

Heroic Lies Excerpt

One year and two months ago...

“Promise you won’t tell anyone?”

The sun was shining brilliantly down from a vibrant azure sky, and Alexandra rolled her eyes toward it, feeling it warm her smirking face as she responded to Alexa’s request. “Did I tell anyone about how you wanted to hide in my bedroom after the third abductee was rescued?”

Alexa bit her lower lip delicately, perfect white teeth sinking into the soft pink of her carefully coloured skin. Her blonde curls bobbed around her meticulously made-up face as she turned it quickly toward her friend, giving her the same concerned half-pout that she used to use on boys when she was in middle school.

“This isn’t funny,” she complained. “This whole ‘alien abduction’ thing has me scared, and if you tell anyone what I’m about to say, I could get in a lot of trouble.”

Alexandra gave an exaggerated half-sigh, smiling the whole while. The other woman could pretend to sulk all she wanted, but the two of them wouldn’t still be friends if Alexa couldn’t handle a bit of good-natured teasing.

“All right, all right. I will not speak, repeat, write, draw pictures of, report on, convey by morse code, or otherwise reveal what you are about to say.”

“To anyone?”

“Anyone. Geez, Alexa, you know me. I talk to thousands of people every workday, but when I’m not behind the camera it’s just you and me. Who do you think I’m going to blab to?”

Alexa sighed. “You need to get out more. If you want, I could throw a party and invite a lot of cute guys...”

“...who would all be deathly afraid of ending up in my next exposé.”

“They could be right.”

“Not if I promised them otherwise.”

“OK. Secret now, party later?”

“Party maybe, secret definitely. Come on, you’re killing me.”

“Fine.” The delicate-looking blonde drew and released a sharp, bracing breath. Then, with her eyes fixed carefully ahead of her, she blurted it out. “I’m Kadian’s girlfriend.”

Surprise and excitement collided in Alexandra’s chest, and she slowly raised her eyebrows, the closest thing to a cross between “SCORE!” and a flat, startled “what” that she’d allow herself to display. Part of being a BFF was, after all, to be unshockable, and *not* to use her friend’s personal relationships to dig for facts.

Instead, she settled with the next best thing. “The alien superhero? How’d that happen?”

“It... it doesn’t matter how it happened! The important thing is, I’m worried that Zorei is going to come after me.”

“And what? Make scary words at you while waiting for Kadian to show up? You know those other three women all came out of it unharmed. Honestly, I wouldn’t be surprised if the whole thing was just an elaborate college prank.”

Alexa shook her head firmly. "It isn't. Kadian told me so."

"And you're sure he isn't just saying that to win you over?"

"I'm sure!" Alexa's eyes flashed with urgency, a hint of anger, and tangible distress.

"Alexandra, please, you can't tell anyone! I know you've been suspicious of Kadian ever since he first went public, but please--"

"OK!" Knowing her friend well enough to realize how fast this could go downhill if her agitation was allowed to snowball, the auburn-haired reporter strategically cut her off, placing a reassuring hand on her back as she did. "Calm down, buttercup. Your tomboy buddy will protect you. I promise."

Those pearly teeth worked their way into Alexa's lip again. "Are you sure, Alexandra? I don't know if you've seen Zorei up close, but he's big. He's at least as tall as Kadian, and... well..."

A bit of extra colour was seeping into her cheeks, and Alexandra couldn't resist making it worse by gently poking the affected area. "And Kadian's all tall and strong and handsome and muscular..."

"Stop it!" Alexa's voice rose to an embarrassed half-wail, but a smile was edging its way back onto her face, and Alexandra knew that her attempts at reassurance were starting to take effect.

Draping an arm over the other woman's shoulder, the reporter smiled down into her wide blue eyes. "Don't worry," she said. "If this Zorei shows up--"

Snap.

Crud.

Her voice died in mid-sentence, and her sharp eyes suddenly lifted to sweep their surroundings, seeking the source the sound that had invaded her senses. Her body, leaning conspiratorially over her friend just a moment ago, straightened abruptly, and every muscle in her slender limbs tensed with wary dread.

"Alexandra?" Alexa's voice was an agitated squeak. "Please tell me you're just doing this to--"

"Alexandra, is it?"

A smooth, familiar voice seized the redhead's full attention, and Alexa shrank back in fear as a tall blue shape stepped into view.

"And Alexa. An interesting confession I heard just a few moments ago; which one of you was making it?"

"I... I was."

Alexa glanced sharply at Alexandra, visibly startled both by the lie, and by the near-perfect imitation of her own voice.

"Please, just... leave us alone," the reporter continued, maintaining the ruse. "Neither of us wants any trouble. Just leave us alone, or I'm going to--"

Her attempt to scream was abruptly cut off, reduced to a smothered, high-pitched squeal by the hand that had clamped itself over her mouth and nose. Alexa promptly made up for her friend's inability, and the piercing shriek that rose from her chest made Zorei and his prey flinch in tandem.

An instant later, a long tentacle snaked around the blonde woman's throat, applying just enough pressure to frighten her into silence. Startled by her antagonist's formidable speed,

Alexandra reflexively lapsed into silence, setting the need to make noise aside in favour of trying to observe everything about the situation at once.

Alexa had no such reflex; her eyes had started to fill with tears, and her shaking and whimpering was enough to give the calmer captive's quest for information something to focus on.

Going to hurt her? Probably not; her skin isn't even dented where it meets his tentacle, he isn't pressing hard... Strong enough to take both of us? Maybe, but I'm not sure Alexa could handle it...

"Let her go."

His hand had loosened on her mouth, and she forced her voice into steadiness as she seized the opportunity. It was easier than she'd thought it would be; while the tense power in his arms made it clear that she was physically outmatched, her memories of the other abducted women suggested that she wasn't in immediate danger.

Those large gold eyes turned to her, their pupils contracting - *Like a snake's, but somehow far more alien; they had a strange, diagonal slant, with their upper tips aimed inward...*

A few persistent neurons in the back of her mind were already writing the story of this incident, but the rest of her focus bent itself to the task of keeping her gaze fixed on his, and settling her voice into a tone of frightened but firm persuasion.

"I'm Kadian's girlfriend. He won't hesitate to come after me. Let her go, and I'll come without a fight."

"Alexa-"

"No." Cutting her friend off strategically halfway through the name, she shook her head as best she could while her captor still held it. "Alexandra, I appreciate you offering to protect me, but... now that it comes down to it, I can't let myself be scared enough to put you in the middle of this. I'm the one who decided to date Kadian. I... I should handle this."

A few of those slowly growing tears broke free and slid down Alexa's face, streaking long wet tracks through her makeup. "Don't hurt her," she whispered, begging Zorei with her eyes. "Please, don't hurt her."

"That will be up to Kadian." The tentacle tensed briefly around Alexa's throat. "Stay quiet, and you will not be harmed. Scream before I'm out of sight, and I'll be forced to come back for you."

The golden-haired girl gave a weak nod, and while the alien's eyes were fixed on her friend, Alexandra nodded in return.

Then she gave a quick wink and smile, allowing a hint of her suddenly growing excitement to leak through.

Front-row seat for an alien battle, WOOO!

"I'll be fine, Alexandra. Go."

This could be awesome. Just so long as Zorei doesn't break his pattern, and make a liar out of me.



One year and two months ago...

"Well, this is just downright romantic, isn't it?"

Judging by the slight, spasmodic twitch, Zorei came within half a second of dropping her. Recovering at the last instant, he tightened his grip on his prey, pinning her legs together with one arm and her arms to her sides with the other.

“Your species’ capacity for what I believe you call Stockholm syndrome is truly remarkable.”

“Yeah, the other girls were shining examples of it.”

Another twitch, this one giving no indication that she was at risk of being placed at the mercy of gravity. Alexandra made a mental note of the reaction and the button she’d pushed in order to get it, then temporarily switched topics.

“Do you always carry your terrified victims into your lair bridal-style?”

The entire way there, Zorei had been staring resolutely ahead of him, half ignoring her persistent chatter, but that last statement got the better of him. “Bridal?” he echoed, glancing down at her incredulously, and Alexandra opened her eyes wide in an attempt to look innocent.

“Of course. Haven’t you looked at any wedding magazines in between kidnappings? You should ask for one next time you’re in jail. They make for great reading, and some of the dress designs are hilarious.”

“Wedding.” His voice had gone completely flat, and she got the impression that there was probably a ‘loading’ screen somewhere inside his head.

“Yeah. You know, the thing that happens right before the husband carries his wife into their new house. Like this.”

One last twitch, and this time Alexandra found herself standing in front of him. A long, thin arm extended to point toward a wooden chair, and Zorei stared at her steadily. “Sit.”

She raised an eyebrow. “There?”

“Yes. There. And put your arms on the armrests.”

“Now, Zorei, that’s cold. You invite me to your house, then you don’t even offer me a glass of water before we get down to business?”

“I have no business with you.”

“Of course, tea would be classier...”

“I have no tea.”

“Fine, then. I hate tea anyway. Hot chocolate is much better.” Alexandra turned her back on him and started to walk – toward the centre of the room, instead of the chair.

A hint of mild exasperation was starting to make its way into Zorei’s voice. “I am your abductor, not your maid. And furthermore, sugar mixed with cocoa and other questionable ingredients is hardly a nutritionally advisable choice.”

In a brisk, sprightly movement, Alexandra spun on her heel to face him, her face brightening with a huge, shining grin. “That matters to you? Aw, you do care!”

By now, Zorei’s face was turning into a mask of incredulity. “Sit. Down. *Now.*”

“OK, OK, but if you gag me, I’m going to start humming Veggie Tales songs. And believe me, once you get one of those stuck in your head, it’s *never* coming out.”

Those huge, inhuman eyes narrowed, their oddly-slanted pupils contracting into slits, and the reporter raised her hands in a placating gesture of surrender. “I never said I wouldn’t sit down. I just don’t want to be gagged.”

For a long moment, the alien stared at her, as if weighing his options and her intentions. Then he slowly inclined his cobalt head in a half-nod. “Very well. Perhaps Kadian will come faster if he can hear you scream.”

“Yeah, well, one good piece of health advice deserves another. Getting me to scream is *not* advisable, if you like your sense of hearing.”

“I assure you, all of my senses are more than capable of surviving-”

“EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!! ... Yeah, I can tell.”

Prying his face out of a pained grimace, Zorei glared at her. “Do that again, and I *will* gag you.”

“If I did that more than once a day, I’d be tempted to gag myself.” She sat, folding her arms across her chest and unhelpfully crossing her legs. “So, riddle me this, tough guy. If you’re the scary supervillain, how come you haven’t beaten me senseless yet? It’s not like you can’t get out of jail at will.”

“I have no interest in you. It’s Kadian I want.”

“Want for what, exactly? Killing him isn’t going very well.”

As he moved toward the nearest bank of computer controls, he gave her a sideways glance, his eyes sliding in her direction even as his face remained forward. “As you may have noticed, my patience is extensive. Eventually, I will succeed.”

“And then what? Rule the world?”

“My reasons are my own.”

Alexandra hopped out of the chair, but under the force of Zorei’s frustrated glare and the finger he aimed toward her, she relented and sat down. “Are you gonna tie me up? I could just make a run for it.”

For a few boring seconds, nothing happened. Then, abruptly, the alien turned and lunged at her in a formidable cobalt blur, causing the reporter to lurch back with a sudden exclamation of “Whoa!”

The movement caused the seat to rock past its centre of gravity, and for the second time in half a second Alexandra felt her heart make a violent attempt to escape by way of her throat.

Then Zorei’s hand closed firmly on the back of the chair, pinning it in place. The reporter stared at him with huge, frozen eyes, and he steadily returned her gaze as his voice fell to a low, intense murmur. “Have I made my point?”

“Yup. Point made,” she replied, her quick, tight voice coming out an octave higher than usual. Then, elastic as always, it settled back to normal. “You can make it to the door in two seconds. I can’t. And my theory that maybe you’re a human wearing a really good costume just got a lot weaker.”

His face froze, and the single hairless eyebrow that he raised seemed more like an attempt to cover the lapse than anything else. “Don’t you have more important things to worry about than determining my race?”

“I’m a reporter, so sue me. But if you want, we could talk about something else. How about that minion of yours? The one who breaks you out of jail every time and never gets caught?” She glanced around. “I don’t see him here.”

“He’s not up for discussion.” The terse statement came in a tone that brooked no argument, and it was punctuated by a sharp movement as Zorei shifted her chair upright.

Unfazed, the young woman smiled warmly. “Aw, are you protective of him?”

The corner of his mouth moved down and sideways, just a little. It was a hard movement to read; either he was accustomed to putting up a mask, or he just didn’t have a very expressive face.

Concluding that she required more data, she decided to push the matter. “Or maybe it’s not a ‘him’ at all – maybe it’s your completely devoted girlfriend who loves you no matter how much time you spend with random women and your archenemy’s girl... Hey, maybe you should have both of us over sometime, and we can kill time with girl talk while we wait for Kadian to show up and kick you around your lair. What do you do for medical treatment, by the way? Is your minion-girlfriend-thing also a nurse?”

Too late, that mask was up again. “Alexa, if you do not stop talking and let me send my transmission in peace, you are going to be waiting for Kadian for a *very* long time.”

“Let you? Why don’t you just punch me out and *make* me let you?”

His eyes narrowed. “Are you trying to convince me to?”

“Sure I am. Wanna to know why?”

He hesitated, confusion flickering across his face, and Alexandra pushed herself to her feet, setting a finger gently but pointedly on his narrow chest. “Because *you*, Mr. Supervillain, haven’t harmed a single one of your hostages in all the time I’ve been reporting on you. Because I don’t think you plan to hurt me. And because, quite frankly, I half suspect that you don’t even want to kill Kadian. I don’t know what you *really* want, but if you were who you portray yourself as, I’d have been on the floor bleeding long before now.”

For a long moment, Zorei simply stared at her. His pupils had dilated in the darkness of the lair, and as Alexandra watched a wave of conflict go churning through his eyes, she couldn’t help but think that in this moment, they almost looked human.

Then he turned away from her, striding toward the console. “Believe what you will, Alexa. In the greater scheme of my plans, it doesn’t matter either way.”

End excerpt

Thanks for reading! If you enjoyed this excerpt, and you want to see how the characters got here and how the story ends, you can get your copy of *Heroic Lies* at <http://www.stephanieobrienbooks.com/heroic-lies.html>