

# Shadow Warrior

## Excerpt 2

By

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### Chapter Four

Still in a half dream, half awake state when Tesla opened her eyes, the room took on the shape of her old room at her home manor. Dim luminaries flickered and played with the shadows on the muted gray walls. She sighed and stretched, reaching her arms above her head.

A squeal of metal brought her crashing back to reality. A reality where she was a prisoner on a ship speeding to another planet. Then came the realization that she had made a complete and utter fool of herself. She groaned and buried her head in her arms.

“How much longer to you intend to stay like that, Tesla? I am hungry.”

Tesla cocked her head and opened one eye. Not a dream. Cad stood over her, his hands on his thin hips, one foot tapping out an impatient rhythm on the floor.

“How did I get here?”

“You don’t remember?” Cad fell on to the sleep platform hard enough to make it bounce.

“Ouch,” Tesla groaned and grabbed her head. “No, I don’t remember.”

“You got mad at the Outlander—“

“Jaxon,” Tesla corrected her mind not on Cad’s story as much as she tried to remember what had happened to make her feel so bad.

“-and I was sent from the room. When I returned, you and the Outlander were rolling around on the floor.” Cad stopped his face thoughtful. “He must have been in pain. He had a very strange look.” Cad screwed up his face looking like he was in pain.

Tesla sucked in a deep breath. Great Moon, what had she missed? More importantly, what had she done?

Cad relaxed against the covers then shrugged. “He said he had to subdue you.”

“Subdue me? Why would he have to subdue me? I don’t remember...” Her voice trailed off. Something clicked in her mind followed by the realization that she had made a complete and utter fool of herself. Tesla groaned again and buried her head in her arms.

“Tesla, what is wrong now?”

“Nothing,” she mumbled under her arms. She lifted her head and smiled slightly. “I’m fine. Why don’t you go wait for me in the kitchen?”

Cad jumped up. “All right. You won’t take long, will you?”

“No, I just want to change.”

Her smile faded after Cad left. Oh, stars, what had she done? The last thing she remembered with clarity was feeling anger and frustration brought on by boredom. And, if she admitted to herself, fear.

Tesla forced herself from the platform. After splashing water on her face, she looked up at her reflection staring back at her from the washroom mirror. Puffy, dark circles shaded her bottom lids; the whites of her eyes were pale in comparison. For an instant, a face superimposed itself over hers, a masculine one with snapping dark eyes. She gasped and stepped back. There was something... But the thought was gone before she caught it.

Something else had happened. Why couldn't she remember?

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Once she saw to the Prince's hunger, Tesla left him alone and found herself pacing the narrow confines of the command deck. Jaxon was nowhere to be found. Not that she'd been looking for him; she certainly hadn't been.

From what she could tell from the mass of lights on the console, the ship appeared to be doing what it was supposed to be doing and going where it was supposed to be going. Apparently, no one needed to actually fly this thing.

She went to the small view window and stared out at the darkness beyond, the ship's passing made the stars look like they flew past the glass instead of the other way around. A lifetime of activity left it hard for her to sit and read or play games as Cad did. Right now, he was in his cabin, reading about the Quir galaxy perfectly content in his solitude. But, Tesla couldn't just sit and read or play games. She had to do something.

Since the ship didn't need her to push any buttons or turn any dials, she headed for the rear of the ship. Maybe she'd missed something on her first search.

Passing the loading bay, she stopped at the sound of metal clanking against metal. The door opened with the tiny sound of air escaping, and she peered around the edge. Jaxon hadn't told her there was anything dangerous on board, but then he hadn't said they were going to Delphi either. Until he had to explain why he wasn't controlling the ship.

The sight that met her eyes was far from what she expected. Jaxon stood before a floating object. Streams of light struck at the Outlander as he defended himself. His blade danced and flashed with every hit from the light.

Mesmerized by his fluid movements, Tesla slid further into the bay. Each step she took felt as if she were moving through a thick liquid – a part of her wanted to move closer and another part wanted to run the other way.

When she was within a few feet of Jaxon, he spun to avoid a bright blast. A look of surprise crossed his face when he saw her. Momentarily, he paused. Another burst of light flashed, striking him. The jolt pushed him back. He fell to one knee.

“Stars,” Tesla cried out and took a step in his direction. When he raised a hand, she stopped.

“Tesla, stay there.” The words came between deep inhalations of air. He spoke into the comm band around his wrist. The silver object ceased to spin, then rose into the ceiling of the bay where it went dark.

Jaxon stood but stayed bent over, his hand clapped to his side where the fighter drone had struck. A hiss escaped him. Blast, that had hurt.

How had Tesla managed to get so near without him sensing her? Not good. This was becoming a pattern he didn't like and could ill afford.

“Are you all right?”

Tesla's hesitant voice reached him. Despite his annoyance for not sensing her arrival, Jaxon looked up and met her worried gaze. “Yes. It was merely unexpected.”

“What was that?”

“A fighter drone.” Jaxon retrieved his shirt from the toolbox. Slipping his arms through the sleeves, he left the front open until the ship's medic could repair the burn. “For simulated weapon's practice.”

When he glanced at her again, her eyes were on the drone, a thoughtful expression crinkling her nose. A grin twitched the corners of his mouth. It wasn't the first time he'd seen her nose twitch when she concentrated.

Excitement flashed in her eyes when she transferred her gaze to him. “Will you teach me to use this?” A wave of her hand indicated the drone. When he didn't respond right away, her chin lifted in a challenge. “Well, will you?”

Jaxon mentally shook his head to clear his surprise. “Why?” He was stunned when the why came out instead of the emphatic no he intended to say. It wasn't that women on his world didn't fight. They did. But, somehow the thought of Tesla picking up a weapon disarmed him.

“To fight.” She moved closer, close enough he could smell the fresh, floral scent of her hair. “I want to be able to defend myself.”

The determined glint in her eyes told him she was serious, but it didn't convince him that training her was a good idea. He rubbed his side. She was a distraction he didn't need.

"I don't think it's a good idea."

"Why not?" She seemed genuinely interested. Not angry.

"It isn't proper." He inwardly winced at the lame excuse.

Tesla stopped short. Of all the reasons she'd been prepared to hear, being proper was not one of them. "It isn't proper?" she repeated, sure she hadn't heard him right the first time.

Jaxon rubbed his chin. "I know your people. Women don't fight."

How would he know that? Had he ever been to Louvain? Maybe he'd been one of the Outlanders at the palace.

"We aren't on my planet." She flipped her hand, waving off his argument. "And, as you so eloquently stated earlier, there may be nothing of my people or planet left. If that's true, then it won't matter if I learn to fight."

Frustration sharpened his expression. She pressed her point. "Jaxon, this is important. I don't want to be in a position of worrying whether I can defend Cad or myself. Maybe if the women of my world had been permitted to fight, we could have fought off the Anatta. Instead, we watched our men either die or turn before they were turned." She moved closer, laying a hand on his arm. "Please, teach me how to fight."

Jaxon looked at her hand resting on his arm. When he met her eyes again, she saw an intense look she didn't recognize, but it sent a rush of excitement through her. Her heart skipped a beat.

The last time she'd been this close to him, she'd stroked his hair. Now, her fingers itched to do it again. The sweat-dampened waves clung to his temples and curled on his neck. A warm smell, of masculine perspiration, mixed with clean male tickled her nose. She wanted to lean in, press against his skin and take in the intoxicating scents.

Something of her thoughts must have echoed in her eyes and body language. Under her hand, Jason's muscles jumped then tightened. The dark iris of his eyes brightened, a faint shimmer of gold flashing in the depths. She watched, mesmerized, as he leaned toward her.

The ship's claxon shattered the moment.

Jaxon stilled a finger's space between their lips. He'd been drowning in the blue depths of Tesla's eyes. About to kiss her.

Bad move. He had no time for a relationship, and no desire to start one.

The ship lurched. Jaxon used the ship's movement as an excuse to stumble back. Her hand dropped from his arm. He felt its loss, the warmth of her palm still heating his skin.

"What is it?" she asked, her expression changing from desire to fear.

"I don't know." Heedless of his half-dressed state, he ran for the bridge, Tesla close on his heels. Jaxon thought about telling her to go to her quarters but he suspected she wouldn't listen, and he didn't have time to ensure her obedience.

"Computer, identify alarm," he called into the comm unit as he entered. At the main panel, he tapped in commands to bring up the concealed screen. At Tesla's half-gasp, he flicked a glance. This was the first time he'd shown her the big screen. Keeping

it a secret had seemed small enough a deception. Why it bothered him now was perplexing.

“Proximity warning. Unknown aircraft within ten star miles.” The ship’s modulated androgynous voice filled the room.

“How long until contact?”

“Twenty minutes at present course and speed.”

An unknown contact? His ship had the schematics of every ship in the thousands of worlds and galaxies. The entire star system had been mapped. Even the Anatta world had been mapped. The surveyors made a mistake when they didn’t share the race’s true nature. A mistake thousands paid for. Could there be other planets and races?

“Hostile intentions?”

“Unknown,” the computer replied. “Sensors indicate an array of weapons vastly outnumbering current ship’s capability.”

“Jaxon, are we in danger?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know.” He pushed in another code on the console. “Computer, plot the location of all nearby planets or other space bodies suitable for concealment.”

“Anacron Asteroid Belt, two star miles. Probability of concealment within the belt is ninety percent. Probability of safely navigating belt is thirty-two point five zero percent.”

Damn.

“Anything else?”

“Negative. The asteroid belt is the closest space body capable of providing concealment.”

Jaxon stroked a hand through his hair. He’d piloted asteroid belts in the past but they were small compared to Anacron. The result of a large star explosion, Anacron held large chunks of planet in a tight elliptical around its dead moon.

Thirty-two percent. Not good odds. He glanced at Tesla. The rosy flush of her cheeks had paled, her eyes now large in her face. She stared at him, her expression alternating between fear and trust. Fear he understood; trust was different.

And uncomfortable.

What if the unknown ship turned hostile? He needed to decide between his ability to navigate the asteroids against his ship’s ability to defend.

“Unknown contact, eight star miles.”

He held Tesla’s glance as he struggled for an answer. Risking his safety was one thing. Risking the safety of innocents was quite another. There was no choice; they had to go in. His odds were better at surviving the asteroid field than going into a battle with an under gunned ship and inexperienced crew.

“Computer, plot the safest course into Anacron to the largest asteroid capable of supporting the ship.” He turned to Tesla. “I can’t take a chance on whether the ship is hostile.”

“But... Thirty-two percent?”

“The odds are against us, but I’ve piloted in worse situations.” He spoke the truth. She didn’t need to know the ship he’d piloted in worse situations was a small slip fighter. Not a larger transport like this one.

Doubt filled her eyes, but Tesla nodded. “What do you want me to do?”

“Bring your Prince to the bridge. I’d like you both strapped in up here.”

“Contact in ten minutes. Anacron Asteroid Belt in three,” the computer droned.

Without saying anything further, Tesla whirled and ran for the door. Jaxon watched her trim figure, the breeches she’d started wearing perfectly molding to her skin. When had he started noticing her as more woman than girl?

When she disappeared, he spun the pilot’s chair around and belted in, fixing his gaze on the view screen. The dense grouping of floating rocks got larger as they moved closer, the bigger ones filling up the view screen. He sighed.

This was going to be rough.