

Chapter One

The moon rose over the forest, huge and bright.

Annora Rahl breathed deeply. Her enhanced Damari senses picked up so much: the rich scent of the trees, a small animal in the undergrowth nearby, cooking smells from not too far away.

But it was the moon that sang to her. To the wolf inside her.

The people of the planet Damar were shapeshifters. She was both woman and wolf, and both parts of her had finely honed, protective instincts.

Both were clamoring at her to protect her planet.

Blowing out a long breath, she strode down the forest path. It wound through the trees, and before long, she spotted houses nestled under the broad branches, all made of wood and glass.

The forest city of Accalia coexisted with the trees, the rocks, and the landscape. The Damari tried to live in harmony with nature.

But it was all in danger.

From a megalomaniac king, determined to conquer not only the planet of Damar, but their entire star system.

Annora's hands curled into fists, a sub-vocal growl in her throat.

She would not let King Zavir Sarkany of the planet Sarkan destroy her people, or their allies.

She'd fight beside her emperor and do what was required to win.

And it appeared that meant she had to head off on a mission with a man who annoyed her to her bones.

Annora scowled. She did *not* want to work with Captain Thadd Naveri of the planet Zhalto. She'd prefer to have her claws pulled out one at a time.

Laughter echoed through the night, distracting her from her thoughts. It was childish, and filled with cheeky delight. Some Damari children ran toward her. A few were in wolf form, others not. The little wolves almost tripped over their big paws. They were such cute balls of fur.

It wrung a smile out of her, despite all the musings crowding her head.

The children saw her and altered course. They ran over to her, those not in wolf form babbling greetings. A small, gray wolf planted his paws on the leather of Annora's trousers.

She scooped him up. "Hello. Are you being good?"

A chorus of yeses. The little wolf nuzzled her cheek.

A wave of affection flowed over her. She was Emperor Brodin Damar Sarkany's right-hand, his First Claw. She was known for being tough and deadly.

But she wanted this one day. A child. A family. A mate.

"Off with you." She set the wolf pup down. "And stay out of trouble." She watched the children scamper away into the night-drenched forest city.

She needed to protect her planet and her people. If that meant working with the man who made her want to punch him, constantly, then so be it.

She strode down the path toward the landing pads built into the side of a green-covered hill that towered over the city. Some of the semi-circular platforms were empty, while others had brown Damari flyers on them. One had a sleek, black ship perched on it like a bird of prey.

As she watched, a flyer flew toward one platform, its wings flapping like the wings of a

giant bird. She looked back at the ground and spotted a small group waiting for her at the base of the hill.

The three tall men sure made an impact. Her emperor and friend, Brodin, was the tallest of the three brothers, but not by much. He was a warrior, built tall and muscular like most Damari. His long hair was silver-gray and pulled back from his rugged face.

The three of them were all the sons of the power-hungry King Zavir, ruler of the planet Sarkan. The Sarkany system consisted of five planets orbiting a red giant sun: Andret, Zhalto, Damar, Taln, and Sarkan.

Andret, a small, rocky planet, had been mostly destroyed by the Radiance, a giant, solar flare that had ripped through the system millennia ago. It had destroyed Andret's atmosphere, and killed the species who'd called it home.

The most distant planet in the system was Sarkan. Zavir ruled his planet with an authoritarian iron fist. He controlled what his people saw, touched, ate, and did. No one dared disobey him, or they disappeared in the night and were never seen again.

Years ago, after decades of fighting with Zhalto, Damar and Taln, Zavir had proposed peace in the system...by marrying a woman from each of the other inhabited planets.

He had three sons, and now those men—Brodin and his brothers—ruled and protected their planets from Zavir. They were united in their hatred for their father.

Brodin would give his life for the Damari. They'd just beaten Zavir's vicious warlord, Candela. And they wouldn't stop fighting.

Her gaze moved to the dark-haired, silver-eyed warrior beside Brodin. Overlord Rhain Sarkany ruled the planet Zhalto. The Zhaltons were skilled energy wielders who were fierce in battle. Rhain had recently battled another of Zavir's warlords, Krastin. He'd won the fight, but he'd lost people.

Annora's lip curled. Zavir's Zhylaw warlords were scum who experimented on different

species. They used their tech to twist, enhance, and keep creatures alive well past their natural lifespans. Annora had no respect for the Zhylaw.

The final planet in the system was Taln. Conqueror Graylan Sarkany, the ruler of Taln, nodded at something Brodin said.

Tall, leaner than his brothers, he radiated an intense strength. His gold eyes sat in a sharp, hawkish face, and his black hair was clipped short. Not a man she ever wanted to see angry.

Brodin spotted her. “Annora, are you prepped for the mission?” His voice was deep and gravelly.

She nodded. “Yes.” She met Graylan’s gold gaze. “Thank you for supplying the ship for the mission. I *will* stop Zavir mining the genite on Andret. Whatever it takes.”

The conqueror inclined his head.

“We can’t let a chip of genite off the planet,” Rhain said, his voice deep and authoritative.

Genite was a mineral found on Andret, and was deadly to Talnian physiology. They’d recently discovered, after Zavir’s failed attacks on both Zhalto and Damar, that Zavir was planning an assault on Taln. His people were mining genite as part of his plan.

Talnians possessed formidable powers, and were able to command and control the geological forces of their planet. She’d never seen it herself, but she’d heard they could generate earthquakes, cause the ground to move, and shoot soil and rocks into the air.

“We have full faith in you and Thadd, Annora,” Rhain said.

Ugh. That was the one little problem in all of this. She had to work with Captain Thadd “Uptight and Controlling” Naveri.

She’d encountered him on and off over the years. Whenever Rhain and Brodin had met up, Rhain’s second in command and bodyguard was there. The first time she’d met him, she’d thought Thadd Naveri was one gorgeous hunk of a man. Just how she liked them: tall, big, muscular.

Unfortunately, she'd also learned he was bossy and controlling, and had no respect for her strength or abilities. At that first meeting, a Sarkan spy had tried to attack the kings. Luckily, the man got nowhere near Brodin and Rhain. Annora had made sure of it.

But when she'd cornered the enemy agent in a cargo warehouse, just as she was about to attack, Captain "Has to be in control" Naveri had knocked her out of the way and had taken the Sarkan down himself.

Her jaw tightened at the memory. He'd treated her like a helpless female in front of her team, and stolen her kill.

She'd blasted him for it later. The man had just watched her, stone-faced, with his brilliant blue eyes, and told her that it was his duty to protect not only his people, but their allies.

She'd growled and stormed off.

Since then, their interactions had been limited, but she'd learned that he was an uptight, controlling *fracta*. Actually, that was an insult to the small animals that lived on the rocky cliffs of the Dardent Valley south of Accalia.

Just this week, Thadd and Annora had worked together here on Damar to track down Zavir's warlord, Candela. Mr. In-Charge had skills, she had to admit. He was a hell of a fighter.

But when he'd carried her out of an alien ship, she hadn't been happy about it. Sure, she'd been injured, but *no one* carried her anywhere.

"I'd better get up to the ship," Annora said to Brodin and the others.

A burst of female laughter made her turn her head.

Two women walked toward them, arm in arm. One woman was tall with brown hair, the other shorter and blonde.

Mallory West and Poppy Ellison.

The two females from Earth had recently crash landed on Zhalto, right into the middle of

the fight with Zavir.

Rhain had fallen for the tough Mallory West. The woman was tall, athletic, and a fighter. She'd helped the Zhaltons defeat Krastin. Rhain and Mal were soon to be married, and she was to become Queen of Zhalto.

Meanwhile, Poppy—a scientist—had been infected with the Damari virus. She'd ended up on Damar under the care of their healers.

Annora had possessed a front row seat as the small human fired up every one of Brodin's protective instincts. The man had fallen hard.

Annora hadn't liked it at first, not because she had a thing for Brodin—who was like a best friend and brother to her—but she'd seen Poppy as weak, an outsider. But Poppy had won her over. There was no doubt that the woman adored Brodin—the man, not the emperor.

“Good luck,” Mal said. “Make sure Thadd doesn't get himself killed being a hero.”

“I'm not a miracle worker,” Annora muttered.

Mal snorted. “It's in that man's genetic makeup to jump into a fight. He can't help himself.”

Annora frowned.

A hand pressed to her arm. “Be careful, Annora.”

She looked down into Poppy's concerned face.

“I will.”

“Your leg's all right?” Poppy asked.

Annora had suffered bad claw marks from a crazed Zhylaw cat in the most recent fight.

“All healed.” There was no sign of the wounds, and the healers had done a great job, but it still ached on occasion.

“Your sister will miss you,” Poppy said.

Annora felt a tightness in her chest. Her baby sister, Nayla, had been taken hostage by

Candela. They'd rescued her, and she was safe, but Annora still woke in the night, thinking Nayla was gone. She was supposed to protect her baby sister, and she'd failed her.

As First Claw, it was her duty to protect all Damari.

She wouldn't fail again.

Annora nodded. "I'd better go and meet Captain Naveri."

At that, Poppy gave her a look and an amused smile. Annora ignored it. She was excruciatingly aware that Poppy had caught her and Naveri kissing.

A hot, scalding, angry kiss.

"We'll see you when you return." Brodin slid an arm around Poppy, tugging her close.

The look on his rugged face... Annora felt another spike of emotion. *That*. She wanted that. A passionate love, and a mate who openly adored her.

With a nod, she headed for the elevators. Her hands flexed. Instead, she was off on a dangerous mission, with a man who showed little emotion and was bossy, irritating...

She stepped into the elevator car, and the doors closed behind her. The elevator started climbing.

A man who'd kissed her senseless the last time she'd seen him.

She blew out a breath.

Why was it the man who drove her crazy had also given her the hottest, best kiss of her life?

Thadd Naveri crossed his arms over his chest and watched the Damari workers loading gear onto the sleek, black ship.

Their shapeshifter strength was obvious in the way they easily maneuvered the heavy boxes. It looked like they had everything under control.

He turned his head, taking in the view from the landing pad.

It was a good one.

He wasn't a man to stand around admiring the scenery, unless he was doing recon on enemy positions, but even he had to admit the forest city of Accalia was beautiful.

The moonlight washed the landscape in silver. Glowing lights glimmered through the foliage—Damari homes filled with families.

Zhalto had more varied terrain—from lightly forested hills, to the flat, fertile farmlands, to the rocky abyss of the Barrens.

He breathed deeply. There was something to be said for the lush, green scent of dense, healthy forest, however. He also felt a pulse of energy.

Unease skittered through him.

Usually, on other planets, the energy wasn't as strong for Zhaltons. But he'd been ignoring the fact that his abilities had...altered. That since he'd come to Damar, the energy here felt just as strong to him as on his homeworld.

He pressed his lips together. It would settle down. It was just a brief anomaly.

His gaze tracked back to the ship.

It was Talnian designed and built. The Talnians had some of the best starships and tech in the system, second only to Sarkan.

His lip curled. The war-like planet hadn't developed any abilities from the Radiance; they were too far out to be affected by the intense radiation. Instead, they depended on technology for their advantage, manufacturing weapons and tools of war.

And allying with the Zhylaw.

Thadd's gut curdled.

The Zhylaw warlord Krastin had attacked Zhalto, bringing terrible creatures called hexids with him. In the fight, he'd also managed to take Thadd hostage.

He swallowed the terrible taste in his mouth and fought back nausea. What Krastin's

scientists had done to him...

No. Thadd clamped his mind shut on those memories.

He'd survived. His physical injuries were healed. There was no reason to revisit them.

He just wished that every time he tried to sleep, the memories didn't well up, like poison.

He dragged in a breath and focused on the ship again. It would be perfect for the mission.

With its slick lines and black metal, it was built for speed and stealth.

Whatever bad things Zavir planned to do with the genite, they had to stop it.

A muscle ticked in Thadd's jaw. He would do whatever it took. Not just for the Talnians, but because stopping *gorr*-cursed Zavir was now Thadd's burning ambition.

"Captain?"

A burly Damari approached. He moved with the liquid prowling that all the wolves possessed. It was also clear he was well trained. Thadd suspected the man was one of Brodin's cleavers—his elite fighters.

"Yes?" Thadd said.

"The loading of the cargo is almost complete. The Talnian pilots have said we'll be good to go soon. There are a couple more pieces of equipment to load." The man nodded his head.

A low hum reached Thadd's ears. A small loading unit, manned by a Damari and loaded with the tower of boxes, approached.

"It's the heavy stuff," the man said. "Randis-repellent generators and drills. Just in case."

The randis were dangerous, ground-boring, tentacle-like creatures that lived on Andret. Not much was known about them, except that they were attracted by sound and vibration, and attacked wildly, devouring anything they could. His team needed to avoid the creatures, if possible. The repellent fencing was from Zhalto. They used it against the irradiated beasts that lived in the Barrens. It gave off a low hum of energy that kept the creatures at bay. They were hoping it would work on the randis.

“Very good,” Thadd said.

“You’re a man of few words, Captain.” The gregarious Damari slapped a hand to Thadd’s shoulder. “I like it.”

Thadd barely controlled his flinch. Since he’d been taken by Krastin, Thadd didn’t like being touched. He surreptitiously sidestepped away from the Damari.

The Zhylaw scientists, at Krastin’s bidding, had touched Thadd all over, cracked open his body, doing whatever the *gorr* they wanted. They’d implanted their cursed tech into his body. It had all been removed by the Zhalton medicas, but sometimes, he still felt it. He rubbed his shoulder. He kept hoping the phobia would ease. He hadn’t minded being touched before. He touched Rhain and his fellow fighters in training, hugged his mother, enjoyed the odd, sweaty night with a woman when he had time.

But since his captivity, his bed had been empty. *Gorr*, he could barely sleep in it, let alone share it with someone else.

It’ll pass, Naveri. He flexed his hand. You’re fine.

The elevator doors on the landing pad opened, and a tall, fit woman with a long ponytail of black hair strode out.

Everything in Thadd reacted, tensing tight.

There was one single person he didn’t mind touching him.

Thadd kept his face impassive. The irony was that he knew Annora would sooner slit his throat with bloody claws than touch him.

He knew, because she’d actually said that after their one shocking, hot kiss.

Thadd blew out a breath. He had no idea why this tough, very spiky woman made him both hotter and angrier than anyone ever had.

Now, they had to work together. She spotted him, and he watched her steel herself and stride his way.

She moved with that wolfish grace, too, but there was something even more sensual about Annora's walk. Something about her movements that made Thadd think of sex.

Gorr. He pressed his lips together.

"Captain." Her tone made it sound like a curse. She had a smoky voice he liked.

"First Claw. The loading is almost complete."

"Good." She eyed the loader heading toward the open cargo door of the ship. Several workers were waving it in.

"Then we can be on our way." She stepped closer to him, and her scent hit his nostrils. Fresh, like a cool stream, but with a wild, sexy undertone.

"Listen, Naveri, we're both in charge here. I won't have you overriding my orders, or trying to save me like I'm some pup in danger. Got it?"

He felt his hackles rise. "I have no plans to override your orders, unless they're wrong."

She growled. "You wouldn't know teamwork if it sank its claws in your ass."

"I'm aware that you're a talented, experienced fighter and leader, Annora. You wouldn't be First Claw, otherwise."

"You say that, but your actions say differently. And I hear a *but* in there somewhere." Her dark brow rose.

"But, if you're in danger and need help, I won't stand by and let you get killed."

She growled again. "I think you underestimate my abilities. I can take care of myself."

Thadd grunted.

Her gaze narrowed. "Do you have a problem working with a woman?"

He made a scoffing sound. "A good portion of my team of fighters is women."

"So, it's just me you don't respect?"

Now Thadd growled. "That's not it—"

Annora held up a hand. "It doesn't matter. Just stay out of my way, Naveri, and we'll be

just fine.”

Suddenly, shouts and a scream cut across the landing pad.

They both spun, just in time to see the loader and its tower of cargo start to tip toward the group of workers.