



Shards of Hope: A Psy-Changeling Novel (Psy-Changeling Novel, A)

By Nalini Singh

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The “smoldering heat, epic romance, and awesome action”* of Nalini Singh’s *New York Times* bestselling series continues as two Arrows are caught in a chilling conspiracy that spans all three races...

Awakening in a darkened cell, their psychic abilities blocked, Aden and Zaira break free from their mysterious prison, only to find themselves in an inhospitable landscape far from civilization. To survive they must make it to the hidden home of a predatory changeling pack that doesn’t welcome outsiders.

And they *must* survive. A shadowy enemy has targeted the Arrow squad, and Aden will cross any line to give his people hope for a new future. Zaira has no such hope. Too damaged to return from the abyss, her driving goal is to protect Aden, the only person who always comes back for her no matter what.

But Aden’s passionate determination may not be enough. The emotionless chill of the Silence Protocol existed for a reason: for the violent, and the insane, and the irreparably broken...like Zaira.

*Jaci Burton, *New York Times* bestselling author

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for Nalini Singh and her Psy-Changeling Novels

“Nalini Singh is a master storyteller.”—Maya Banks, #1 *New York Times* & *USA Today* bestselling author

“An amazing...series.”—*USA Today*

“An amazing storyteller.”—Smexy Books

About the Author

New York Times bestselling author **Nalini Singh** is passionate about writing. Though she's traveled as far afield as the deserts of China, the Highlands of Scotland, and the temples of Japan, it is the journey of the imagination that fascinates her the most. She's beyond delighted to be able to follow her dream as a writer.

Nalini lives and works in beautiful New Zealand. You can contact her directly through her website. While visiting the site, Nalini invites you to join her newsletter for up-to-date news about both the Psy-Changeling and Guild Hunter series, as well as fun exclusive extras, including free short stories set in her worlds.

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

In Alphabetical Order by First Name

Key: SD = SnowDancer Wolves DR = DarkRiver Leopards BE = BlackEdge Wolves

Abbot Arrow, teleport-capable telekinetic (Tk)

Aden Kai Arrow, telepath (Tp)

Amara Aleine Psy member of DR, former Council scientist, twin of Ashaya, mentally unstable

Amin Arrow, telepath (Tp)

Andrew “Drew” Kincaid SD Tracker, mated to Indigo, brother of Riley and Brenna

Anthony Kyriakus Psy Councilor, father of Faith

Ashaya Aleine Psy member of DR, former Council scientist, mated to Dorian, twin of Amara

Axl Arrow

Blake Stratton Arrow

Bowen “Bo” Knight Security Chief, Human Alliance

Carolina Arrow child

Council (or Psy Council) Former ruling council of the Psy race; no longer extant

Cristabel “Cris” Rodriguez Arrow, sharpshooter, teacher

DarkMind Neosentient entity and dark twin of the NetMind

Devraj Santos Leader of the Forgotten (Psy who defected from the PsyNet at the dawn of Silence and intermingled with the human and changeling populations), married to Katya Haas

Edward Arrow

Faith NightStar Psy member of DR, gift of foresight (F), mated to Vaughn, daughter of Anthony, cousin to Sahara

Ghost Psy rebel

Gregori BE Lieutenant

Griffin BlackSea Changeling, Lieutenant

Hawke Snow SD Alpha, mated to Sienna

Ida Mill Psy, leader of group that believes the Silence Protocol is the only right path and that the empaths should be removed from the gene pool

Irena Arrow

Ivy Jane Zen President of the Empathic Collective, married to Vasic Zen

Jaya Empath

Jen Liu Psy, matriarch of the Liu Group

Jojo Leopard cub

Judd Lauren Psy member of SD, Lieutenant, former Arrow, mated to Brenna

Kaleb Krychek Leader of the Ruling Coalition, psychically bonded to Sahara Kyriakus

Lara SD Healer, mated to Walker

Lucas Hunter DR Alpha, mated to Sascha, father of Naya

Malachai BlackSea Changeling, Lieutenant

Max Shannon Human, Security Chief for Nikita Duncan, married to Sophia Russo

Mercy DR Sentinel, mated to Riley

Miane Levèque Alpha of the BlackSea Changelings

Mica Arrow, Lieutenant of Zaira Neve, based in Venice

Ming LeBon Former Psy Councilor, military mastermind, cardinal telepath

Nathan Ryder DR Senior Sentinel, mated to Tamsyn, father of Roman and Julian

Naya Hunter DR cub, daughter of Sascha and Lucas

Nerida Arrow, telekinetic (Tk)

NetMind Neosentient psychic entity said to be the guardian and librarian of the PsyNet, twin of the DarkMind

Nikita Duncan Former Psy Councilor, part of the Ruling Coalition, mother of Sascha

Pax Marshall Head of the Marshall Group, grandson of Marshall Hyde

Pip Arrow child

Riaz Delgado SD Lieutenant, mated to Adria

Riley Kincaid SD Lieutenant, mated to Mercy, brother of Drew and Brenna

Ruling Coalition Formed after the fall of Silence and of the Psy Council; composed of Kaleb Krychek, Nikita Duncan, Anthony Kyriakus, Ivy Jane Zen for the Empathic Collective, and the Arrow Squad

Sahara Kyriakus Psy (uncategorized designation), psychically bonded to Kaleb Krychek, niece of Anthony Kyriakus, cousin to Faith

Samuel Rain Psy, genius, robotics engineer who developed experimental biofusion

Sascha Duncan Psy member of DR, cardinal empath, mated to Lucas, mother of Naya, daughter of Nikita

Selenka Durev BE Alpha

Shoshanna Scott Former Psy Councilor, head of Scott Enterprises

Sienna Lauren Psy member of SD, cardinal X, mated to Hawke, niece of Judd and Walker

Silver Mercant Senior aide of Kaleb Krychek, in charge of worldwide rapid response emergency network that spans all three races

Sophia Russo Former J-Psy, married to Max Shannon, aide to Nikita Duncan

Tamar Civilian member of the Arrow Squad, financial and data analyst

Tamsyn “Tammy” Ryder DR Healer, mated to Nathan, mother of Roman and Julian

Tavish Arrow child

Vasic Zen Arrow, teleporter (Tk-V), married to Ivy Jane Zen

Walker Lauren Psy member of SD, mated to Lara

Yuri Arrow, telepath (Tp)

Zaira Neve Arrow, telepath (combat)

Smoke and Mirrors

SPRING IS IN full flower in the year 2082.

It has been four months since the fall of Silence, the protocol that bound the Psy race to a cold, emotionless existence. Telepaths or telekinetics, strong or weak, the Psy are now free to feel, free to love and hate, free to laugh and cry. Emotion is an intoxication to many, but to others, it is a deadly threat.

For the Silence Protocol was put in place for a reason.

The ten-year debate preceding the implementation of Silence was fractious and raw for a reason.

Millions of Psy decided to condition all emotion out of their young for a reason.

The Psy gave up joy as well as sadness for a reason.

That reason was the violence and madness endemic within their race. To be Psy was to have a far greater chance of criminal insanity, a far greater chance of striking out in a moment of uncontrollable anger and ending the life of a loved one. To be Psy was to be cursed.

In 1979, Silence was a beacon of hope. To a desperate people on the verge of a violence-fueled extinction, it was the *only* hope. They ignored the smudges on the beacon, the flickers of darkness within, the whispers that perhaps Silence was all smoke and mirrors. Driven by love for the very children they were condemning to a loveless existence, the Psy accepted the harsh tenets of the Protocol, accepted the hope held out by their leaders.

Today, the smoke has dissipated, the mirrors have shattered.

And the darkness at the heart of the Psy race is once more a vicious truth no one can ignore. For what happens to the murderers and the insane in this new world? What happens to the broken?

They still exist.

They still kill.

Chapter 1

ADEN WOKE ON a cold, hard floor, his head throbbing. Another man might have hissed out a breath, might have groaned, but Aden's training was so ingrained that his sole response was to lift his lashes a bare

sliver, only fully opening his eyes once he realized he was surrounded by darkness. He wasn't, however, alone. He could hear breathing—quiet but jagged. As if the other person was trying to maintain silence, was unable to do so for reasons Aden couldn't yet identify.

Remaining exactly where he was, he scanned outward with his telepathic senses . . . and had to capture a scream before it traveled to his vocal cords. The pain was blinding, the agony leaving his vision white. Controlling his breathing and his body through sheer strength of will, he fisted his hand, gritted his teeth, and made a second attempt, this time to reach the PsyNet, the sprawling psychic network that connected all Psy in the world but for the renegades. A Net connection would give him a viable way to alert the squad about his capture.

The backlash of pain almost led to a blackout.

Quietly lifting his arm when he could function again, white spots burning in his vision, he reached to the back of his head and the center of the starburst of pain. He expected to find blood-matted hair that denoted a cracked skull. What he discovered instead was a raised bump close to the lowest part of his skull, near the area that housed the cerebellum and beyond it, the brain stem. No, it wasn't a bump but a *scar*—it shouldn't have been there and it still felt tender.

That wasn't the only anomaly. From the dryness in his throat and the stiffness of his limbs, Aden calculated that he must've been unconscious for hours. Long enough for the squad to realize he was missing and to locate him. Vasic alone should've been able to accomplish that. Except it appeared even the best teleporter in the Net hadn't been able to lock on to his face, using it as an anchor to get to him.

The only other times Vasic had failed to lock on to people was when those individuals had created complex shields designed specifically to thwart teleporters capable of locking on to people rather than simply places, *or* if the individual concerned didn't know his or her own identity—such as those whose minds were broken.

Aden's mind was whole, but whatever it was that had been done to his brain via the barely healed incision he'd discovered, it had screwed up his psychic wiring. Vasic's absence told Aden his psychic signature must've also been affected on a deep level. He knew of no surgical technique—or technology—that could achieve that aim without a full psychic brainwipe, but he didn't make the mistake of thinking he knew everything.

He ran a mental checklist of his body and the items on it. All his weapons were gone, as were his belt and his boots. Whoever was behind this had been thorough.

Having maintained an ear on the other person breathing in the room, he crawled silently toward the rasp of sound. His cellmate hadn't moved the entire time, and there was something in the unsteady rhythm of the breathing that had him certain the individual was hurt. With his eyes having adapted to darkness ameliorated only by a thin edge of light that came in under what must be a door, he could see that his cellmate's body lay in a corner of the windowless room—as if it had been thrown there. That body was small and with the wrong proportions to be a man. Either a child or a woman.

Close enough now to see the curve of her hip, the fine line of her jaw, he realized it was a woman. A woman who smelled of blood. He moved his hand to her face, brushed away the dark curls that were impossibly soft . . . and found his wrist gripped in a punishing hold. "Move and I'll rip out your throat."

"Zaira," he said in the same low whisper she'd used. "It's—"

"Aden." She released his wrist. "I'm injured."

“How bad?”

“I was shot.” Taking his hand, she placed it on the viscous stickiness above her stomach, her thin but should-have-been-bulletproof top soaked with blood and her lightweight body armor missing. “It passed through the left side of my abdomen.”

Aden might not have any equipment or supplies, but he was still a trained field medic. “Do you have any source of light on you?” It was possible their captors had overlooked something.

“Negative. No tools or weapons. They even took my boots.”

He shifted so close to Zaira that, under any normal circumstances, he would’ve been invading her personal space. When he pushed up the long-sleeved black top that hugged her body, she didn’t protest. Her skin was clammy under his touch, and though he felt the edges of a bandage, it had clearly been an inexpert job—blood had soaked through, was continuing to do so. “I need to touch your skull.”

“No need. I’ve been cut, something done to my brain. I’m psychically blind. Any attempt to use those abilities results in extreme pain.” She took a shallow breath. “Since rescue hasn’t arrived, I’m assuming you’re in the same position.”

“Yes.” He checked her head wound to make certain it wasn’t bleeding, too, discovered a roughly sealed incision identical to his own. Their unknown captors had the technology to do brain surgery advanced enough to block psychic abilities, yet they’d left Zaira badly hurt and in pain? “They want you weak.”

“Yes.” Her next words were so quiet he heard them only because he was close enough to feel the soft warmth of her exhale. “I didn’t know it was you, but now that I do, I think our captors plan to use me to break you. One entered the room earlier, said, ‘He’ll talk or we hurt her,’ to another individual.”

“Arrows aren’t so easy to break.”

“And you aren’t fully Silent, Aden. You never have been.” Another strained breath. “Everyone in the squad knows that—now someone outside the squad has figured it out.”

Aden decided he would correct her about his Silence later. “Conserve your strength. I need to be able to count on you when we escape.” There was no “if.” They *would* escape.

“If you can get me a weapon,” Zaira said, “I’ll cover you as you go. I’m weak, will slow you down. You’ll do better on your own.” She said that as if it was a simple fact, as if she wasn’t talking about the end of her own life.

Leaning in until their noses almost touched, until she could see his eyes as he could see the jet-black darkness of hers, he said, “I don’t leave my people behind.” He knew what it was to be left behind, and though it had been done for the best of reasons it had marked him on a primal level. “We’ll go together.”

“You’re being irrational.”

It was a complaint he’d heard multiple times from her. And not because her own Silence was flawless.

The truth was that Zaira had never needed Silence. What had been done to her in childhood had caused her to retreat deep into her psyche, shoving her emotions into a dark hole in a bid to survive. In their place had grown an iron will and a harshly practical mind. Silence had only ever been a tool she used to create a civilized shell.

Without it, she was close to feral but no less ruthless, her brain having learned long ago to put survival above all else.

It made her the perfect soldier.

Some would say it also made her a psychopath, but they didn't understand—unlike a psychopath, Zaira had the capacity to feel the full range of emotions. That capacity was in permanent cold storage, but it gave her a conscience regardless. It also gave her the capacity for unflinching loyalty: because Zaira's violent survival instincts didn't always equal her *own* survival. She'd already walked into the path of a hail of bullets aimed at him during an operation three years before, had barely survived her injuries. He wasn't about to allow her to sacrifice herself for him again.

“You should've toppled me from the leadership years ago,” he said as he moved to lift up the bandage, see what he could make out of the wound. “My irrationality where my people are concerned is apt to continue.”

“I thought about it, but I don't have the patience for politics.”

He knew that despite her icy words, Zaira would take down anyone who challenged his right to lead the squad. For him to lose her loyalty, he'd have to do something so horrific, he couldn't even imagine what it might be. “How were you shot?” he asked, wiping away the memories of how close to death she'd come the last time. “How many hits?”

“One,” Zaira replied. “They came for me while I was some distance from the Venice compound. Five men. I blasted a telepathic request for assistance but no one made it to me in time.”

“How many did you kill?”

“Three. Fourth injured. Fifth would be dead, too, if he hadn't made the shot.”

Five men against a very small woman and she'd nearly defeated them. Deadly and smart, she was one of Aden's top people for a reason. Now her breathing grew harsher as he checked the edges of her wound by touch. “Must be a new bullet designed to penetrate our armor,” she said through what sounded like gritted teeth.

“Is this top made of the new material developed by Krychek's company?” The thin and fabriclike innovation was meant to be as effective as much heavier body armor.

“No. I put myself low on the priority list—others on the frontline needed it more.”

Pressing the pads of his fingers on different parts of her abdomen, he asked her to tell him what hurt and what didn't, and stumbled upon an unbandaged wound on her side. “I'm fairly certain the abdomen wound is the exit site,” he said after investigating it as carefully as he could, “but there are signs the bullet ricocheted inside you before it left your body.” Causing internal damage he couldn't determine without a scanner. “Are you coughing up blood?”

“No.”

“That's good.” Her abdomen was also not swollen or tense. “If there is internal bleeding, it's not severe yet.” Pressing the bandage back into place, he pulled down her top, then shrugged off the leather jacket he was still wearing and got her into it. It was too big on her, and he rolled up the sleeves before she could ask him—Zaira would not want her hands hindered in case of a fight.

That done, he stripped off his T-shirt and, tearing it using brute force, managed to make wadding for the entry wound on her side. If he'd been wearing his uniform top, this would've been impossible; that material was designed not to tear. It was as well he'd been in civilian dress except for his combat pants. Knotting together strips of fabric, he got it around her waist and tied the wadding into place. It'd provide some pressure at least, help stem the bleeding. "Too tight?"

A shake of her head.

"I'm going to try to stop the bleeding." He had minor M abilities that meant he could seal some wounds, though he had no capacity to see inside a body to gauge injury.

"No," Zaira said when he would've touched his hands to her skin. "That sucks energy. Save it. We'll need it to get out of here."

He didn't like leaving her hurting and in pain, but she was right: he was a trained field surgeon and medic *because* his ability was so limited. It was useful when he had healthy backup, but it became a liability in a combat situation. Far better for him to rely on his skills. "Warn me if you're about to lose consciousness," he said before he realized a grim truth. "I need to test if my M abilities even work." No matter if it was about healing the body, not the mind, it still required a psychic energy burn.

Pain was a hot poker down his spine, his vision blurred for over a half minute.

"No?" Zaira said softly.

"No," he confirmed. All their psychic abilities were out of reach.

Tugging her top back down again over the makeshift bandage he'd created, he put his lips right against her ear, one of her curls brushing his nose. "How long will you last?" He was well aware that though her injury was bad, she wasn't as frail as she'd made herself appear.

"Seven minutes at full capacity, but that capacity has been halved by the wound and the shock from the blood loss."

That still made her a hundred times deadlier than most people on the planet. "We wait for a chance. My signal."

"Agreed," she said, just as there was a rattling sound.

Leaving Zaira on the floor in her guise of a small, weak, wounded creature, he rose to his feet. The light that poured into the room was dim, but it told him multiple things.

This room had no other exits and was created of hard plascrete.

There was a corridor outside, but no sounds of machinery—even the hum of background technology or traffic—invaded the room.

Either they were far from civilization or the plascrete was well insulated.

The heavily muscled man in the doorway was dressed in camouflage pants, a jacket of the same mottled shade, and black combat boots. He stood like a special ops soldier . . . stood like an Arrow.

Aden ignored the male's masked face and took in his height, his body weight, his musculature, ran it against

his mental database of Arrows. No match. He and Zaira hadn't been betrayed from the inside, but this man was a high-level soldier. Black ops most likely.

He carried a weapon.

That was his weakness. He thought the weapon made him invulnerable.

Pointing that weapon at Aden, the male said, "Sit."

Aden had noted the dented metal chair in the center of the cell at the same time that he noted the plascrete; he'd also weighed up its value as a weapon. Still calculating his options, he walked to the chair, took the seat. "If you're intending to interrogate me," he said, confirming the presence of another guard outside when that guard's shadow hit the opposite wall, "you should know Arrows are trained to die rather than break."

"Oh, you'll talk. I have plenty of time and everyone has a breaking point." Cold words. "From what I hear, Arrows are nothing if not loyal. This one—she means something to you." Having walked into the room, he kicked Zaira's body.

Chapter 2

SHE MOANED, BUT Aden knew it was for effect. That didn't mean the kick hadn't hurt. It only meant that Zaira would never permit anyone to hear her in pain unless it was to her advantage.

Aden memorized the location of the kick, made a mental note to check Zaira for further injuries after they were free and the man who'd kicked her was dead. The latter was a certainty. "All my Arrows mean something to me."

Their captor continued to stand by Zaira. "But this one you go to see every week."

Zaira needed the oversight, not because she wasn't a good Arrow, but because of her psychological makeup. She was independent and strong and she had a conscience, but she was also damaged in a way that might cause her to make certain decisions that could not be unmade. So Aden ensured he was available for her to use as a sounding board.

That was what he told himself, what he'd always told himself.

"Do you intend to torture her to break me?" Aden asked, his eye on the guard outside—who had stepped partially into the doorway now. Well trained, like this one, and careful never to take his attention off Aden. Not well trained enough, then, because Aden wasn't the only threat in the room.

"Yes," the guard answered. "Tell me—are Arrows trained not to break under sexual torture?"

Aden felt his muscles lock. Relaxing them with conscious effort of will, he watched the guard by the door while pretending he hadn't even seen him. "Pain is pain," he said. "We've had more body parts broken, burned, crushed, and otherwise injured during our childhoods than you can imagine. During anti-interrogation training, I once had my fingernails pulled out one at a time before a hot poker took out my eye."

The medics had fixed the eye, the other injuries, but they'd left him in brutal pain and half-blind for days, the next round of training based on exposing psychological weaknesses. Aden hadn't splintered. He'd been ten

years old at the time.

The guard kicked Zaira again. “You might think it’s all the same, but we’ll see. First I’ll make you watch as she’s sexually tortured by my human compatriots, then I’ll ask them to do the same to you. In the end, you’ll give us everything.”

Aden needed to know the why behind this captivity, but he’d already made the determination that both these men had to die. It was the most efficient way to secure an escape. “Only two guards for two Arrows? A mistake.”

“There’s nowhere for you to go—and we have the guns, while your minds are chained by those implants the docs put in.” A vicious telepathic blow that made Aden’s head ring.

It also gave him an accurate gauge of the male’s psychic ability.

“*Low and hard,*” he said in Arabic, the language Zaira had spoken with the parents she’d ended up beating to death with a rusty metal pipe. “*He isn’t strong enough to kill with his mind.*”

Though her breathing had gone shallow, she moved like lightning, her legs scissoring to take out those of the stupid, stupid man who’d stood so close to her. As he slammed to the ground with bone-cracking force, Aden was already moving, picking up the chair and throwing it at the second guard, who’d come in, bullets firing. The chair hit the other man in the chest hard enough to make him stumble back and nearly drop his gun.

“*Aden.*”

He grabbed the gun Zaira shoved across the floor, having taken it from the guard she was choking to death using her thighs. Lifting and firing it in a single smooth motion, he hit the second guard dead center in the forehead.

“Cris would be proud,” Zaira said, then sucked in a pained breath.

Aden shot the guard on the floor, guessing the male had attacked Zaira on the psychic plane. What he didn’t realize until he hauled Zaira to her feet and felt the wetness on her side, the scent of iron suddenly bright, was that the man had also jabbed his hand into her wound, doing further damage. “I’m fine,” she said, though her shivers indicated otherwise.

Conscious they didn’t have much time, Aden left her for a second—she swayed but stayed upright—and ripped the ski masks off the two men. No one he recognized, but he had faces now.

“He’s human,” Zaira rasped, eyes on the second guard. “Has to be, given the lack of a psychic component to his attack and the other guard’s boast about his human compatriots.”

“Agreed.” Aden stripped the blood-flecked camouflage jacket off the second guard, pulled it on, then took the male’s knives and guns to strap them on himself and Zaira. Their one advantage was that any other guards wouldn’t have heard the altercation—all the weapons were silenced and Aden and Zaira had kept their voices low throughout.

Zaira pushed him away when he went to wrap his arm around her waist to steady her as she walked. “No. We’ll only succeed if you have both arms free. I’ll be behind you.”

He knew that wasn’t what she planned, but he allowed her to believe he did. “Let’s go.” Reaching the door, he scanned for surveillance feeds, found nothing. Low-tech—but low-tech could be a defense against

discovery: if nothing was hooked into a network, then no one could hack in.

He didn't like exiting into the corridor not knowing what awaited around the corner, but there was no other option. He and Zaira were all but silent, each movement careful, but a guard saw him as he looked around the corner. Aden fired to silence the guard's shout of alarm. The guard fell without making a sound, but he had his hand on the trigger as he died; the gun spit fire, the bullets hitting a small steel grille that covered an air vent.

The hard, pinging noise echoed against the plascrete.

Aden heard a door bang open the next second, more footsteps heading toward them. Checking to make sure Zaira remained with him, he covered the distance to the dead guard and, hauling up the body, used it as a shield against the bullets and laser shots that peppered the area. Ice-cold wind swept down the corridor as more guards came in from what had to be the outside of this building.

The door was slammed shut seconds later.

Zaira didn't try to come around him; she knew as well as he did that he needed her alive. Not wasting his ammunition, Aden took one shot at a time, eliminating two of the guards before they got smart and started trying to target him in turn—except Zaira was laying down fire that meant the men couldn't poke their heads out from the side corridor where they'd taken shelter.

The psychic attack that accompanied the weapons fire was haphazard and not as powerful as it should've been for the number of men he'd seen. Despite the inexplicability of such an alliance, it again indicated that some of these guards had to be human. "The door," he said to Zaira, pointing out their escape route.

It lay in almost a straight line from their current position.

Continuing to move toward that door under a covering hail of gunfire, the dead guard's body absorbing the hits, Aden waited until he was almost at the corridor junction, then shoved the corpse onto the dead man's former comrades. They weren't expecting that, had underestimated Aden's strength, as people often did, and were momentarily stunned.

That was all he needed.

He ran.

As he'd expected, Zaira stayed behind, continuing to lay down fire so he could get out. When he slammed through the door, it was into a sullen darkness, the sky above starless and heavy with clouds that threatened to crash open at any moment. Lightning flashed in the distance but that was the only—fleeting—source of light.

No sound of vehicles.

No high-rises.

No sign of a road.

Nothing but trees in every direction . . . and gunfire behind him.

• • •

ZAIRA saw Aden make the door, felt a sense of satisfaction that wasn't strictly Silent. He was important, Aden; he was the future of every Arrow in the squad and those to come. She was a senior commander, experienced and useful, but she was also disposable in this circumstance. Compared to Aden's, her life had little value—its value lay only in protecting his.

She'd done that. She'd served her purpose.

Side burning and head thumping, she continued to fire even as she slid to the floor, but her bullets eventually ran out. She dropped the weapons to show her captors she had nothing, was no threat. If they came close enough, she could get at least one with a knife.

Regrettably, the guards appeared to have learned their lesson. Though they emerged from their corner, they kept their guns trained on her and maintained their distance. "Go after the male," a bearded man commanded two others. "He won't get far in this terrain. We need him alive."

Two of the camo-gear-clad men ran out, leaving two in the room.

"If you need me alive," Zaira pointed out, "you should get a medic." Death didn't worry her, had never worried her. But she would've liked to have seen the future into which Aden would lead the squad. She was a murderer who'd never felt an ounce of remorse for her crime. She could never shrug off the coat of Silence without becoming that pitiless killer again, but she'd thought maybe she could take part on the shadowed periphery.

Vasic and Ivy Jane's wedding had made her see that there was hope for many of her squadmates, hope for a life beyond the regimented existence of an Arrow. Those like Zaira could stand sentinel against the darkness so others could be free to grab at life. It was no sacrifice, not when the end result was that some of that life spilled over onto Zaira and her brethren.

She'd been invited to Vasic and Ivy's home more than once since the wedding, had thrown a stick for their inquisitive dog, had even helped Ivy repair a trellis the other woman used for climbing berries of some kind. Normal things that had, for a short window of time, made Zaira feel normal, too.

And Aden . . . she would've liked to see him make it.

"Get the medkit," the bearded guard said without taking his eyes off her. "And call in an update, tell the team in the chopper that we have the situ—"

A bloody flower bloomed on his forehead, his body thumping to the ground a split second before the other guard's.

Zaira looked up to see Aden in the doorway. "You came back." No one had ever come back for her for no logical reason. No one but Aden. Because this wasn't the first time he'd done it. "Foolish."

"Not from where I'm standing," he answered, striding into the room to check her wound. "You need medical attention."

"They said there's a kit here." Taking the gun he put in her hand, she tried to stay conscious as he disappeared, to return with a small metal box four minutes later.

"This installation is compact—I've cleared the entire area," he told her before opening the kit and quickly cataloguing the items within. "Communications system is voice-code protected."

Which meant it was out of their reach; voice code locks could be broken, but it took time and a very specific set of tech skills. “I think there’s a backup team on the way in a chopper.”

Aden gave a short nod to acknowledge her intel, but didn’t stop what he was doing. “The kit’s not advanced enough to fully take care of the gunshot injury, but I should be able to stop the major bleeding at least.” He took out a handheld scanner, tried to switch it on. “Dead. Water damage.” Throwing it aside, he picked up a disposable laser.

Biting down on a leather belt Aden pulled from one of the dead guards, she tried to contain her pain as all Psy were taught to do, but her mind wouldn’t cooperate. Aden looked up at her flinch. “Whatever is in our heads is interfering?”

She nodded, but told him to continue with her eyes.

He did, his jaw a brutal line. Why did he persist in believing himself Silent? He *cared*. Aden had always cared. It was the biggest open secret in the squad. It was why they all fought so furiously for him and with him. Because Aden came back for his people. He’d come back for her.

No one else might mourn or care for an Arrow, but Aden would. Aden *did*.

She knew that Marjorie Kai, the woman from whom Aden had inherited the Korean part of his heritage, would consider his capacity to care a black mark against him. Marjorie was an Arrow of old, one who’d helped set the rebellion in place—and who had given up her son to it when he was just a boy.

His Navajo-Japanese father, too, would say the same: *Strength is control. Control is power*.

Zaira had heard Naoshi Ayze say that at least a hundred times during the past five, going on six, years. Marjorie and Naoshi had settled in Venice after their “deaths” in an explosion at sea two decades past, and the compound there wouldn’t have existed without them. But while the squad owed them a great debt, Zaira had come to realize the two Arrows no longer understood the son they had created and shaped to be an avatar of rebellion.

Aden was stronger, *better* than both of them, and he followed his own path.

Throwing aside the laser when it burned out, he picked up another one from the kit, worked on her. There was pain, but it was the burn of the laser, the deep ache of being gutshot fading slightly.

“I think I’ve cauterized the major bleeds,” Aden told her, rebandaging both the entry and exit wounds using sterile gauze packs before making her drink two small bottles of a high-nutrient compound in the kit. Soon as she’d done that, he thrust a solid energy bar at her. “It’ll increase your energy levels, stave off unconsciousness.”

While she forced down the tasteless bar, he went looking for their boots. “Got them,” he said a couple of minutes later. “Socks were on the floor but they’re dry.”

He’d also unearthed a green camo canvas daypack and, once he’d pulled on his socks and boots, started filling the pack with any food he could find, the remaining medical supplies, and technical equipment they might be able to jerry-rig. “We’re in mountainous and heavily forested terrain, low visibility because of thick cloud cover and the fact it’s full night,” he told her. “A storm seems imminent. Strip the guards, put on as many extra warm layers as you can; ditch my jacket and find a rainproof one.”

Already moving, though she was sluggish compared to her normal speed, Zaira went to the guard who’d

taken a bullet in the skull and fallen forward on his face, leaving his clothing mostly unbloodied.

“Here.” Aden threw her an olive green sweater from a small metal trunk he’d dragged over from around the corner. “Looks like their spare supplies.” Shrugging off the lightweight jacket he was wearing, he pulled on an identical sweater over bare skin, though what was baggy and loose on her sat easily across his broad shoulders. “It’s empty aside from a few more energy bars.”

Having unzipped and shrugged off the leather jacket, she put it back on over the woolen sweater. She could easily fit a heavier waterproof jacket over it. “Do they have sleeping bags?”

“No. I found pallets in a small room down that corridor.” He paused. “I think I saw a jacket that might not swamp you.”

Zaira made her way to that room while Aden stuffed the daypack with the last supplies and extra ammunition. The heavy hooded jacket she found hanging on a hook on the wall must’ve belonged to the short, slight guard who’d run outside after Aden. It was still large on her, but not so large as to be unmanageable. Seeing another thick, weatherproof jacket crumpled in the corner, she picked it up and shook it out, then scanned the room until she located a pair of gloves.

Aden had just finished packing the supplies when she got back. Nodding thanks for the jacket and gloves, he snapped closed the clasps on the daypack and began to get into the jacket. Her senses prickled fifteen seconds later, while he was zipping it up. “Let’s go. I hear a chopper.”

Aden didn’t argue, both of them aware her hearing was more acute than his—a simple genetic quirk that often gave her a slight advantage in stealth operations. Her father had once credited a long-ago changeling ancestor for that familial genetic trait. Zaira didn’t know if that was a true assertion or not, but she appreciated the usefulness of it.

Slinging on the daypack, Aden led the way out. The bodies of the guards sent to find him lay on the ground outside, their eyes staring at the sullen night sky and their skin leached of color. Ignoring them, Zaira and Aden made straight for the cover of the dark green firs that spread out in every direction around them, birch trees with lighter green leaves scattered in among them. Right now, intel wasn’t as important as survival.

Chapter 3

THE GROUND WAS uneven, rocky, as they ran, the air cold in her lungs but not knife sharp. Of course, that was now, right after she’d had an infusion of energy thanks to the drinks and the bar she’d eaten. The real test would come in an hour or two, when her injury began to make itself felt again. “Chopper’s about to land.” She could hear the jets that made it a high-speed vehicle. “Has to be a clearing nearby.”

“Probably a natural one. Nothing to raise suspicion to anyone doing a flyover.”

Shouts carried on the air soon afterward, but while this terrain might make for a good holding pen, it was so thickly forested that it also made for a very bad area to search. Especially when hunting two Arrows. Except one Arrow was badly wounded to the point that she was a liability.

“I’m slowing you down,” she said, her breath coming too hard and too fast for someone with her training and endurance.

Aden’s answer was to point down, to what she was just able to make out as flowing water. *A river.* Seeing

his point, she headed in that direction, slip-sliding down the hill covered with small flowering shrubs and leaving a visible trail on purpose. Aden did the same. With luck, their pursuers would think they'd both slid right into the river.

Going in a straight line to the river once they'd reached the bottom, she and Aden scuffed up the dirt near the water's edge to further the illusion that they'd fallen in.

"If we get wet," she said, "we're dead." The water was a hard rush, as if swollen by rain upstream. Not even the strongest swimmer could fight that current, keep from being smashed up against rocks or into broken tree trunks caught in the torrent. That is, if the cold didn't stop the heart first.

"Rocks," Aden said, pointing out the jagged stepping-stones she'd missed in the darkness. If her hearing was acute, Aden's night vision was just as sharp. It had made them an excellent team on the rare missions they'd worked together.

"We get to the other side and we have a much higher chance of survival. They won't expect it."

"Because I can't make it." She knew her balance was off, her body weak; she currently didn't have the physical agility to cross the "bridge" of stones, especially when each stone was covered with a thin and no doubt slippery layer of wet green moss. "You go that way and I'll lead them left."

Aden took off the daypack, gave it to her. "Put it on." When she went to open her mouth, he said, "For once, Zaira, don't argue."

"I only argue when you're wrong." She put on the pack against her better judgment because time was their enemy. "You need the supplies and I can't go far."

He turned his back to her. "Get on."

"Aden, that's a bad decision. We'll both go into the water." The sounds of pursuit were getting louder. "Go. I'll lead them off."

Looking over his shoulder, he held her gaze, the deep, liquid brown of his irises so intense it felt like a physical weight anchoring her where she stood. "Either we both go or neither one of us goes. Choose."

"I'll challenge your leadership the instant we're out of here," she threatened, then jumped onto his back, locking her legs around his waist and sliding her arms up under his own to clamp over his shoulders.

She knew she was comparatively light, probably weighed around half of Aden's body weight, but she also carried the pack, and he was walking across a river in the dark on stones that weren't exactly meant to be used as steps. Focusing only on staying as relaxed as possible, so as not to throw him off, she breathed in the chilly air and thought about all the ways she would torture those who had taken her and Aden.

The guards had just been the brawn. Someone else was behind this.

Aden stepped onto the first stone, his muscles flexing against her as he maintained his precarious balance. A second step. A third.

Water frothed around the rocks, the river's passage rushing thunder around them.

Aden's body dipped and she held on though her training told her to let go so he'd have a better chance of survival. She knew Aden. He'd come for her again. He'd dive into that dangerous water in a stupid,

irrational, un-Silent decision and he'd *come for her*. So she'd stay with him as long as possible, until there was no other option and even he would agree with her.

Only she wasn't sure he ever would.

He really was a very bad leader in that respect—and it was why his Arrows gave him their unswerving dedication. All of them rejects from the world, from their families. No one else had ever come for them, ever would. Silence or not, it mattered that Aden would. Perhaps that exposed a flaw in the heart of the Protocol and perhaps it was simply a sign that even Arrows had a soul.

Halfway across the river and she could hear shouts that indicated their pursuers were heading to the ridge she and Aden had slid down. "I estimate they'll see us in another two minutes."

Aden didn't answer, but she knew he'd heard.

Four more stones, the other side starting to appear closer, but then Aden's foot slipped. Zaira would've released him and chanced the water except that he locked one hand around her ankle. A silent statement that if they went, they'd go together. Irrational, she thought again as they both almost fell in before he righted himself.

Two more stones.

The sounds so close now, flickers of light flashing on the ridge when she glanced over her shoulder.

Aden slipped and slammed down to his knees . . . but it was on the bank. He made sure his body tumbled sideways so she fell on the bank beside him rather than backward into the water. Pushing up on her hands, she looked up toward the ridge. "We need to get into the trees."

They made it barely in time; the chopper was in the air now and sweeping the area with a spotlight. Pressing themselves to the ground and covering their bodies in enough forest floor debris that they no longer looked people-shaped, Aden and Zaira waited.

Zaira breathed into her hands, the gloves she'd found in the coat's pockets too large but warm. She couldn't hear Aden breathing and for a second, her heart stopped. *Alone*, whispered the stunted, murderous child hidden in the darkest corner of her psyche, *alone*. A second later, she shook it off. He was being silent, that was all. Aden could be more silent than any other Arrow she knew, even the most capable assassin. She'd asked him once how he'd learned to do that. His answer was one she'd never forget.

When I was a child, my parents told me to be invisible, so invisible that no one would ever consider me a threat, so invisible that I would be forgotten.

Zaira didn't understand how anyone could have failed to see the relentless strength and raw power that lived in Aden, but they had. Ming LeBon had barely paid Aden any attention, until one day, their former leader suddenly realized someone else was holding the reins and that he'd been deposed. No more would Ming treat the Arrows as his personal death squad, using them up then putting them down as if they were lame dogs.

They belonged to Aden now. And they would follow him into hell itself.

She felt the spotlight sweep over her at that moment, the light seeping through her damp tomb with its smell of the earth and the musty wet of decomposing forest debris. The light didn't linger. The sound of the chopper grew more distant heartbeat by heartbeat as the search went downriver, the voices of the searchers on foot also heading in that direction.

“I think they’re gone,” she said at last.

“Slowly.” Coming up from his prone position with painstaking care as she did the same, Aden picked up the pack she’d thrust under a tangle of undergrowth, then looked up at the smattering of stars exposed by a small gap in the cloud cover. “We’re in the northern hemisphere.”

Since it was spring in that hemisphere, they had to be either at a high elevation or in one of the generally colder areas such as Alaska. “Can you narrow it down further?”

“No, but this might.” He retrieved a small device from the pack, stilled before turning it on. “It could have a tracker that could lead the search straight to us.”

“Don’t use it,” Zaira said. “The risk outweighs the gain. In fact, leave all the tech behind. They may not have thought of it yet, but if there are trackers, they could activate them remotely.”

Aden took out every piece of technology they’d carried this far, venturing to the river’s edge to throw them in the water before returning. “How good is your knowledge of astronomy?”

“Bad. I’ve always had access to the PsyNet for reference.” The psychic network overflowed with data. “And after my defection, I could telepathically contact others if I needed location data.” Zaira had played dead for five years and eight months in order to provide a safe haven for “broken” or used-up Arrows for whom Ming had signed execution orders, but now the Net needed her alive and part of it. A large number of the Venice contingent had returned to the PsyNet with her, none of them any longer at risk from Ming’s assassins and pet medics.

It had been a strange homecoming, the formerly stark night sky landscape of the Net now webbed with delicate golden threads created by the empaths whose presence protected the Psy race from a deadly psychic contagion, but it had been a homecoming all the same. In a heartbeat, her world had gone from a small, contained network she’d had to constantly remind herself wasn’t a cage, to a vastness without boundaries.

It felt as if she’d taken her first real breath in years.

As a result of the work she’d done protecting empaths, thus interacting with them, one of those fragile golden threads had reached out to her and, despite her instinctive defensive reaction, she’d allowed it to connect. She had no desire to end up insane and foaming at the mouth as a result of the infection that had almost destroyed the Net before the empaths created the Honeycomb.

Thinking of the Honeycomb as armor helped her accept it. Knowing that on the other end was an empath with absolutely no survival skills whatsoever helped even further—Zaira had more chance of being eaten alive by scarab beetles than she had of coming under attack by an E whose gift helped create that protective web.

“Tell me when you start to flag,” Aden said, pack back on. “We can’t go far in the dark anyway, especially with no landmarks.”

Zaira knew that had she been uninjured, they would’ve kept going. “I say we put more distance between us and our pursuers regardless.”

They walked in silence, surrounded by trees on every side, with thick shrubs forming the undergrowth—which meant they unavoidably left a trail—and jagged rocks hidden beneath that they tried to avoid. Aden was the one who stopped. “Look.”

Following his arm, she narrowed her eyes to see better. “A cave?” It was more a serrated slash in the rock face, but when they squeezed through, it proved large enough to fit them both. However, the instant they were inside, they shook their heads and moved back out. To be in that cave was to be protected—and to be trapped.

Instead, and keeping an eye on the increasingly ominous cloud cover, they eventually made a shelter at the tangled roots of a forest giant, breaking off branches from a nearby fir tree to create a carpet and then a kind of tent. Zaira ate the energy bars Aden gave her, made sure he ate his share, and forced him to drink half of one of the high-density nutrient drinks from the med kit.

“You’re no use to me dead or hypothermic,” she said when he told her to finish it. “Drink it.”

Filling the empty bottle with water from a nearby stream, Aden put it back in the pack and lay down beside her. Snug against one another in the small space they’d deliberately structured that way to maximize heat retention, she said, “How did they take you?” Aden was as experienced as she was, and while she was the more deadly in one-on-one combat, he was smarter when it came to tactics. No one should’ve been able to outmaneuver him.

“Blitz attack,” he said. “Four men hit me on a city street in the split second while I was out of public view—they came in shooting, I took a stun to the face.”

That explained the spreading bruise on the right-hand side of his face. “They respected your skill more than mine.”

“That’s why you’ve always been so dangerous. People see you and think woman first and soldier second.”

“I used to think my shape a hindrance before I realized the effect it had on males.” At a height of five feet and two inches, she was relatively short, and while she was in lethal shape, her body tended toward curves rather than straight lines. “Now I see it as camouflage.” The soft, unthreatening exterior hiding a razored blade that could cut your throat and not blink.

“Good.” Aden put his hand on her forehead. “Your temperature is slightly elevated. Rest.”

Tired from the continued pain in her gut and aware she had to become stronger if she was to function as his backup, she didn’t argue. “Will you take first watch?”

When he said, “Yes,” she closed her eyes and went to sleep. Because Aden was the one being on the planet she trusted never to harm her. He was too irrational to be sensible.

Chapter 4

“IT’S CONFIRMED? THE Arrows have escaped?” That was the last thing the organization needed.

“They won’t get far,” said the blunt-faced man who was the leader of the cleanup squad. “At least one is badly injured, from the report we received before it went to shit. Bandage we found inside was soaked with fresh blood. She’ll die soon and save us the trouble of hunting her down.”

“Arrows don’t worry about camaraderie so she’s probably already been dumped to survive on her own.” The group of elite assassins was composed of piercingly intelligent and highly trained rabid dogs who’d do anything to complete a mission—or to survive capture. Leaving an injured squadmate behind wouldn’t even

be a question. “The retrieval of her body isn’t a priority.” Zaira Neve was no longer useful. “Concentrate on Aden Kai.”

The human male on the other side of the screen chewed the tobacco he insisted on using, and spit out the yellow-brown residue in a disgusting display. “Yeah, well, he won’t survive long, either. Massive storm front’s about to hit the mountains and he’s got nowhere to go.”

That, at least, was true. The group had chosen the location in part because of the privacy afforded by its inaccessibility. “Continue tracking.” The only way to be certain an Arrow was dead was to see the corpse.

“I will, but I need to know if I have authorization to take terminal action if necessary.”

“Yes, but only if you can’t contain him.” Once broken, Aden Kai could be a critical intelligence asset. “Do *not* use the fail-safe solution. Not yet.”

“No offense,” said the tobacco-chewing subhuman creature, “but I was told real strict to only take orders from the whole group when it came to this kind of a decision, never just one of you.”

There wasn’t time for a group meeting, but he was right. This groundbreaking and brilliant organization worked only because each member believed himself or herself equal to the others. That equality was a carefully constructed sham, but the belief was important for the end goal. “The others will contact you within the next five minutes.”

There would be no dissension, not on this point. Because if it was a case of a live Arrow with vengeance on his mind or a dead one, the equation was simple. Should Aden Kai prove problematic, the organization would have to live with the loss of data, change plans accordingly, adapt.

Adaptation was the key.

Chapter 5

ADEN SENSED ZAIRA fall into a deep sleep, her breathing even. Her skin, when he checked it after about what must’ve been an hour, was no longer as clammy. Though they were in a cold climate, which the rising wind was turning even more bitter, they were well clothed and had enough food to last another day. After that, they’d be in trouble, and Zaira was already dangerously weak as a result of blood loss.

Making sure the hood of her jacket covered her head, he curled his body around hers in an effort to keep her warm, his mind alert. However, that mind was bound in chains he had to force himself not to test. It went against his instincts, but he couldn’t afford to do any damage that might debilitate him—his knowledge as a medic told him that whatever implant they had in their heads, it was unstable.

Technology this advanced *could* be created underground, but the Arrows worked in the shadows, worked in that underground. They would’ve picked up hints if this had been a long-term project. No, what he suspected was that the implant was some nightmare combination of the Human Alliance implant that shielded against psychic intrusion and the “hive-mind” implant developed by Ashaya Aleine while she’d been under the control of the Council.

Her research had been destroyed, a large part of it by Aleine herself, but it was possible that someone had smuggled out a prototype or had siphoned off enough of her research before she pushed the destruct button, to reverse engineer her creation and fiddle with it in concert with the Alliance implant to achieve this

psychic-blinding effect.

If his hypothesis was true, the implant in his skull and in Zaira's couldn't be as well constructed as either of the originals—Aden had cause to know that Ashaya Aleine had helped the Alliance develop their implant, too. She was a genius on a level rarely found, and she worked in tandem with her sometimes psychotic but always brilliant twin. It'd be difficult for any lab in the world to procure a team that could match their combined abilities.

There remained a slim chance that he was wrong, that this was an independent creation, but if he was right, these implants could well have a remote self-destruct built in, as with the *original* Alliance implants. Their abductors could kill them from a distance. If so, the only reason he was alive was likely because they wanted to interrogate him about classified data.

Zaira, however . . .

He sat up, staring down at her. She'd been taken because whoever had been watching him believed she was a weakness in his armor. That fact had kept her alive up until now, but it wouldn't last. Their captors might think Zaira was already dead, but if they didn't find her body they'd push the detonation key in order to make certain. She'd die in a matter of seconds unless she was out of range. The same applied to him. They wanted him alive, but only to a certain point.

No one was stupid enough to hurt an Arrow, then set him free to come back with retribution on his mind.

“Zaira.”

She woke silently and with Arrow swiftness. “Yes?”

“We need to move.” He explained why as she sat up, a slight catch in her breath the only indication of pain.

It was an hour later, when she stumbled while they were crossing an exposed, treeless area that had only a thin covering of some kind of foot-high shrub or grass with tiny white flowers, that he realized something was seriously wrong. “Your wound?”

She halted in among the grasses. “Significant pain, some light-headedness.” Chest heaving in shallow breaths, the softness of her lips bracketed by white lines, she held his gaze. “I’m not going to last much longer.”

He knew what she was telling him—to do what Arrows were trained to do and make the rational, logical decision: leave her behind. Gripping her chin, he said, “We are not that anymore. We are not only assassins trained to die and to kill. We do not abandon the weak or the hurt. And we never, *ever* leave our own behind.” That, he decided at that instant, would be the new motto of the squad, be what all trainee Arrows were taught. *No Arrow is disposable. No Arrow is to be left behind.*

Zaira’s eyes held his for a long moment, the thickness of her lashes throwing shadows over the rich black of her eyes. “You’ve changed,” she said. “You were never Silent, but now you’re . . . different.”

Aden didn’t disagree because she was right. Touching Vasic’s bond with Ivy had altered him on a fundamental level. His fellow Arrow and closest friend guarded that bond with intense protectiveness, but Vasic had permitted Aden within his shields, permitted Aden to see the shimmering power of the translucent yet unbreakable strands that bound Vasic to his empath. Not only that, but he’d permitted Aden to touch one of the strands, *feel* the power of the emotions that locked him and Ivy to one another in an intricate, intimate

tapestry.

Aden didn't know if it was because he'd been permitted so close, or if it was because Vasic was his blood brother and Ivy an empath, but when he'd touched their bond, he'd felt a sharp stab of emotion that was as painful as it was beautiful. A knife blade that slid in through muscle and bone and heart to make him bleed. "Vasic allowed me through his shields," he told Zaira. "After his bonding."

She went motionless. "What was it like?" A whispered question.

"I don't have the words." A slumbering part of him had awakened at the contact and that part craved the feeling of belonging that he'd sensed from Vasic. As if the world could fall, but Vasic knew Ivy would always be there, no matter what. Aden wanted the same. Not yet, not when so many of his Arrows needed him to remain their leader, alone and strong, but one day in the future, he wanted that intimate, absolute connection with another being. "Even before that experience, I wouldn't have left you behind. You know that."

"You *have* to go ahead," Zaira said, pressing her hand over his mouth when he would've spoken again. "Listen to me. If you go ahead, there's a chance you can find help, bring it back. We won't get half as far with me slowing you down."

Waiting until she removed her hand, he wrapped his arm around her waist and began walking. She came rather than hold him back. "Aden."

"Do you think," he said, "that I could continue on as I've been doing knowing I'd left you to die alone in the cold dark?"

Zaira's arm came around his waist; the sign of capitulation had his muscles tensing. Because it meant she was far worse off than she'd let on. Zaira never held on to anyone, never accepted help except in extreme circumstances.

Seeing movement a bare half minute afterward, he froze, his eyes tracking the lumbering shape until it resolved itself into the form of a black bear. The creature wasn't interested in them, disappearing off to the left while Aden and Zaira went forward.

"We need to get the implants out," he said, realizing she was right in one sense—they *were* too slow to outrun a chopper and if their captors had any intelligence they'd eventually do a low sweep over the entire possible search area while transmitting the command that would cause their brains to implode. "It's possible I'm wrong and there might not be a fail-safe switch, but we can't take that risk."

"Agreed." Zaira's response was immediate, her voice rough. "If we remove them, we might regain our abilities, be able to contact the squad."

Scanning the unforgiving landscape around them, he found a thick grove of trees that would provide cover and a shield against the wind. When Zaira stumbled, he picked her up and carried her there. Pain shot down his left leg from where he'd been injured in the fight outside the bunker, but it was nothing he couldn't handle.

Placing Zaira on the ground, her back against what looked like it might be a young chestnut tree, he found the medical kit and started to go through the supplies. "Two disposable lasers left." One for each of them. "Power grade means it should be strong enough to cut through the skull since the area is already weakened, but it might not be enough to fully seal the wound."

Zaira took one laser. “I should do you first. Talk me through it before I lose consciousness.”

It was a smart request but impossible. “I need to figure out how to get it out without paralyzing or killing us.” If the implants had integrated into their brains and/or had filaments woven into their spinal columns, both were very real possibilities.

“What are the chances they’ve put it in a part of the brain you can’t reach?”

“I won’t know until I remove the bone. Our only advantage is that the surgery was clearly done recently and in a hurry—there’s a high probability the implants won’t have fully integrated.” Fewer connections meant less chance of a fatal mistake.

Zaira handed back the laser. “My head’s swimming. If you operate first, I might not remain conscious long enough to remove your implant.”

“I have a longer window of life—they want to break me. Execution is a last resort.” He looked up at the sky as he felt a spit of rain on the back of his hand. “Now, before the clouds open up. Angle your entire body to the left.”

When she did, he dug out a penlight he’d taken from a guard. The beam was too thin to be useful anywhere but in close quarters, but it was bright enough at that range. Holding it between his teeth, he gathered up Zaira’s barely shoulder-length hair and used a rubber band from the med kit to tie it up off her neck, exposing her nape and the area immediately above. Then he tucked a bandage between her collar and her spine to soak up the blood.

That done, he snapped on a pair of disposable surgical gloves. “This will hurt.”

She reached out to grip one of the tree roots that had curled out over the earth before flowing back in. “Go.”

Thin beam of light shining on the reddened and jaggedly sealed flesh low on her scalp where a rough square of her hair had been shaved off, he frowned. “Damn it, it’s infected.” Whatever their captors had shoved in there, Zaira’s body was rejecting it. Grabbing the disinfectant, he wiped the area and knew he’d have to hurt her again later by washing out the wound.

His muscles threatened to tense, but he couldn’t allow that to happen. Not now, not when he needed to have rock-steady hands and iron focus. Thinking back to the lessons on the brain he’d had as part of his training, and of everything he’d learned as a result of his attempt to find a fix for Vasic’s gauntlet, he put one hand on the back of Zaira’s head to hold her in position, and very carefully made four incisions along the lines of the scar to cut through the skin and muscle and into bone.

She bled and it was a clean red, no sign of deep infection. Good.

Wiping away the blood with a swab he’d dampened with disinfectant, he put down the laser and disinfected a disposable scalpel, then used the tip to gently check if he could lift out the tiny piece of bone. No. He had to go deeper. Squeezing Zaira’s shoulder to warn her, he used the laser again. It took three careful series of cuts to get the bone out. Zaira’s breathing was beyond shallow by that point, but she was holding on to consciousness.

“There’s a rough suture in the membrane that protects the brain,” he told her. “I’m using the lowest setting on the laser to cut through it.”

Relief punched through him as soon as he opened the suture. “I can see it. It’s as if they literally just shoved

it in."

"Wrong part of brain," Zaira managed to say as he replaced the blood-soaked bandage he'd thrust below her skull.

"Yes. So it must somehow be able to send signals to the right sections." There hadn't been enough time for filaments to weave their way through the neural matter.

Using the penlight to examine the implant, he said, "It has six very thin arms that are clasped around a part of the cerebellum." Like a spider gripping its prey. "I think the arms are meant to hold it in place until the final biological connections are made."

A crackle of blue-white light in the implant, powered either by Zaira's body or by a tiny battery within the implant itself. "It looks like it might work via electrical impulses."

Zaira took a deep breath, exhaled slowly. "Is that good?"

"Yes. It lowers the risk of dangerous neural connections." He tried to look very carefully under the implant to confirm, but he didn't have the right tools.

"If I'm wrong, I'll kill you." One more death on his conscience. And this time, it would be this woman he'd known almost as long as he'd known Vasic. Tortured and bruised black-and-blue, skinny and suspicious, she'd glared at him during that first meeting, then lied to his face, and he'd known he had to make sure she survived.

The squad needed her fire, her relentless spirit.

He wasn't sure he'd succeeded—Zaira lived, but that fire of the soul had gone into deep hibernation. The disobedient, wild, dangerous girl he'd met had become the perfect Arrow . . . who continued to argue with his decisions fifty percent of the time and who'd once shot him in order to make a point about a threat assessment.

What were you saying about the angle being impossible?

It had been a measured, glancing hit to his upper right arm that had barely taken off a layer of skin, but the memory gave him hope that the fire wasn't hidden so deep that there was no hope of its return.

Because it wasn't just the squad that needed it. Aden needed it most of all.

He'd been trying to provoke her since the fall of Silence in an effort to reawaken that part of her nature. Now he might be the one to end it all, to forever stifle the flame. "The risk of death is significant."

"I'm dying anyway," she said as rain hit his back, the canopy above not enough to totally shield them, though he angled his body to give Zaira as much protection as possible. "I'd rather go honestly, trying to fight this thing, than have my brain explode because I did nothing." A shuddering breath. "You'd make the same choice."

It was still the hardest thing he'd ever had to do.

Holding the penlight clamped between his teeth again, he used the laser at the lowest possible setting to burn the "legs" off the implant. When the tiny metallic square didn't fall away after all the legs were gone, he used the tip of the scalpel to lift it off. It stuck for a stubborn second and he held his breath at what could be a

sign of further connections beneath, but then it was falling into his hand.

And Zaira was bleeding again.

Dropping the implant in the medkit, he said, "Disinfectant." It was the only warning he could give her before he washed the blood out with the burning liquid—the brain might not technically feel pain, but the skin and muscle at the incision site would. He would've never done this had he been in an infirmary, but out here, the risk of a fatal infection through the open wound was too high.

He had to take the chance the disinfectant wouldn't do further damage.

Her spine went stiff before her body slumped. Catching her, he leaned her against the chestnut tree on her side and, repairing the membrane, lasered the piece of bone back into her skull, hoping to hell he hadn't done permanent harm. The wound finally closed, if raggedly so, he put a small bandage over it, then got rid of the blood-soaked bandage below her neck by placing it, his gloves, and any other detritus in a small disposal bag and putting that in an unused pocket of the daypack.

If their pursuers brought in tracking dogs, he wouldn't leave such a rich blood supply for them to scent. At least he and Zaira had the rain on their side—it would wipe away any tracks, wash away scents. The rising wind might also ground the chopper, which would take any heat-sensing technology out of the running; even if the chopper stayed up, the presence of bears in the area would bring up false hits their pursuers would have to investigate.

He didn't immediately have to move Zaira.

Decision made, he slid the implant into a small plas bag that had held pain relief pills before he emptied the pills into the medkit. He placed the bag in the bottom of the medkit to protect it from the elements, weighing the bag down with the burned-out laser and putting all the remaining supplies on top before he shut the kit. That done, he used fallen leaves to line the floor of another small hide under the thickest part of the canopy and carried Zaira's unconscious body to lie on it, building a tent around her using low-hanging branches he snapped off from the trees around them. It would make them invisible from the air and provide protection from the elements.

By the time he finished, the rain was hard pellets whipped into a harsh slant by the wind, but the canopy was holding off most of it. He checked the hide, gathered three more heavily leafed branches to cover the spots where water might get in, then slid inside himself. He'd stay awake, maintain a watch, but he needed to be close to Zaira.

Her breathing was too faint, her pulse sluggish.

No.

Turning her over carefully onto her back, he unzipped her jackets, pushed up her sweater, and found her Arrow uniform once more sticky with blood. When he peeled it up and examined the bullet wound, he saw it was bleeding steadily. Grabbing the last disposable laser, he gripped the penlight again and sealed multiple torn veins. By the time the laser flickered, she wasn't leaking fresh blood.

He had to fight himself not to try to use his M ability to reach the internal wounds he couldn't see. Given the viciousness of the pain feedback to any attempt at using psychic abilities, she could wake to find him burned out, unconscious. And much as Zaira liked to tell him to leave her behind, he knew damn well she'd never leave him behind. She saw him as critical to the survival of the squad—he'd never been able to make her

understand that she was as important. So if he went down, she'd stay, guard his back. Die.

That fact and all the others weighed against testing the padlock on his ability.

That didn't mean it was an easy decision.

Bandaging the wound, he found another one of the small, nutrient-rich drinks in the medkit and, lifting up her head, coaxed it down her throat, drop by tiny drop. Afterward, he placed her head on his thigh and kept his finger on the pulse in her neck, under the hood he'd tugged up over her head so she wouldn't lose heat through her skull. The fact that the top of her head was tucked up against his abdomen should also help her maintain her body temperature.

"Stay with me," he said as her pulse refused to grow stronger.

Zaira had survived a childhood so hellish, she should be insane or broken or a monster. Instead, she was one of the strongest Arrows he knew; she'd protected their most wounded, most broken for over five years. That many long years she'd stayed dead to the world, stayed in a tiny network that he knew must've felt like a prison to a woman who'd grown up in a barren locked room.

And still she'd gone because he'd asked her.

He would not allow her to die now, when, for the first time, she had a chance at a real life. This desolate landscape would not claim her fire. It had no right. "You *will* stay," he ordered, his lips against her ear. "You promised me." That promise had been made nearly twenty-one years ago, but he'd never forgotten, never would forget.

Even after months of sufficient food and daily outdoor exercise, she'd still been so skinny and small and with such anger inside her. Barely four feet tall back then, at least a foot shorter than him, and yet she'd said, "I won't run anymore. I won't try to leave. I've decided to stay and protect you."

"Why?"

Midnight black eyes afire in a sun-brown face that was all sharp bones. "Because you don't have a monster inside you."

"Keep your promise," he said now. "Don't leave. Stay with me. *Stay*."

His only answer was a pulse so faint, he could barely feel it.

Chapter 6

STANDING BELOW A star-filled North Dakota sky, Vasic tried and failed for the hundredth time to get to Aden or Zaira. "I can't sense either of them," he told Ivy where his wife stood next to him on the wide verandah both his lost squadmates had helped build.

The light above bathed the area in a gentle glow that didn't penetrate the night darkness beyond. "I've never not been able to sense Aden." The idea that his failure meant his closest friend was dead was a possibility he refused to consider.

Dark circles under the translucent copper of her eyes and lines of tension around her mouth, Ivy took the

phone from her ear and thrust it into a pocket. “Sahara says Kaleb’s continuing to try, too, but he’s getting nowhere.”

That was bad. Vasic was a born teleporter and Kaleb Krychek a cardinal telekinetic who could also lock on to people rather than simply places. If the two of them couldn’t locate Aden or Zaira, no one could. “I can’t even tell if they’re together or not.” The timing of the abductions suggested the same foe at work, but they couldn’t rule out two separate actions or two separate prisons. “The Es connected to Aden and Zaira—they’re still sensing nothing?”

Ivy rubbed her face. “Yes. They’re saying it doesn’t feel like death . . . just as if they’re lost.”

Vasic had never known Aden to be lost. Even as a child, his best friend had known where he was headed, known what he wanted.

Wrapping her arms around him, warm and soft and loving, Ivy said, “Aden’s strong, resourceful, incredibly smart, and Zaira’s lethal, with a mind that thinks in ways no one can predict.” The bond between them rippled with her passionate belief. “Whatever the situation, I know those two will come out on top.”

Vasic held her tight with the single arm he possessed; Samuel Rain’s attempts at designing and building him a working prosthetic had continued to fail. Vasic could’ve halted the entire thing, but after what the brilliant robotics engineer had done to save his life, it was a small enough thing to indulge Samuel’s eccentricity and determination to succeed.

“He needs constant challenges,” Aden had said a bare week earlier, while he and Vasic were going through a martial arts training routine in the open area to the left of the verandah. “Right now, you’re it.” A small pause. “Sooner or later, he *will* succeed or go mad trying, so you’d better decide if you do, in fact, want a prosthetic.”

“Since I was eight years old,” Vasic said to Ivy, the side of his face pressed to the soft black of her hair, “Aden’s always been there.” A quiet rock that didn’t shift or give way no matter how vicious the deluge. “The idea of not being able to speak to him . . . I can’t process it.” Vasic had once had a death wish; it wasn’t until this instant that he understood what it must’ve done to Aden to believe he’d have to watch Vasic die.

Ivy leaned back to reach up and stroke his hair off his face, her gaze potent with emotion. “He’s your brother.” She swallowed past the thickness in her voice. “And he’s our family.”

She understood; she’d always understood. Never had she begrudged him his friendship with Aden. Never had she failed to include Aden in their new family.

Love isn’t finite, she’d told him, it is infinite and it has infinite facets.

“I love him, too,” she whispered. “Even though he’s a year younger than you, he’s like a big brother.”

“Yes.” Vasic cupped the back of her head. “Aden’s always been older than he should be.” Always carried too much weight on his shoulders.

“And Zaira.” Ivy’s hand fisted against his chest. “She plays with Rabbit, you know.”

“What?” He’d never seen the commander throw so much as a stick for his and Ivy’s pet, had always thought she was too deep in Silence to pay attention to the needs of a small white dog.

Ivy nodded against him, fine strands of her hair catching against his jacket. “I’ve seen her when she thinks no

one is watching. She'll play-fight for his stick with him, and once, I saw her give him a treat she must've bought herself."

Raw hope grew in his heart, dulled only by the dark fact that both Aden and Zaira were missing. "Is she capable of breaking Silence?" He'd never forget the defiant, bruised, and bloodied girl he and Aden had first met, the girl Aden had stayed in touch with even when he and Vasic had been transferred to a training facility on a different continent.

Vasic and Aden had shared so much growing up, but Aden's relationship with Zaira was and had always been, separate. Vasic had never questioned it, seeing it simply as Aden being Aden and keeping an eye on a member of the squad who needed it. That was before Ivy. Being bonded to an empath had given him new eyes; he'd begun to glimpse odd inconsistencies in Aden's interactions with Zaira, things that didn't line up with his behavior when it came to the rest of the squad.

Vasic hadn't said anything but he hoped that his friend would find with Zaira what Vasic had found with Ivy. He wanted that for Aden, wanted him to know what it was to find home in his lover's eyes. Even more, he wanted the laughter for Aden, the joy of figuring out how to navigate this new territory of love and affection and tactile contact that wasn't about pain or training or anything but pleasure. The only problem Vasic had foreseen was Zaira herself—the Venetian commander had never shown any signs of desiring a life beyond Silence.

"Zaira's shields are so strong I never pick up anything," Ivy told him, running a hand up and down his back in a petting gesture she didn't seem to be aware of making but that was deeply familiar to him by now. "I don't know if she feels or even *wants* to feel, but anyone with the capacity to be kind to a small animal who can offer her no advantage, has a heart." Ivy looked up, a sheen of emotion in her eyes that punched him in the heart. "She has this blunt and deeply honest way of looking at the world. No filters."

"You're friends," he said, the realization a surprise.

Ivy wiped at her eyes. "Not yet, but we're getting there. I really like her even if she keeps telling me I have the survival skills of a newborn puppy," she added with a wet laugh. "She's planning to teach me self-defense moves tailored to my size and weight."

"Did you tell her I'm already giving you lessons?"

A shaky smile. "She said the things you're teaching me are fine if I plan to grow a foot and put on ninety pounds of muscle. Otherwise, I need to move smarter and be more sneaky."

He felt his lips curve slightly. "Yes, that sounds like Zaira." Pressing his forehead to Ivy's when she drew in trembling breath, Vasic cupped her face in his hand. "You said it—they're tough. They'll survive and we'll find them."

"I know." Ivy closed her fingers over his wrist. "I just hope they're not being hurt." Anger and worry and frustration. "It's enough, Vasic. *Enough*. Why can't the world just leave the Arrows in peace?"

Vasic had no answer for her, but he knew his next move. "I'm going to head to Venice," he said, continuing to hold her face in his hand, her skin so soft under his touch and her love so sweetly fierce that he was astonished all over again that he had the right to hold her, to call her his own. "We still aren't certain where Aden was taken, but Zaira's team has pinpointed the exact location of her abduction."

"I'll come with you." Ivy pressed her palms to his chest, his empath who was so generous with touch, with

affection. "I might be able to help some of Zaira's people. Especially Alejandro—he's not functional without her."

• • •

IVY had been right to worry about Alejandro.

The Arrow, who was only in his twenties, had imprinted on Zaira after his brain reset following an overdose of a drug Ming LeBon had used to turn Arrows into mindless weapons. As a result of Zaira's absence, he was in a violent rage. Corralled in a secure room in the Venetian compound, he was crashing his body repeatedly against the door in an effort to get out.

"Be careful," Vasic told Ivy, well aware she had a full measure of the empathic tendency to give too much, even at the cost of her own safety. "His brain is compromised. He may not react to empathic help in a predictable way."

"He's afraid." Ivy's voice held an echo of pain that wasn't her own. "I can sense it from here—Zaira is his only anchor to sanity and he's terrified he's falling back into the abyss. More than that, he's terrified for her." Her head turned toward the door behind which Alejandro screamed in fury. "Keeping him trapped and unable to assist in the search for her isn't a good idea."

Vasic wanted to free the other male, but he also knew that to be an impossibility. "He's a deadly threat. He'd think nothing of killing tens if not hundreds of people in his hunt to find Zaira." The commander was Alejandro's sole priority but not in a healthy way. "The best we can do is sedate him so he doesn't harm himself." And hope Zaira wasn't lost forever, because if she was, so was Alejandro.

The clarity of Ivy's eyes reflected her awareness of that terrible unspoken truth. "I'll see if I can calm him enough that the process of giving him a sedative doesn't turn into a bloodbath—and doesn't cause him even more psychic pain."

Waiting in the predawn darkness that cloaked this part of the world, he watched until he saw her reach the closed door guarded by two sentries who came toward her, no doubt with a report about Alejandro. Only then did he follow Zaira's lieutenant, Mica, out of the compound that had functioned as a secret bolt-hole under Silence. It was here that many of their "dead" had come, the ones deemed useless by Ming and targeted for execution.

Aden, Vasic, Zaira, and the others at the heart of the rebellion hadn't been able to save all their brethren and each loss lingered an open wound on their souls, but they'd saved enough that the squad was now the strongest it had ever been. Many of Ming's useless Arrows had decades' worth of experience to pass on to those coming through the ranks. Even Alejandro had something to contribute—quite aside from being a fully trained Arrow who could provide backup as long as Zaira gave him the order, he was a genius with delicate explosives.

Ming hadn't seen any of that. All he'd seen were men and women who were "imperfect," and thus not worth the time or the effort to ensure they could remain a part of the squad. That made him a fool.

"What was Zaira doing outside the compound?" he asked Mica.

"I think she just needed downtime." The dark-haired and stocky male, whose jaw was currently heavily shadowed by stubble, glanced around to ensure they couldn't be overheard. "Some of the older Arrows occasionally do their best to make her brain explode."

“I’ve always told Aden I’m surprised they’re all still alive.” Zaira was not known for her patience.

Mica’s expressionless facade didn’t crack. But when he spoke, Vasic understood why he was Zaira’s lieutenant. “I’ve offered to disappear them where no one would ever find the bodies, but Zaira says they’ll come back from the dead, they’re so stubborn about doing things a certain way.”

It would, Vasic thought, take time for the old guard to adapt to this new world. “Did she often take the same route on her walks?”

Mica shook his head. “She was scrupulous about never following a pattern . . . but she did go for a walk away from the compound at some point every two or three days.”

So someone had to have been watching her, waiting for her to get far enough away that the chances of backup reaching her in time were low.

“We’re here, sir.”

Though the canal water sat dark and placid beside them, the evidence of violence was easy to spot not far from where two older Arrows stood watch and kept away the robe-and-slipper-clad spectators who’d spilled out of the nearby homes. Splatters of blood marked the cobblestones, distinctive even under the dull yellow of the light seeping through the old glass of the ornate streetlamp.

Krychek appeared beside Vasic right then. Dressed in black combat pants and a black T-shirt, the cardinal telekinetic appeared more akin to the Arrows than to the political sharks with whom he swam daily. “This is the location?” His eyes, cold white stars on black, scanned the scene.

Vasic gave a short nod before looking toward Mica. “The bodies?” There was too much blood for one person; he’d have known Zaira had taken down at least one of her attackers even without the telepathic briefing he’d received when Mica’s team first arrived at the scene.

“We have three in a cold storage room at the compound.” The lieutenant stood at parade rest, his eyes watchful of the civilians who lingered beyond the perimeter. “Someone used a high-powered laser to burn off the dead men’s faces and their fingerprints show signs of having been burned off months ago.”

“Crude but effective.” Kaleb looked at Vasic from the other side of the splatters of blood, having walked slowly around, his eyes cataloguing the evidence as he moved. “Obliterating the faces wouldn’t have taken longer than a minute at most. DNA?”

Mica answered only after glancing at Vasic and receiving a nod. Vasic wasn’t officially Aden’s second in command, had never believed he was stable enough for the position, but his squadmates had always treated him as if he was—and now, the mantle was beginning to fit.

“No DNA hits.”

It was possible to wipe someone that deeply from the official record, but it took considerable power and access. “Psy?” he asked the lieutenant as Kaleb crouched down beside the bloodstains as if attempting to analyze the pattern.

The answer was a surprise. “One Psy, two humans.”

Krychek’s head came up at Mica’s response, the flawless physical lines of his face betraying nothing, despite the fact that he was the man who’d taken down Silence. Many people believed it was a twisted double bluff,

that Krychek was holding on to his own emotionless conditioning while nudging others out of it. Those who believed the latter thought he planned to take advantage of the confusion engendered by the breakdown of a way of life that had lasted more than a hundred years.

Those people seemed to have conveniently forgotten the psychic bond that tied Krychek to Sahara Kyriakus. The man wasn't Silent—he was just very, very, *very* good at showing only what he wished.

"Psy and human?" he said to Mica, his dark hair gleaming blue-black under the streetlight.

"Yes. We double-checked the genetic screen."

That was highly unusual. Psy and humans *could* work together, and the Human Alliance had recently assisted in helping those of Vasic's race control the infection that had turned so many Psy blindly murderous, but it was a fragile relationship at best. Humans had no trust in the Psy, given how often unethical Psy had used their abilities to manipulate and rape human minds. For members of the two races to work together to abduct an Arrow was so beyond the realm of what was known as to be nearly incomprehensible.

"Did the humans show signs of mind control?" Long-term control could leave physical lesions on the brain.

Mica shook his head. "It was the first thing the pathologist looked for."

Vasic wasn't surprised—it made no sense to use enslaved humans against a high-value target. The puppet master couldn't know when his slaves might collapse from the strain of fighting against psychic coercion. "Any other useful data?"

Mica's eyes met Vasic's. *Sir, should I answer aloud?*

Vasic knew Mica wasn't worried about the bystanders—they were too far away to catch anything. *Did you find any signs Krychek may be involved?*

No, though investigations are ongoing.

Answer aloud for now and run any sensitive data past me. The fact was, Kaleb had tentacles in every corner of the Net—he was an asset they couldn't afford not to utilize. And so far in their alliance, the cardinal had kept his word.

"Zaira managed to telepath certain details before she was incapacitated," the lieutenant said. "Five trained operatives working as a unit, in silence."

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