything.”

He hesitated again as if he was afraid, something that mystified her. She’d seen him stand toe-to-toe with the baddest asses the League and Caronese government could throw at him.

Never had he flinched or faltered.

But tonight, something was bothering him in a way his enemies never had.

“When you see me, I want you to remember not to judge me by my looks.”

How could he be afraid of something so incredibly trivial? “I told you that I only judge people by their hearts.” And he had the most beautiful one she’d ever known.

“But I’m not just anyone, Zarya.”

“I know. You’re the man I love.”

He cupped her face in the palms of his hands... hands that held roughened calluses—testament, along with the scars all over his body, to how hard a life he’d lived. Her Kere was anything but a spoiled rich aristo who lived off the backs of people like her and her family and those she tried to protect from the aptly named Cruels who preyed on them all.

Though he rarely spoke of his life outside of his role in her beloved Resistance and the Sentella, she felt the road map of tragedies all over him. His past had been one marred by untold brutality and battles. All she wanted was to soothe and comfort him the way he comforted her.

“I don’t ever want you to forget that, Z. Promise me?”

“Of course.” She laid her hand over his damaged cheek. She knew he was extremely self-conscious about the scar that bisected the left half of his face, and the ones on the rest of his body. When they’d first started sleeping together, he’d kept his hair over his face and had pulled back from her touch anytime she went near that particular scar.

Then one night, when he’d been so exhausted that he’d fallen asleep on her, she had brushed his hair back from his face and found what bothered him most. That scar was so deep, she could feel where the wound had left a deep groove in the bone underneath it. So deep that she wondered if he might not be blind in his left eye from whatever had caused that injury.

No, he couldn’t be. His aim was too perfect in battle. If he only had sight in one eye, his depth perception would be off and he’d be at a serious disadvantage. Still, there was no denying the savage ferocity of the injury that had caused a scar like that.

Her heart aching for the pain it must have caused him, she’d pressed her lips to the

scar he'd always hidden from her. That kiss had awakened him instantly.

He'd turned his face and pulled away. "Don't. I'm disgusting."

"You're not disgusting." She'd felt his pain in the darkness and it had broken her heart. "We all have scars, Kere. Inside and out. Wounds that go so deep, they leave a permanent mark on us. But that doesn't make them ugly or revolting. They were hard lessons learned and for better or worse, they changed us. No matter how hard you try to hide them, they will always be there. And I think your scars are beautiful because they are what have made you the man I care about."

After that, he'd allowed her complete access to his body. But only under the protection of full darkness.

He still wouldn't let her see any part of him in the light.

Could he, who stood fearless before the scariest of enemies, be afraid of her rejecting him for his looks?

Was that even possible?

"Your features don't matter to me, Kere. I'd love you even if you had three heads and a split nose."

"You say that because you don't know who and what I really am."

"And again, it doesn't matter. I will stand by you forever. How could you doubt me?"

He laughed bitterly. "Almost everyone you've ever loved has died on you. Almost everyone I've ever loved has put me in harm's way. Not one of them ever failed to throw me to the wolves to protect their own ass. Whenever it was a choice between them and me, I was the one who paid for it. Once I show you my face, Z, I can't go back. You will have the power to completely destroy me and everyone I hold dear. All of our lives will be in your hands."

She stared at what she hoped was his eyes so that he could see her heart. "I would *never* hurt you."

"You're the only one I've ever trusted this much with my real thoughts and beliefs. You know me better than any creature alive."

"And I am forever yours. You can trust me, Kere. I swear I will *never* betray you. Not ever."

"I believe you," he whispered in her ear before he captured her lips again. Then he slid himself deep inside her.

Zarya groaned at how good he felt there. She cradled him with her body as he thrust himself slow and easy against her hips. "I love you, Kere," she breathed.

"I love you, too. I always will."

She smiled and tightened her hold on him. It was the first time he'd ever said that back to her. In the past, he'd always remained silent or said that he was glad that she did.

But tonight...

There was no longer any doubt whatsoever that she was more to him than an easy lay whenever he was horny. For the first time in their two-year relationship, he finally confirmed that he loved her and that he intended to stay.

Running her hands over his scarred back, she delighted in the way his muscles played against her palms as he pleased her. If she could, she'd stay right here, like this, forever.

She lifted her hips, bringing him even deeper inside until her entire body was rife with ecstasy. “Tell me again that you love me,” she breathed.

“I love you, Zarya. And I have *never* said that to another woman.”

Most of all, he never said anything he didn’t mean.

Her heart singing, she threw her head back and screamed as she came again. Still he kept that steady, deep pace until she was completely sated and begging him for mercy. Only then did he join her in that one perfect moment of intense pleasure. She held him close against her entire body as he shook in her arms. Unlike her, he was always quiet whenever they made love. He would suck his breath in sharply from time to time whenever she did something unexpected, but overall, he seldom made any sound whatsoever.

Yet another strange quirk of his. One that made her wonder if he, like many assassins she knew, was keeping his guard up in expectation of an ambush. Did he, even now, fear she’d stab him in the dark?

I hope you know me better than that.

His breathing ragged, he lowered himself to cover her and to nibble her neck and ear. “What time do you have to be up in the morning?”

“Nine, why?”

He brushed his whiskers against her breast, tickling her in a way that should be illegal. “Good. I have plenty of time to play with you and still let you get a good night’s sleep.”

She smiled at those words and at the fact that by his hunger, she knew he didn’t cheat with other women. Whenever they were together, he was a powerhouse of testosterone—like he stored it all up just waiting for a chance to be alone with her.

And as the night went by, he made good on his promise.

Hours later, Zarya tried to stay awake, knowing that he’d be gone whenever she woke up. But all too soon her exhaustion overcame her and she drifted off while lying on top of an eight-pack of rock-hard abs.

Something loud buzzed, rudely pulling her out of her happy dreams. Groaning, Zarya rolled over and slapped at her alarm. Gah, she hated that thing.

“Ow!” she grouched as something caught in her hair and pulled out several strands.

She opened her eyes to see the huge griata stone in her engagement ring.

Holy gods...

The thing was worth a fortune.

She’d known Kere was loaded. As one of the five Sentella leaders, he made a killing, pardon the pun, by taking out military targets.

But this...

Whoa. It caught the light and glittered in a spectrum of rainbow colors. There were two blood-red smaller stones on each side that only made the rich, dark color more intense.

A classic-style Caronese engagement ring, the stones stood for the past, the present, and the future. The red for passion and the center stone for fidelity.

His promise to her. She couldn’t wait to call her sister and tell her what had happened. Sorche wouldn’t believe it. As far back as Zarya could remember, they’d

spent countless hours talking about what kind of man they'd fall in love with. Who they dreamed of marrying one day.

Never had she imagined hers would be the most lethal outlaw in the universe.

One whose face she'd never seen...

Her gaze fell to the notecard he'd left on her nightstand by her clock. How very old-fashioned and sweet, and it was so vintage Kere that it made her smile. But even more endearing, on top of the note was one perfect white rose and a small round electronic something she'd never seen before. Curious, she pulled the note and black circle device toward her.

Leaving your bed was the hardest thing I've ever done. But in four days, I will be back for you. Look for the man dressed in black, wearing your mother's ring around his neck.

You know me, Zarya, better than any person ever has. My greatest prayer is that my face doesn't offend you so much that you forget your promise to me. I could never bear to be rejected by the only woman who has ever held my heart.

Four days of absence, then a lifetime of happiness. I promise you, you will never regret loving me.

*Eternally yours,
K*

P.S. I designed the tricom just for you and you alone. If anyone fires a blaster at you, either in kill or stun mode, it'll deflect the shot and then emit a pulse that will render them and anyone near them, paralyzed. For a few hours, they'll be conscious, but won't be able to do more than blink.

Don't take it off. It'll protect you in my absence.

The hair on the back of her neck rose as déjà vu tortured her. Her eyes filling with tears, she touched his flowing script. The last time a man had left her a note like this, it'd been her father.

Soon, we'll be free of Caron. Then you'll never have to fear again. Two days, my precious and I'll return. Have your sister packed and ready.

Her father had died on his way back for them.

She winced in pain as a bitter lump tightened her stomach. *Please, please don't let history repeat itself.*