

Prologue

In the time of war...

“Father, this is insane,” Zar grumbled. “Queen Lyria has offered to meet. We need to put a stop to this. Enough lives have been lost already. On both sides.”

King Arlias let out a roar of rage as he rounded on his oldest son. “I will never call that traitor Queen! Nor will I surrender.”

Zadoc watched on as the pair argued. So much suffering and yet their father refused to back down. When Lyria and her followers had rebelled, no one could have imagined it would come to such a devastating conclusion.

His brother Kade began to step between Zar and their father, but Zadoc quickly stopped him and shook his head. Their father had always ruled with brutal force, but now he appeared to be devoid of all emotion. Rational thought nowhere in sight. Hatred was all that was left of him now. And the only thing that would stop him would be death. They could all see it. Even if they didn't want to face it, the proof was in his eyes. Ice-cold with a ruthlessness beyond compare. He would allow his people to die before he gave into Lyria's demands.

Zadoc started to leave the king's chambers. He'd heard enough foolishness and needed to check on Jasmine. He'd left her at his home with three members of the *awe'rosa*, but it still worried him when she was out of his sight. For days a sense of foreboding had been his constant companion. Zadoc only made it to the door when his father called him to a halt. Zadoc glared at the man he once admired. Once loved. “What?”

He pointed at him, his enormous wings flexing and contracting in agitation. “I have not dismissed you.”

Zadoc scowled. "I will not stand here and listen to your madness any longer. Not when my *ofelia* is at risk."

"How dare you speak to me in such a way!" King Arlias took out a dagger and flew across the room.

Zadoc braced himself for the impending assault, but Zar placed his own body directly in their father's path. The fist connecting with Arlias's jaw landed hard, breaking bone. "You go near my brother and I will end you right here," he warned as he went head-to-head with their king. "Stand down now!"

The shock on their father's face was quickly replaced by fury. "You will never rule!" Their father shouted at his eldest son as he brought the dagger up intending to thrust it into Zar's chest. A rush of wings and rage-filled shouts filled the room as Kade, Venn, Therius, and Zadoc all rushed forward in an attempt to protect their oldest brother. In all their minds, Zar was already their king. All held daggers in their fists as they faced off against their father. Prepared to kill the male if necessary.

Seconds ticked by before Kade, second in line for the throne, reached up and wrestled the blade from King Arlias's grip. "You have always been bloodthirsty, father, but you go too far this time. Enough!"

Zar clutched Zadoc's shoulder. "Go, brother, watch over your *ofelia*. I will be along to offer aid shortly."

"You are certain?" he didn't want to leave Zar, not at such a crucial time. He needed all his brothers' support, standing by his side. They were always stronger together. "She is well guarded," he conceded, even as the sense of foreboding intensified.

Zar nodded. "Trust me, I will handle this. See to Jasmine. Our females should always be our first concern."

Zadoc glanced at his father once more. Blood ran along his chin and there was a promise of retribution in his eyes as he watched Zar. It was clear he intended to kill his firstborn. In the end, Zadoc chose to leave. His father might be a ruthless killer, but Zar was more cunning, stronger, and faster. After all, it was how their father had trained them all. In the end, it would be his downfall.

Zadoc rushed toward the doors to the balcony then quickly took to the sky, soaring above the trees. He headed south in the direction of the home he shared with his beautiful Jasmine. So many fond memories flooded his mind. Since he'd brought her into his world, she'd been a beam of light. Breathtaking in her radiance. An Earth-born and yet she'd acclimated easily. Accepted their differences with an open heart. Even his father had smiled more when she was in the room. She brought joy wherever she went. *Garra* had blessed him the day he'd seen her near the barrier concealing their mountain. Even though it'd been forbidden to interact with those native to the planet, Zadoc had happily broken that law. And he'd never regretted it.

As his home came into view, he immediately knew something was off. The guard he'd had stationed on the balcony near the door was gone. Fear skated along his spine as he flew faster, landing hard on the decking. He took out a dagger and ran for the doors, then flung them wide. "Jasmine!" he called out as his gaze scoured the room. Nothing. No sound, no movement. Fear for her safety burned a path through his soul. He sprinted toward their bedchamber and saw her standing near the dresser. Pure terror in her eyes.

"Z," she whimpered.

Zadoc didn't think as he took the room in two strides. He pulled her close and stared down at her. "You are well?"

Her mouth opened, but no sound came out. Movement behind her caught his attention and too late he saw the twelve-inch blade. "No!" he shouted as he yanked Jasmine away from the lethal instrument. Zadoc watched in horror as blood spread across her dress, coating the once

pretty pale blue satin. Then without warning an arm moved around his neck and he could feel the slice. He turned and thrust a dagger into the heart of the female. Queen Lyria's followers. He began to fall to his knees, but not before hearing the wrathful shout from Zar. His last image was of Jasmine as she lay in a crumpled heap on the floor. Her eyes wide in death, her delicate hand reaching for him. Too late. He'd been too late. She was gone and Zadoc ached to join her.

He had nothing left without his Jasmine.

Zadoc by Anne Rainey

Chapter One

Present day...

His mind was clear for once and Zadoc took advantage of the rare moment. He extended his wings and shot into the night sky high above the treetops. He moved faster, flew higher, leaving his home behind as he headed for the north side of the mountain. The evenings were getting colder, and he welcomed the harsh bite of the wind as it struck his cheek. He glanced down and spotted an outcropping of rocks coming into view. He tucked his wings tight and dove toward it. He landed on the edge and looked around, searching for heat signatures. He saw an owl in a tree about a hundred yards away. A few deer grazed close by. Other than the forest animals, he was alone. He liked it that way. No one around to give him pitying glances.

Zadoc waited for the ever-present pain to slam into him, but it never came. That invisible sword splitting his skull in two was absent for a change. He wasn't sure why and he wasn't foolish enough to question it. Instead, he sent a silent prayer to *Garra*, thanking the great creator for the moment of peace. The constant pain of losing his Jasmine would never fade. He knew that. With each passing day, the anguish intensified. There would come a day when it would overwhelm him. He was beginning to think that day was near.

He took a deep breath, inhaling the cool night air, and turned off his morbid thoughts. A rustle of leaves caught his attention and he glanced down at the valley below. Kera and Bar's pups bounded out of the tree line, chasing each other. Nips and squeals as they rolled around in the tall grass had him grinning. Seconds later Bar came into view. Of course, he wasn't far behind. Zadoc knew that the male would be keeping a close eye on his offspring. Bar snarled at one of the pups and the three quickly ceased their play and moved close to their father. Bar and Kera were tough parents but loving as well. The three pups were growing and thriving. Zadoc enjoyed watching the *lhargerre* family from afar. Motion from the opposite side of the valley

caught his attention. Kera. She stalked closer and Zadoc could see she'd been hunting, judging by the fox she had clutched between her powerful jaws. When she was within a few feet of the pups, she dropped the nighttime snack onto the ground at their feet. The trio leaped on it, tearing at the fur to get to the fresh meat. Bar sidled up next to Kera and licked her snout.

It was such a beautiful scene. A family caring for each other. Zadoc would never have that. Never feel the pride of being a father. Never know the touch of his *ofelia*, his soul mate. She'd been taken from him during the war. Not for the first time he wished he'd died alongside her. Something he could never tell his brothers. They wouldn't understand his pain. His grief was a constant knife in his heart, twisting and twisting until he thought he'd go insane from it.

A sound in the sky drew his attention. Zadoc reached for a dagger strapped to his right thigh and glanced up. He relaxed when he spotted Zar coming toward him. His brother. His king. Had he followed him? When he landed on the cliff next to him, Zadoc crossed his arms over his chest and glared. "How did you know where to find me?"

Zar waved a hand in the air as he flexed his enormous wings. "It wasn't difficult. You come here often these days, little brother."

He shrugged. "It's peaceful, my king," he explained, frustrated that he was no longer alone. That his sanctuary had been invaded.

For a moment Zar didn't speak, merely watched him. His brother saw too much. He was probably the only one who truly knew the extent of Zadoc's pain. Whether it was because they were so much alike or because he'd been there the day Jasmine was slain. A combination of both, Zadoc thought.

"I have a task for you," he finally replied.

Zadoc quirked a brow. He wasn't sure what Zar had in mind, but he was already intrigued. Anything to take his mind off his own misery. "Is it the rebels?"

He crossed his arms over his chest. “Yes. Dyre has heard rumors that they might be working with the Earth-born. Specifically someone at Zenarian Industries. I want you to look into it.”

“Leave the mountain?” Zadoc hated it outside the barrier that kept their home invisible to Earth-born. “Flare is better with the employees at ZI. Why not send him?”

Zar sighed, his brows drawn together in a scowl. “He’s busy with the *regis*. When he learned of Quell’s betrayal it shook his faith in the others. Every member has undergone intense questioning.”

The *regis* were supposed to be beyond reproach. Their loyalty to the king and their vow to serve etched into their being. Zadoc could only imagine how Flare felt at finding out one of his own had betrayed that vow. The trip outside the mountain would be an uncomfortable one. He would need to retract his wings, a painful and unnatural process. But his king asked so little of him and Zadoc didn’t have it in him to deny him this one request.

“When do I leave?”

“Immediately.”

Zadoc nodded. “Does Dyre have any idea whom the rebels are working with at ZI?”

“He has one name that he wants you to inquire about. Eddie Fellers. He was fired recently. Something about sexual harassment. Miss St. Claire will be expecting you. Find out what she knows about Fellers.”

Zadoc stiffened. He remembered the female. She’d been the one to aid Dyre when he’d left the mountain to retrieve Jade Talley, his *ofelia*. Laura had acted as liaison. He’d been intrigued by her. She’d been familiar. Her scent had reminded him of something. And her eyes. So blue that he’d been drawn to her. It angered him that she’d sparked that reaction in him.

“Why her?”

Zar expanded and contracted his wings. “Because Flare trusts her, and I trust Flare. Do you have a problem with Miss St. Claire?”

Zadoc could see the concern in Zar’s eyes and he rushed to reassure him. “No. I will leave at once, my king.”

Zar nodded, then stretched his wings wide and took off. Within seconds he was out of sight. Zadoc looked down at the valley and realized Bar, Kera, and the pups were gone. Now, he was truly alone.

Zadoc stood in the foyer of Zenarian Industries. The building was a seven hundred thousand square foot brick structure that employed over four thousand Earth-born. As a holding company, ZI held controlling stock in several hundred businesses from real estate to trademarks. The company had grown over the years and they’d expanded. While he was proud of the business Zar had created, all he really wanted to do was find Miss St. Claire and get the meeting over with. Already his skin prickled with the sensation of having his wings contracted, and the air outside the *gindier* was heavy with pollution. The sooner he got the meeting over with the better.

He spotted a red-haired female seated behind a long mahogany desk tapping on a keyboard. Zadoc crossed the room, smiling when she looked up from the computer screen. “I’m here to see Laura St. Claire.”

Her eyes widened and she rushed to his feet. “Oh, Mr. Zenarian, I didn’t see you there.”

Zadoc chuckled and looked at the nameplate. “It’s fine, Sarah. I only just arrived.”

She bobbed her head and picked up a phone. "Laura, Mr. Zenairan is here to see you." Several seconds drifted by before she placed the phone back onto the base. "She's expecting you. Second floor, suite 204."

"Thank you," he replied, then headed for a set of elevators to the right. When he arrived at her floor, Zadoc noticed a few employees stop and stare. He couldn't be sure if it was because of the scar along his neck or because it was so rare for one of the owners of ZI to make an appearance. Both, most likely.

When he reached the second office on the right, he realized the door was ajar. He stepped inside the spacious room and saw Miss St. Claire standing behind a desk. She wore a cream-colored silk blouse and a black skirt that reached just above her knees. *Garra*, she was beautiful. Tall, with rounded hips and full breasts. Her shiny espresso hair was pulled back from an oval-shaped face, giving Zadoc an unobstructed view of her large, blue eyes. Breathtaking. When their gazes connected, she tipped her head to the side and smiled at him. He stepped closer and inhaled. That scent...it was so familiar. It reminded him of a violent summer storm, wild and unexpected. Intensely feminine and captivating.

She moved around the desk, her heels tapping on the tile floor. "Mr. Zenarian, it's lovely to see you again."

"Zadoc," he stated, unable to look away from the fathomless pools of her eyes. "Thank you for meeting with me, Miss St. Claire."

Her smile widened. "I insist you call me Laura." She gestured to one of the two brown leather chairs. "Please."

After they were both seated, Zadoc recalled the conversation he'd had with Zar. "It was brought to my attention that an employee was let go recently. Eddie Fellers."

Laura paled and she clutched her hands together in a tight fist on the desk in front of her. "You're here about Fellers?"

Zadoc heard her question, but he couldn't concentrate long enough to reply with any degree of coherency. He leaned closer and inhaled. The female's scent was stronger now that she was closer. "What are you wearing?"

She blinked several times, as if having a difficult time concentrating. "Excuse me?"

Zadoc waved a hand toward her. "The scent. What is it?"

Her hand closed over her neck. "Oh that. It's an herbal mixture that a friend of mine makes. She blends her own fragrances using natural ingredients. The one I'm wearing is called Warrior Dreaming. Do you like it?"

"Yes." Zadoc had to force his hands to stay at his sides. He'd never been so drawn to a female. Not since Jasmine. Guilt assailed him at the thought of his *ofelia*. For a brief moment he'd been drawn to another female. Why would Laura affect him in such a way? It wasn't in their nature to feel desire for another after finding their soulmate. Even after death, the bond was still there.

Oblivious to Zadoc's inner turmoil, Laura's smile widened. "Oh good. With the way you're looking at me, I thought maybe the scent was offensive to you."

"No, it isn't." As much as he hated himself for it, Zadoc couldn't help but smile in return. "You are very pretty, Laura."

"Uh, thank you." She blushed and Zadoc's black cargo pants were suddenly too constricting. "I feel as if we're getting off-topic though," she said, her voice softening a fraction.

Zadoc tried to get them back on track and away from things he had no business thinking about. "Of course." He cleared his throat and leaned back in the chair, putting a few inches more between him and the female's alluring scent. "First, tell me more about yourself. Do you enjoy working here?"

She nodded. "I love my job as the executive assistant for the chief financial officer." She picked up a pen and began twirling it between her fingers. "I've been with the company since I

graduated from high school. I had zero office skills at the time. I didn't know the first thing about scheduling meetings or creating digital presentations. The only thing I could do was type fast. I was lucky and had a boss that was happy to train me. I've been with ZI ever since."

Zadoc glanced over at the clock on the wall to his right. It was after six in the evening. He felt bad for keeping her past normal work hours. "Perhaps we should discuss Fellers at another time."

Laura looked at the time as well and sighed. "Darn it! I had no idea it was so late. I meant to call my brother to ask him for a lift home, but he'll be at work already. He works second shift at a shipping company in town."

Zadoc frowned. "You don't have a vehicle?"

She snorted. "Oh, I do. Unfortunately it's a piece of junk and in the shop getting a new fuel pump."

"I see." Zadoc couldn't let the opportunity to spend more time in the female's company pass him by. "I would be happy to offer you a ride."

"Oh, I can just call for a driver. Thank you though." She glanced at her cell phone and added, "My morning is free if you want to reschedule this meeting for tomorrow."

"That would be fine, but I insist on escorting you home. Zadoc stood, then waited for her to move around the desk. "After all, it's my fault you're here so late. Allow me to make it up to you," he softly demanded.

"Okay." Laura moved closer, a pretty blush filling her cheeks. Thank you," she murmured, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear that had come loose from its binding.

"My pleasure, Laura." Warmth spread inside his chest and Zadoc had to concentrate to keep from releasing his wings. Something about Laura brought out his creature. Not since Jasmine had he been so drawn to a female. He wasn't certain what it meant and Zadoc refused to let Laura out of his sight until he had an answer. For the first time in too many years, the cold

misery of his *ofelia's* loss was absent. Shame ate at him. He should remove himself from Laura's presence. Honor Jasmine. Instead, he was going to drive her home.

She's Earth-born, he reminded himself. She didn't know about his kind and Zadoc would need to tread very carefully. That meant no wings. His king was trusting him to keep their race a secret and he would not let him down.

He motioned toward the door. "Shall we go?"

"Sure." Laura grabbed her purse from the back of her chair and retrieved a set of keys from an inside pocket. "You're certain I'm not keeping you?"

He shook his head, allowing her to precede him out of the office. "I only came to speak to you. My evening is free."

"Mine too." She shot him a smile over her shoulder and Zadoc's chest filled with warmth.

Laura St. Claire was dangerous to his vow to Jasmine. He should call Zar, arrange for another male to question her. Instead, he watched her walk toward the elevator, every move she made tore at his honor. But the pain in his skull was gone. There was no denying it. Laura affected him. And until he knew why he wasn't leaving her side.