

Soul Song

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The bar was loud. Music spilled out onto the path. A trail of blue uniforms went in, few came out. The Imperial ants were marching into one of the watering holes on base. Jedda hesitated, her fingers closed over the clear topaz hanging around her neck, next to her heart. Could she be bothered looking tonight?

She released the crystal and left it hidden beneath her uniform. There was no point in advertising she was single and hadn't found her heart mate if she couldn't be bothered hooking up with a random just to fill the blank. She rolled her shoulder and cracked her neck. Gems, she was tense. She needed a drink more than she needed a bed buddy.

As she walked in she scanned the already drinking occupants. She'd made the right choice; the men with a clear topaz showing didn't interest her. A table of young ones watched her pass, no doubt they had just finished their compulsory two years and signed on for twenty. They were barely better than the cadets she'd spent the day with trying to teach them the grace required to be a sword master. And failed. If given a real blade, they would've cut off their own legs. They were the reason she needed a drink. She had them for the rest of the week. Jedda snorted and sat down at the bar, elbows resting on the ever shifting colours of the glass counter top. There was nothing light about teaching cadets. She'd rather be on guard duty for the Emperor and taking a blast.

The fresh scar on her belly twinged at the thought. The wound might be laser sealed but it still pulled.

"What'll it be," the bartender took the time to scan her ears for her rank. Five fat gold bands were wrapped around her left ear. "Quinn-sergeant."

Jedda smiled, much better than a standard ma'am-ing.

"Persimmon crush, thanks." Sweet, red and totally intoxicating. She held out her hand and the bartender scanned the wrist-band taking the exact creds required.

Her thumb tapped the bar in time with one of her favourite tunes while she waited. Beneath the music was a ringing. She tilted her head but it was gone. Jedda glanced over her shoulder but no one else seemed to have noticed. She shook her head and turned back in time to see her drink arrive, scarlet and loaded with ice. If she had too many, she'd have a red tongue for a week. Probably not the best impression to give the cadets.

The song changed to an electro thrash number and the ringing returned, like bells being struck. She closed her eyes. The notes were familiar, she'd caught pieces of the tune before. But before she thought she'd imagined it. She placed her hand over her topaz. It

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vibrated against her skin. This was her soul song. Somewhere nearby, probably in the bar, was the man with the matching song.

At birth every babe was given a clear topaz, a gift from the Emperor, to help guide them to their mate. A piece of their soul sung into the crystal. Some chose to ignore it, others searched for their mate believing in the power of Gems. Once she had believed there was one perfect person for her. Lately she hadn't cared. She had been busy and if it was destined it would happen, right?

Now here he was. Her heart-mate.

Her heart gave a flip. What if she hated him on sight? Jedda took a gulp of her drink, the cold slid against her throat, heat exploded in her stomach like pulse pistol fire. She could ignore her soul's song but he would be hearing it too.

Jedda licked a drop of red alcohol off her lip and turned on the bar stool. She cast her eyes over the crowd, automatically skimming past the women. Just because he was here didn't mean she had to accept him. Although it was said only fools and mad men walked away from their heart-mate.

Her survey of the drinkers stopped at a corner table where a group of senior officers were gathered. One man lifted his head, his gaze locked with hers. He stood, excusing himself from the gathering. Gold glinted off both his ears. Ten gold bands. A man worth his weight in gold. He must be at least a decade older than her to have earned them. She turned her attention back to her drink. It couldn't be him. A man that age would be matched. She snuck a second glance as he sauntered towards the bar, towards her. His topaz wasn't showing.

Her chest grew tight, her heart thumping hard as if calling to her mate. He was here. She should draw out her pendant and follow its pull.

"This seat taken?" The man's voice was smooth and strong, like he was used to getting what he wanted.

Her topaz jumped. Jedda glanced at the man, the Deci-sergeant.

"No, sir."

He sat in the only free seat at the bar. The lighting turned the scar that slashed the length of his cheek bone white. His gaze skimmed her uniform and took in the badge that marked her branch. "A dancer."

Jedda's lips twisted in a half smile. Sword masters always copped flack unless they were performing. They were the ceremonial branch of the Imperial Army—a reminder of their origins. They also acted as guards for visiting dignitaries, something the rest of the ants

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forgot.

She took a look at the badge on his shoulder. Spy master. “And you, sir, are a trained liar.”

The corners of his eyes crinkled like he was going to laugh. He didn’t. “You know why I came over.”

“No idea.” The topaz warmed, like it was trying to melt her heart. Was this man really her heart-mate? “If you’re looking to warm your weapon I suggest you try over there.”

She nodded to the table of giggling girls, medics from their badges, who were giving him the once over for longer than necessary.

He didn’t give them a glance. “You’re lying. I’m also trained to spot a liar.”

“That right?” Jemma drained her glass and stood. If this was her heart-mate, she didn’t want to have this conversation in a noisy bar surround by overly curious onlookers. They needed to get to know each other before deciding whether or not to accept each other as mates.

The spy master stood preventing her from leaving. “Oran.” He held out his hand.

If she didn’t return the greeting, she’d be being rude to a senior officer and a spy master. The only two people that should never be crossed were cooks and spies. Both could make life rough. She’d end up with a posting in the middle of the snowfields that guaranteed no more promotions.

“Jemma.” Their skin connected with a snap of electricity.

His grip tightened. “You just post in?”

“No. You?”

“No.”

With ten thousand people on the base it would be easy to miss Oran and never get close enough for her topaz to sing. Those times she had heard a few notes they must have passed or been in the same building.

“I was almost a spy master.” It had been her first preference when she’d decided to sign up and not return to civilian life.

“Yeah, what happened?”

“I was recommended for swords.” That wasn’t something she could turn down. The swords were elite.

“Why weren’t you at the ball for the Imperial Colonies last week?”

“Appendicitis.” Jemma considered the spy master. “Why were you there?”

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The corner of his lips turned up. “Never said I was.”

Of course not. He’d deny being born and get away with it. Behind him his friends were staring.

“What’s the party for?”

“I’m paying out.”

Cashing his gold bands for creds and a plot of land in the province. That was the Emperor’s way of keeping people in the rural areas. Many farming families were ex-Imperial, and full training in farming was provided. Somehow she couldn’t imagine Oran on a farm. He was more of a colonist, pushing the frontiers and expanding the Empire.

“Heading to the country?”

He shook his head. “I was going to take a month off, then join skyfleet. Now...” Oran let the sentence hang. Now his plans had changed.

“You can’t join skyfleet if you have a heart-mate.” Only unattached, or those misfortunate enough to have lost their mate were allowed space travel.

“I know.”

“I have ten years left.” And Oran was paying out. Would he follow if she got posted away?

“You could get a breeding license.” He said it with grin but there was a firmness behind his words.

Jedda pressed a nerve in his hand with her thumb. He was making plans for her life already. “I can kill you with my bare hands.”

He didn’t release her, only shifted his grip. “You could try,” Oran pulled her close. “But I think we’d have too much fun.”

His body was hard, lean muscle. This close she could see his ice-green eyes were flecked with gold. In peridot they would have been called impurities. On him they just added to his handsome edge. If she’d met him out of uniform, she would have given him a second glance.

“You don’t want children?”

“Never been an issue.” Only heart-mates could apply, and even then not everyone got approved. In the colonies it was different. Anyone could breed. She caught herself. She was discussing potential children with a stranger. “Look, you might share my soul song, but I know nothing about you.”

“I’ll have a dossier on your desk by morning.”

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“Yeah, and one on me in your hands.”

He shrugged with one shoulder. With his free hand he pulled his topaz free of his uniform. It was clear but shone as if lit from within. He reached out and tugged the chain around her neck. Jedda didn't stop him, there was no point in hiding it. They both knew. Rainbows arced between the two glowing gems.

Around them people stopped to look. Oran's pale green eyes narrowed. “We're attracting attention. Are we going to seal this or walk away?”

Jedda's tongue swept over her lip. He was giving her a choice. If she ran, she would be denying them both the chance at love, of living with their heart-mate. If she accepted she would be denying him skyfleet. And she had to choose now.

“You've been waiting a long time.” Longer than most.

“I heard the song, a few notes in a crowd. It was enough for me to know you were out there. To not lose hope.”

Yet not enough for him to search and now he was willing to let her go. Jedda looked down to hide her disappointment. She'd expected more, but she was no less to blame. She hadn't looked for him either, content to live her own life. “You would really let me walk away?”

“Yes. But I'd stop you before you reached the door. I'm not letting you go now I've found you. You're my heart-mate.”

“And skyfleet?”

“Wasn't meant to be.”

All the times they must have passed, just missing each other and catching the trailing notes of their soul song. One more day and Oran would have been gone for good, lost to the wonders of the universe.

Jedda raised onto her toes, Oran lowered his lips to hers, a gentle kiss that burned with potential. Warmth from the topaz filled her heart. They pulled apart, their gems now a matching deep luscious pink, a colour unique to them.

Clapping and whistles filled her ears as the soul song faded. The bartender placed two glasses of fizzing frillium on the bar. Jedda glanced at Oran, he picked up the free drink tapped her glass, raised it to the onlookers then took a sip. She did the same, but she spoke over the rim.

“I'm not leaving with you tonight.”

“Didn't expect you to.”

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“Don’t forget the dossier.”

“0600 okay?”

“Fine.” Jedda put her glass down. “You know where my office is?”

“I will.” He kissed her again his lips sweet with frillium. Then he left her standing and went back to his party, leaving her with a backward glance and a smile to take home.

Jedda was early, hoping to catch him. She hadn’t slept, a thousand questions burned her tongue, a thousand more spun her thoughts. When she went into her office the folder was already on her desk. She choked back her disappointment at not seeing Oran. No doubt he had a pile of paperwork to get through before he handed over his bands.

She flicked open the file not bothering to sit down. There were only two sheets of paper and a ticket to Vivish Bay, a fancy resort on the coast where the jungle met the sea. She blinked as she read the Imperial Army document. It was a signed leave form...for her. She had a month off starting today. She couldn’t just leave, she had work to do, cadets to train...maybe a month off wasn’t so bad. The other piece of paper was a handwritten note.

Come and find out.

Oran

She smiled and fingered the shimmery green ticket. She could give Oran the month and see if this heart-mate thing was everything it was supposed to be. Her skin warmed and she looked up. Oran stood in the door way, dressed in cream, the gold gone from his ears and an almost smile on his lips like he was unsure she would say yes.

“You move fast.” Jedda said trying to calm the nerves frying under his gaze. Out of uniform he still commanded attention.

“I have a lot of time to make up for.” He glanced at the ticket in her hand. “Will you come?”

Their soul song filled her heart. This was her heart-mate. The man she was destined to love. She slipped her hand into his, not wanting to waste another day not knowing.