

*~ Official Document ~*

*Galactic Strike Wing*

*Discharge Record #12234-P1*

*Subject: Commander Zayn Phoenix*

Following the recommendation of the Medical Corps, it is my disappointing task to grant Commander Zayn Phoenix discharge at his request. He has been an invaluable member of the Strike Wing under my command. I have watched his natural talent for piloting develop since his days in the Academy. If there was ever a man born to be in the Wing and pilot the TH47 Talon, it is Phoenix.

There is no doubting his skill at the cockpit controls or his bravery in battle but he has not recovered since the regrettable incidents on Lucifa in the Devil's Nebula. I sincerely hope that civilian life grants him the peace he seeks.

Admiral M.N. Corvin

## Chapter One

One wrong touch of the controls and he'd be dead.

Zayn Phoenix handled the flight-pod's controls with the lightest touch. It was experience—years of it—but also gut instinct and nerves. For him, flying had never been about pushing button A, or pulling lever B. It was a passion.

Watching the map on the tiny viewscreen, he saw a turn coming up. He didn't tense, stayed relaxed, but his concentration was fierce. Maneuvering a pod barely big enough for his body through the tight twists and turns of a space station's ventilation system wasn't something he did every day.

He waited, watching the small red blip that showed his pod's location on the screen, and when it reached the right spot, he tilted the tiny joy stick. The pod responded, turned hard to the left and sped down another vent shaft. His end goal, marked on the map with a giant blue cross, wasn't far ahead.

"Hey, flyboy. You there yet?"

The voice came through his nano-earpiece loud and sharp. Like his brother was seated right next to him. Except there wasn't an inch of space in the pod for Dathan to squeeze his muscled body in.

"Remember I said I needed complete concentration while flying this thing?" Zayn muttered.

"Yeah. So, are you there yet?"

Zayn rolled his eyes. "Nearly."

"I want that crown, Zayn." The new voice was a shade deeper than Dathan's and held its usual serious edge. "Darc's been after it for months. I want it."

"I'll get your bloody crown. Now, shut up." Zayn frowned. His oldest brother Niklas' obsession with their rival treasure hunter left Zayn worried. They'd all had their asses handed to them by the lethal woman numerous times. Nera Darc was emotionless and deadly. Nik and Darc

had a dangerous relationship of one-upping each other, which was going to get one of them killed before long. Zayn just wanted to make sure it was Darc, and not Nik who got hurt.

He turned his focus back to the controls. They'd been planning this hunt for weeks. Vand Braxx had spent more than a few nights boasting about his purchase of the Crown of the Consorts. Old Earth treasure was coveted and valuable. The guy, on the other hand, was scum. His private space station was a haven for thieves, thugs and anyone interested in shady activity of the less-than-legal variety.

The Phoenix brothers, therefore, didn't feel an ounce of remorse of relieving him of his latest treasure.

Not that they'd sell it for full price. Since Dathan had up and married an upstanding astro-archeologist, they were suddenly donating a lot of the treasure they hunted to museums. Zayn grinned. They still gladly accepted the finder's fees, though. And Zayn quite liked having Eos around. She'd smoothed out some of Dathan's ragged edges—he'd had quite a few—and her insane smarts made planning their hunts a hell of a lot easier.

Zayn palmed the controls and the pod dipped, flying downwards through yet another vent. He enjoyed the sensation of falling.

And going fast.

He'd always loved speed, but in the last few years, he'd developed an addiction for it.

Going fast meant the bad memories couldn't catch you.

All too soon, he brought the pod to a gut-churning stop. "I'm at the location. Exiting pod. Radio silence 'til I'm back."

"Good luck, Zayn. Be careful." Eos' softer, cultured voice whispered in his ear.

The door opened with a hiss. "Thanks, babe." Zayn pulled himself out of the pod and stepped onto the metal grate of a maintenance platform. He glanced upward. The hatch into the station was eight meters above his head. His boots were made of synth-leather, silky soft and great for sneaking around. The magnetic soles were also pretty damn useful.

He pushed one foot against the wall and felt the snap as the boot stuck to the metal. He walked up the wall and then went to work on the blinking control lock beside the hatch. A second later, the hatch opened without a sound.

Zayn climbed through. He was in a bedroom. It was draped in metallic gold fabric—the walls, the ceiling, the posts at the corners of a bed large enough for an entire VelocityBall team.

And in the center of the bed was a woman with very dangerous curves. Naked curves.

She sensed his presence because she slid sensuously against the silken sheets and looked over her slim shoulder. She pushed a tangled cloud of multi-colored hair back. Her gaze skimmed his tight flight suit, then she shot him a smile designed to turn a man's cock hard as space rock.

Zayn loved women. Always had. But this lush woman left him uncomfortably cold. Instead, the image of a toned, athletic body and a cap of blonde hair wavered in his vision for the briefest second.

*Mission, Zayn.* He shot the woman a smile and pressed a finger to his lips. She nodded and gave him her best come-hither look. He mouthed *later* and crept out of the room.

Eos' research had indicated that Braxx's harem girls weren't particularly loyal to the man. He provided them with luxury but he was cruel and demanding.

Just another good reason to give the man a huge fuck you. Anyone who hurt women was lower than low.

*That include you, Phoenix?*

The uncomfortable thought was a kick to his belly. Zayn gritted his teeth and kept moving.

A few rooms later—all thankfully empty as planned—he found Braxx's little throne room. At one end of the space was a large elaborate chair of twisted metal set on a small dais. Behind it, a huge window offered a fantastic view of space and the distant asteroid field that provided the station with protection. One of those asteroids was also hiding his ship, the *Infinitas*, and his brothers.

Zayn's gaze moved back to the butt-ugly chair. Why did these bastards always have thrones? What was wrong with a good office? Or just a comfy couch? This his gaze zeroed in on the slim stand spotlighted in the center of the room. He walked toward it.

*Incredible.* In the center of the pedestal sat the Crown of the Consorts nestled on a bed of blue velvet. It was made from platinum, set with a sprinkle of diamonds. Four arms arched up to some sort of cross at the top. But what stole the show was the huge diamond sitting right in the center at the front. Eos had told him it was called the Koh-i-noor and was just over a hundred carats. The crown was a symbol of power and wealth. But also a piece of history.

Zayn always thought it was wrong to lock treasure away, even in a reputable museum. Life was supposed to be lived, experienced. This crown should be gracing a beautiful woman, not cold and lonely, locked away on a space station. And definitely not Vand Braxx's space station.

He opened the secure bag he'd brought to carry the invaluable piece. He reached out to grab it and his fingers passed right through it.

What the fuck? He tried again. A fucking hologram!

He touched his ear. "Guys, we have a problem. Crown is a hologram."

Dathan's curses echoed through the line.

"Braxx could have the real thing in a safe." Niklas was always the voice of reason on a Phoenix treasure hunt.

Zayn glanced across the room. Wild Delican art graced the walls and other artifacts and treasures were dotted around. "I don't think so. The room is jam-packed with expensive stuff." He thought of the curvaceous woman lounging in her exotic room. "The guy likes his toys on display for everyone to see."

Looking back at the pedestal, Zayn searched for the hologram projector. He found the tiny dot, far smaller than any he'd seen before, on the side of the stand. He pressed it and the hologram of the crown disappeared.

What was left nestled on the velvet was a small metal bird of prey with wicked-looking talons.

Anger stormed through him. "Damn it. Our pain-in-the-ass rival's been here."

"What?" Dathan demanded.

"There's another one of those birds of prey. He was here. Stole our prize right out from under us. Again." Zayn had no idea who their mysterious rival was, but this was the third hunt where the treasure hunter had bested them. "What the hell does he want?"

"Better yet, who the hell is he?" Nik asked.

"Get your ass back to the ship, Zayn." Dathan's voice was tight with barely leashed anger. "We can't ignore this little upstart any longer."

Zayn fingered the silver bird before he slipped it into his pocket. It reminded him of the hawk logo he'd once worn on his Strike Wing uniform. He pressed the button to turn the hologram back on.

Nothing happened.

For a second.

Then an alarm started blaring.

*Oh, fuck.* The bastard had set a trap. Zayn spun and sprinted back toward the entrance to the

vent network.

He'd made it out of the throne room when he heard shouts and the thunder of running guards. Great. He pushed harder for more speed. The door to the bedroom was ahead.

Suddenly, a large guard sprinted around the corner ahead of him. He was a Taurean with a broad, stocky body covered in gray skin and small tusks on either side of his mouth. Taureans were known for being incredibly strong.

Zayn debated. The one weakness of Taureans was they were slow. Zayn had speed. And plenty of it.

It didn't matter, the guard made the decision for Zayn. The Taurean lowered his head and charged.

Zayn's body flooded with adrenaline. He wanted to run, but he held his ground, waiting for the right moment.

The guard thundered closer. Zayn pivoted and ducked around the Taurean as he rushed past.

Then Zayn sprinted. The door was at the end of the hall, calling like a homing beacon.

Laser fire sprayed the wall beside him, sending Zayn diving to the floor.

"Don't move." The words were deep and slow, like the guard wasn't used to using them.

Zayn rolled. The guard probably didn't have a lingual implant but almost everyone knew a smattering of English, the business language of the galaxy.

The guard had his gun trained on Zayn. Zayn raised his hands.

*Okay, shit. What now?* Usually it was Dathan who did this end of the hunting work. The guy was slipperier than a slink eel in a mud hole. But piloting through the vents needed Zayn's skillset, so the job was Zayn's, not Dathan's. And Zayn had no idea how to get out of this.

All he had going for him was instinct. He slammed out with his foot and hit the Taurean's knee. The guy groaned but didn't move.

Another blast from the laser pistol and Zayn felt the hot burn on his thigh.

*Flame-burned son of a bitch!* Zayn grabbed the knife he kept tucked into his belt. In a quick move, he tossed it. It sliced into the guard's shoulder. The guy let out a roar and fell like a ship with no engines, clutching at the bleeding wound. His weapon hit the floor with a thud.

Zayn grabbed it and jumped to his feet. It had been two years since he'd handled a gun. It felt cold and hard in his hands. Wrong.

His heart thundered. He stared at the laser pistol and the past he was running from crashed in

on him.

The guard groaned again and Zayn glanced up. One pull of the trigger and this guard could tell no stories, send no one after Zayn.

But an image of big, green eyes—eyes that haunted his dreams—made his stomach tighten.

He leaped forward and slammed the butt of the gun into the guard's temple.

It hit the hard bone there and the guard grinned. Zayn hit again, this time the man's nose. Green blood sprayed everywhere.

Zayn stared at the gun for a moment longer before dropping it and sprinting down the hall. He burst into the same bedroom he'd passed through before. The woman was gone. He yanked open the vent and moments later was climbing into his flight-pod.

The small engines hummed to life and he shot down the vent. He leaned his body into the turns, pushing the pod to get all the speed he could.

It felt like forever but it was only a few minutes later when the pod shot out the external vent and into space.

Made it. This far, anyway. The pod's engines were too small for the space station to detect, so he should be in the clear. He took in a deep breath and set a course to intercept the *Infinitas*.

He felt blood seeping from the wound on his thigh and slapped a hand over it. More annoyed by it than worried. They had a medscope on the ship that'd heal him up in seconds. It was the mission that had his blood boiling. This entire hunt had been a waste of time. He slammed his other hand against the side of the pod, causing it to rock.

He wanted to know who the fuck this bird of prey-taunting rival was and why the bastard had decided to mess with the Phoenix brothers. Zayn had been itching for a new mission, for something to keep him busy. And now he had it. Maybe it wasn't the same as tearing through space at interstellar speed, but Zayn vowed he wasn't going to stop until he found their tormentor.

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“Who *is* this thief?” Niklas asked.

Zayn sat sprawled on a stool in the tiny alcove on the ship that housed their medical equipment. The *Infinitas* was hauling ass away from Braxx's space station and back to their home base—the small moon of Khan. Dathan was competent at the controls but Zayn felt a

slight vibration in the engine that told him she needed his care and attention. “I don’t know but I sure as hell plan to find out.” He craned his neck. “Dathan, for God’s sake, adjust the thrusters.”

“You get your ass up and here and fly this bucket,” came the response.

“Can’t. Your wife wants to play patient and nurse with me.” Zayn shot a grin at Eos who’d just plucked the metallic cylinder of the medscope off the shelf. She returned his grin, nudging the braid of her dark-brown hair back over her shoulder. On her hands, her mehndi, the floral designs that looked almost like tattoos, were visible. They were unique to her race, the Vedic. “And she’s so pretty.”

Dathan’s response was short and pithy.

“Stop teasing him.” Eos crouched and studied the bloody tear in his trousers. “Lucky that guard didn’t aim a little higher.”

Zayn winced at the thought and out of the corner of his eye saw Nik do the same. Eos clicked on the medscope and waved its soft blue light over his thigh.

Footsteps thunked on the corridor’s metal grating and Dathan appeared. As usual, he’d let his hair grow a little too long and it was a shaggy mess around his tough face. “Ship’s on autopilot. I’ve already started putting out some feelers to our regular contacts. See if anyone knows anything about this new player.” He frowned. “Why is my wife so close to your crotch?”

“I think she’s decided she’s had enough of burned-out, old treasure hunters, decided a younger, leaner space jock is more fun. Has more stamina.”

Dathan growled.

Eos clicked off the scope. “Stop it, both of you. All finished, Zayn.” She touched a finger to his face. “Glad you’re okay.” Then she turned to Dathan. “Now come here, my burned-out treasure hunter, and show me I picked the right Phoenix.”

Dathan wasted no time. He swept her into his arms and pressed a wild kiss to her lips. Eos gripped at his shoulders, pressing her body into his.

Something in Zayn’s chest tightened. He was damned happy for his brother. If anyone deserved some happiness, it was Dathan. He’d copped the brunt of their father’s bitter disgruntlement with the world before the old man had drunk himself to death.

But as Zayn watched the couple—two people who belonged, who were making a life together, fulfilling all their passions—he felt something else he refused to name, to acknowledge.

Zayn glanced over at Nik. His older brother had a brooding look on his face, his gaze zeroed

in on Dathan and Eos as well. He was always more reserved, more academic than Dathan and Zayn, but lately broody had been his main mode of operation.

Zayn hopped off the stool. “If you two can drag yourselves away from each other for a few seconds, how about we discuss Mr. Bird of Prey. Guy’s becoming a right royal pain in the ass.”

Dathan swung an arm around Eos’ shoulders. “Damn straight. We need to work out who he is.”

“And how he knows about all our hunts,” Eos added.

Zayn and the others stared at her. “Why the hell didn’t we think of that? How does he know what we’re going after?”

“I just want to know what the hell he wants,” Nik added.

Zayn had a thought. “You don’t think it’s Darc do you?”

Nik pondered for only a second. “No, she doesn’t go for subtle. She’d be letting us know she’s stealing our targets and rub our faces in it. Just like all the other times she’s bested us.”

“Bitch,” Dathan added.

That she was, but since she’d helped save Dathan a few months back, they hadn’t heard from her. Zayn glanced at Nik’s closed face and felt a twinge of suspicion. Well, as far as Zayn knew they hadn’t.

“I’ll keep pushing our sources.” Dathan held Eos close to his side. “Someone must know who he is.”

“I’ll run some searches.” Nik crossed his arms over his chest. “See where he’s selling his goods.”

Zayn nodded. “We’ll start—” A discreet beep from the cockpit cut him off. “That’s an incoming message.”

He stalked to the command center, a large screen that controlled all the ship’s systems. A message blinked on the screen and he tapped it.

“Looks like someone’s already responded to your call, Dath. Darwood.”

Dathan grimaced. “Slippery bugger. But his intel’s always been solid, if a little old. Of course, he only sells it for an exorbitant price.”

“He says he might know something.” Zayn scanned the text. “But he’ll only meet in person.”

“Strange. Usually he’s happy to do business over the comm.”

Zayn read the rest of it. “It gets worse. He wants to meet on Syntha.”

Even Nik cursed. Syntha was a megacity world. Every inch of it was covered in neon-colored humanity and quite a few species that weren't human. There was the Sub World tunneled into the ground, the Tower World for those who lived in the mega-skyscrapers and then the Sky World—communities built on huge floating platforms tethered to the towers for the richest of the rich. The entire planet was filled with bars, strip joints, gambling dens and brothels. It was loud, chaotic and full of people out to take your e-creds.

Zayn caught his brothers' gazes. Then his sister-in-law's.

She gave him a short nod. "We have to find out who this thief is and why he's targeted us."

Zayn turned to the control panel. "Setting course for Syntha."