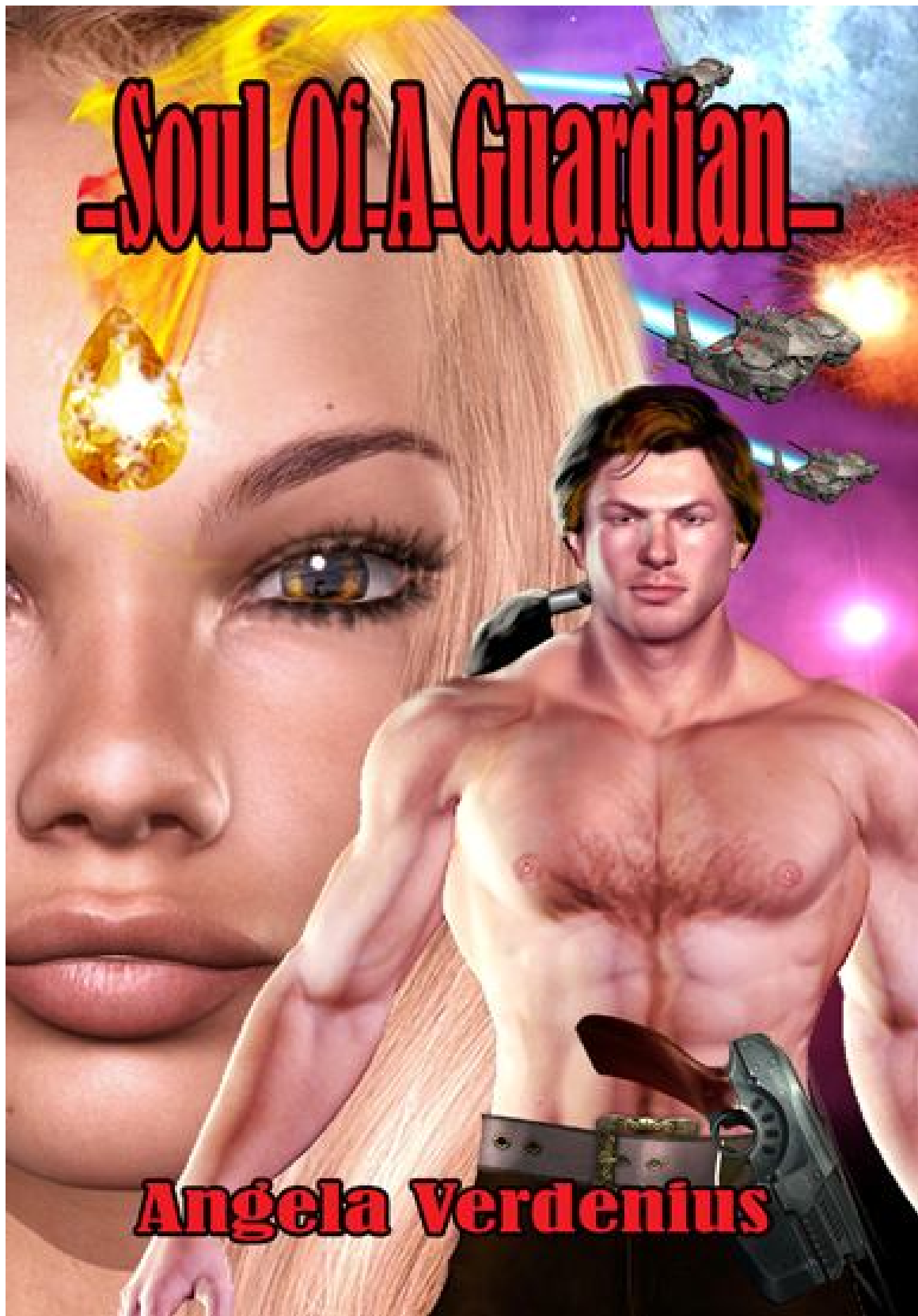


-Soul-Of-A-Guardian-

Angela Verdenius



Soul Of A Guardian

This time there was a soft moan. He froze. No doubt about it, that moan came from—he glanced over to the door in the side of the room. A whisper of sound and then a sigh. Someone was hiding in the bathroom.

His first thought was that it could very well be a tavern wench who'd been smacked around a bit by an overzealous patron, and one thing a Daamen hated was to see a wench hurt.

“Hello?” He started across the room. “Is there someone in there?”

Silence met this and he frowned. Mayhap 'twasn't a wench. Someone else?

A wet rattle of breath sounded, a sigh, and then silence.

Alarm shot through Heddham. Someone was hurt. In several long strides he was at the bathroom door and placing his hand on the doorknob. “Whoever is in there, I'm not going to hurt you, all right? You sound hurt. I'm coming in.”

“Go away.” The voice was definitely female. “This room is taken.”

As though he was going to believe that. Swinging the door open, he walked in and then came to a complete stop, his shocked gaze taking in the scene before him.

A wench was lying on the floor, her eyes open and staring sightlessly up at the wall. Blood was pooling under her and slipping down the drain in the floor beside her hip. Dressed in a plain gown that came down to her calves, her feet shod in flat slippers, she had several cuts and scrapes on her.

And she was very dead.

The wench crouched on the floor beside her had tears glittering in her eyes and a laser in her hands, the barrel pointed directly up at Heddham. A small pack was at her feet. Dressed similar to the dead wench, she had blood on the side of her gown but didn't seem injured.

But what struck Heddham the most was the tear-shaped topaz *kyrat* in each wench's forehead. The topaz of the dead wench was dull, but the living wench's was darkly bright.

The second shock of the night was realizing that he was facing two Guardians, and outside the tavern were the Aora soldiers hunting them.

What They Are Saying About

Soul Of A Guardian

“...touches on the magical aspects of one of the planets in her world.... With these new level in the Heart and Soul universe, Angela Verdenius opens up so many more avenues we can explore in future works. a very engrossing love story that will leave readers aching for more.”

Kelley Hartsell,

ck2s kwips and critiques

“In **Soul of a Guardian**, the sparks between Heddam and Tasi are hot enough to ignite a planet. The action is nonstop. Verdenius fans will not be disappointed. This is one to add to your collection.

Sandra Cox,

The Cats of Catarau

“I know I can never wait to get the next book in the series and **Soul of a Guardian** didn’t disappoint me. So if you have never read a story by Angela Verdenius, you need to go out and get one; you will not regret it.”

Lydia Funneman,

Writers Unlimited

“...another E-Ticket ride, one filled with all the excitement, treachery, and love you could ask for in one of her books... The **Soul of a Guardian** is back to the darkness, yet still holds the reader captive with the magic between Heddam and Tasita that is not lost in the telling. So often the spark can be lost in the futuristic romances that take themselves too seriously. Angela constantly keep the reader on his/her toes, however, with the twists and turns of plot, the quirks and idiosyncrasies of character, and the excitement of the current chase. “

Rose,

Romance at Heart

"...an intense story of betrayal, action and passion...

Soul of a Guardian is an excellent addition to Ms. Verdenius' Heart and Soul series, she never fails to keep you turning page after page until you reach the end always leaving you craving for more. Another keeper to add to your Heart and Soul shelf."

Brenda Edde,
Reviewer/reader

Other Works From The Pen Of

Angela Verdenius

Heart of an Outlaw February 2003

An outlawed warrior saved by a Daamen trader. Love blossoms, a powerful enemy threatens. Passion, betrayal, bloody legends, and a shocking secret in a galaxy of enemies and friends.

Soul of a Mercenary May 2003

Reya walks the edge of insanity, her soul darkening beneath a bloody secret.

For love, Maverk will follow the Reeka warrior into the nightmare reaching out for her.

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Betrayed once, Dana trusts no man. Garret will risk everything to prove his love – even if it means assisting her betrayer, and entering a country split by hate.

Love's Sweet Assassin November 2003

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The bounty hunter's soul thirsted for vengeance, her life given to the hunt.

He'd thought Sabra was dead. Now he's found her again, Cam won't give her up.

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Heart of the Forsaken December 2004

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Heart of a Smuggler Jan 2009

When small-time smugglers, a ruthless slave lord and the law mix, Hell will fly. Can one Daamen trader keep the heart of his smuggler safe?

Wings

SOUL OF A GUARDIAN

by

Angela Verdenius

A Wings ePress, Inc.

Futuristic Romance Novel

Wings ePress, Inc.

Edited by: Leslie Hodges

Copy Edited by: Elizabeth Struble

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Executive Editor: Marilyn Kapp

Cover Artist: Richard Stroud

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Wings ePress Books

<http://www.wings-press.com>

Copyright © 2009 by Angela Verdenius

ISBN 978-1-59705-389-1

Published In the United States Of America

June 2009

Wings ePress Inc.

403 Wallace Court

Richmond, KY 40475

Dedication

As always, to Doreen Verdenius. Love you, Mum

Leslie Hodges, my editor, for her support, and Richard Stroud for the great book covers.

To Bee (Brenda Edde), who has saved more than one errant character from being terminated in a fit of writer's exasperation LOL.

To all my readers everywhere – I couldn't do it without you all.

To all those who stand for truth, justice, loyalty and friendship. To those who protect us in times of war and terror, the police and armed services - you are all in my thoughts.

At the time I am writing this dedication, fires are tearing through my home state of Victoria, as well as burning in NSW and SA. My thoughts and prayers are with those caught in this terrible time. My thanks to the SES, police, ambulances, animal rescue and welfare groups, and all those helping.

Revolution

Planet Aora

Explosions seemed to shake the very air outside and cracks appeared in the marble walls. The once pristine gardens outside were, she knew, a shambles. No day flyers flitted about, no butterflies perched delicately on the edge of flowers. No man or woman walked the gardens, no children played amongst the once bubbling fountains. The finely tended gardens were a mass of burnt plants and wreckage.

Overhead she heard the hum of battle cruises and orders being yelled out. In the distance came the roar of heavy war machines breaking through the walls surrounding the palace. Screams, yells, curses. Explosions.

“Empress.”

The High Empress looked up from where she sat on her throne to see her Guardians enter the room. Four men and four women, all dressed in the Guardian uniforms of plain pale brown jackets and pants, white shirts and low-heeled black boots. Uniforms that were now dirty, some torn. One woman, Acantha, had a bloody bandage around her upper arm. The teardrop shaped topaz in their foreheads glinted in the light.

Four of her Guardians carried lasers, all of them had their sensor swords out. None showed fear, not even the youngest of them.

“Empress.” Balfour, the highest ranking of the Guardians, hurried forward. “The outer walls have been breached, the inner walls fall now.”

“There is a traitor in our midst.” She rose stiffly.

“There are war-mongerers in our midst,” he replied.

“Finally they have won.”

“It was something we didn’t expect.”

“My power is waning.” She sighed as the sounds of war drew closer. “If I was only at my peak, I would have sensed this coming. I could have dealt with this.”

“Empress, we don’t have time.” Tasita ran across the room to catch her arm. “We must move you to safety.”

The High Empress looked from the grimy hand holding her arm to the doe-brown eyes that watched her unwaveringly. The golden streaks in Tasita’s white hair were dull with ash and dirt. The youngest of her Guardians had been fighting.

The walls shook with another boom and a shower of broken marble from the ceiling spattered down.

“We can wait no longer.” Balfour came up on the High Empress’ other side and took her other arm. “We go now.”

Go and leave her people to fight and die. It grated so badly on her. Even as she allowed herself to be ushered across the great room to where Gifford, Melantha and Lajos waited by the opening to the hidden tunnel, she said, “This should never have happened.”

No one answered her and she was hurried through the opening after three of the Guardians. The remaining five Guardians filed in after her so that she was surrounded, and the opening slid shut.

Gifford had torches ready and silently they moved down the tunnel.

“We need to get you to safety,” Balfour said, his gaze darting around, never resting. “There’s a craft waiting for us in the forest. Once we have you on it we can get you to safety.”

She knew there was no argument that would sway the man in charge of her safety, nor could she sway those who followed his orders in time of danger. The job of the Guardians was to see to her safety at all times, regardless. They would never stop protecting her.

But age was upon her and their progress was slowed because of it. The journey through the tunnel took longer than she’d have liked and she knew, even though nothing was said, that the Guardians didn’t like the slower pace they were forced to walk.

“Not long now,” Gifford grunted.

The explosion tore through the tunnel, the roof tumbling down and smoke and dust billowing out in every available space. When the rumble faded, all that could be heard was the distant shouting of people.

She couldn't lift her head properly. Something was weighing her down, rubble covering her chest, pain filling her. Someone was breathing wetly, and she realized it was herself. Blood spilled from her mouth and she coughed.

With sudden clarity she realized that she was dying.

Fear filled her, but it wasn't for herself. It was for her people who would be without her, her people who were even now fighting for the freedom of the power and themselves.

"Empress? Empress!" Tasita was beside her, that glorious hair covered in dirt and the blood that ran down the side of her face. Her normally merry expression was now sober, her movements determined.

Lajos was beside her.

Tasita started to reach for her but stopped as she realized how badly the High Empress was hurt.

"Empress." Balfour knelt down on her other side, ignoring the rubble beneath him. His lips tightened and for the first time since he'd started working for her all those years ago, she saw a flicker of fear in his eyes.

Acantha moved up beside Balfour. "I can hear voices in the tunnel. We need to get moving, we—" She stopped, her eyes widening as she looked down at the High Empress.

"Help us dig her out—" Balfour began.

"No!" A surge of determination went through the High Empress. She was the Head of the Aora people. She would not be the downfall of its future.

"Empress—" Balfour began again.

"Listen to me." She coughed and felt the trickle of blood run down her chin, but she didn't flinch. Keeping her gaze trained on Balfour, she said wetly, "The House of Aora has fallen to greed. I am soon to die, there's no arguing that. But the House of Aora must rise again, and it is left to you surviving Guardians to see this through."

They knew what she meant, she could see it in their eyes.

“How many of you survive?” Black dots flickered briefly before her eyes but she blinked them away determinedly.

There was a moment of hesitation before Acantha finally answered, “We are six.”

There had been eight. The explosion had killed two of her loyal Guardians.

Acantha continued, “But we must keep moving. You need to conserve your strength and—”

“Six Guardians left. The others in the palace?”

“They died doing their duty,” Balfour replied quietly, his eyes darkening.

“Died protecting me.”

“It is our duty.”

“And my duty is to ensure that the role of High Empress and all it entails is passed on.” She reached out to him and he clasped her frail hand in his dusty fingers. “They will hunt you all down. When they pick through the rubble and find that six Guardians are unaccounted for, they will hunt you to the ends of the universe. They will hunt you because you will have in your possession the one means to bring peace back to Aora.” She finished on a gurgle and had to fight for breath.

The Guardians drew close around her, weariness in their blood and dirt streaked features, sadness in their eyes, and determination in the set of their shoulders.

Shoulders that would bear the weight of an entire world on them.

“The time is not yet for this,” she said, her voice breaking weakly as she felt her strength fast fading. “You must keep it safe until it’s time.”

“When will we know?” Melantha asked quietly. “Empress, what is the sign?”

“The one holding it at the time will know,” she whispered, blood bubbling up. “Protect this preciousness with your very lives until the time is upon you. Promise me.”

“Your wish is our command, Empress,” Balfour said quietly.

The High Empress heard the wet rasping of her own voice as she struggled to stay conscious. “You will spend your time hiding, fighting if necessary, always on the run. They will not rest until they have what they will not find when the fighting is over. Balfour, come closer.”

Grim faced, Balfour did as bidden.

When it was done and the High Empress slipped away on one last breath, he looked up at the five remaining Guardians. Sorrow filled their eyes, shock not far below the surface, but they had a job to do, a duty to fulfil.

The future of a world in their hands.

“Your High Empress has given us one final duty.” Balfour’s voice was steady even though his dirt-grimed face was pale. “We leave together. We will not fail her.”

“We will not fail her,” Ryle repeated.

“If one of us falls, the others will continue,” Balfour continued. “None of us shall falter in our duty. Failure is not an option.”

“Failure is not an option,” they echoed.

“Then let us move,” he said harshly. “Guardians, it is time.”

Six Guardians stood, six Guardians ran, leaving the body of the High Empress lying partially beneath the rubble.

Six Guardians became the source of a hunt that led across the universe.

One

Lifting the heavy barrel easily, Heddham swung it up onto one broad shoulder and started down the ramp. “I heard Gabie got into trouble with Sonja.”

Shamon, his best friend, laughed as he strode beside him with a sack balanced on his shoulder. “Sonja caught her cheating at cards.”

“Your wench has no fear.” Heddham shook his head. “I wouldn’t be game to cheat on Sonja.”

“Gabs can hold her own.” Shamon’s teeth flashed whitely in a grin. “The lass talked her way out of it.”

“Sonja was talked out of it? ’Tis something I find hard to believe.” Bending, Heddham dropped the barrel on the hover tray and straightened up.

“Gabs offered to teach her how to cheat.”

“Sonja knows how to cheat.”

“Not the same way my lass does.”

Heddham had to laugh at the pride on his friend’s face. Shamon was well and truly besotted with his sassy little fiancée.

This was why his friend wasn’t taking notice of the few wenches who had been ogling the giant traders as they went about their work. ’Twas a time not so very long ago when Shamon would have been winking at the wenches and setting their hearts aflutter. Nowadays, his thoughts were on his fiancée. So instead of suggestive winks, he smiled at the disappointed wenches and continued blithely on with his work.

Almost as though reading his thoughts, Shamon looked at Heddham as they strode back up the ramp, passing Aamun and Mikal on their way down. "'Tis time you found yourself a lass."

Heddham nearly slipped off the edge of the ramp. "What?"

"A lass of your own. 'tis time."

"Are you mad? With all these willing wenches wanting me?" Heddham jerked a thumb over his shoulder to the wenches in question who were loitering near the entrance to the docking bay. "Who would be left then to pleasure those sweet wenches?"

"Trust me, when you find the wench for you, you'll appreciate the beauties but none will match your own lass."

Heddham squinted at him as they entered the cargo hold. "You're not turning matchmaker, are you?"

"Me?" Feigning shock, Shamon pressed one hand against his bare chest.

"Aye. I think you spend too much time with those wenches when we're home."

A smirk replaced the surprised expression. "I only spend time with one wench when I'm home."

"And half of that is spent getting her out of trouble."

Shamon's grin was again filled with pride. Rueful pride. Heddham gave a snort of laughter.

The sudden sound of laser fire in the air caught their attention and they jerked around, their gazes instantly scanning the docking bay outside.

Simon appeared at the bottom of the ramp. "'Tis coming from towards the east."

Coming down the ramp, Heddham and Shamon joined the rest of the traders as they looked towards the hills.

"Bounty hunters, mayhaps?" Torkra suggested.

"Outlaws," Kel suggested at the same time.

Even as the words left their mouths they saw a peacekeeper pursuit craft lift off from the settlement beyond and soar through the sky towards the hills.

“Michel is on the way,” Shamon stated.

“Or one of his peacekeepers,” Aamun said. “No doubt they’ll sort it out.”

Laser fire sounded once more and then silence. After several minutes without further sound, the traders went back to unloading the cargo, though Simon remained watching the skies for any sign of trouble. Even though in the Lawful Sector, it always paid to be vigilant in case of outlaws or space pirates.

Heddam noticed that the peacekeeper’s pursuit craft came back half an hour later, and within ten minutes a black craft came from the east, swooping over the settlement before circling the docking bay and finally landing on the far side of it opposite the Daamen trading ship.

Straightening up from depositing the crate he carried with Shamon onto the hover tray, Heddam watched as the ramp lowered on the craft and ten men came into sight. Dressed in black and armed with holstered lasers, the dying light from the setting sun flashed off the red *kyrat* embedded in their foreheads.

“Aora soldiers,” Simon murmured from where he leaned against the side of the ship, a handtronic in his hand as he tallied up the cargo for the waiting merchant.

“Since that trouble on Aora five months ago, we’ve seen them a few times,” the merchant said. “The takeover was quite savage so I heard.”

Heddam had heard the same. An uprising on Aora, the death of the High Empress, and the hunt for her surviving Guardians. A new day had dawned on Aora and from all accounts it had been very bloody.

Heddam waited until the merchant and his two assistants had left with the hover tray before he asked Simon curiously, “Has Des said much about it?”

Simon shook his head. “Aora doesn’t come under the Intergalactic Peace Council, so whatever happens on their planet is their problem.”

“And even if Security was interested, your wench wouldn’t breath a word,” Heddam added.

“Neither Cam nor I are privy to what Des and Sabra get up to with Security.” Simon looked wryly at him. “’Tis for the best. I’m sure if we knew everything we’d be gibbering wrecks.”

Personally, Heddham didn’t know how his two friends went through life married to two Security officers. The Intergalactic Peace Ship Security did things their own way, and many threats to the Lawful Sector went by undetected by the inhabitants, who remained blissfully ignorant of many near misses. Security slipped in, did their job, slipped out again and the Lawful Sector remained a safe place. But Heddham had seen the worry in his friends’ faces when their wives had returned with healing wounds, new scratches, and new scars. But not once had they voiced any resentment or tried to stop them from working in the area they loved.

Plus the fact that Sabra and Des were good at their jobs.

Instead, Cam and Simon spent all their free time with their wives, and went about their trading in-between.

Heddham wasn’t so sure he could live with the uncertainty of his wife’s safety if he was wed to someone like those two wenches. A Daamen’s instinct was to keep his lass safe, not watch them fly off and not know if this would be the last time he saw them alive.

And to be truthful, ’twas not his business. His friends were blissfully happy and ’twas the main thing.

“They must be hunting a Guardian, do you think?” Shamon came up on Heddham’s other side as they watched the soldiers stride towards the settlement.

“I’d have thought they’d all be dead by now,” Heddham replied. “Five months on the run with squads of soldiers and mercenaries on your heels. ’Tis not something you’d expect anyone to survive for long.”

“Unless they fled into the Outlaw Sector, like the Reeka warriors did.”

“I don’t think ’twould be any coming back for Guardians, though.” Heddham ran one hand through his shaggy hair. “They have no one to turn to for protection or help.”

The soldiers disappeared into the gloom and Simon turned back to his crew. “If you’re finished gossiping like old men, I’m starving. I want food and drink.”

“And a nice warm wench,” young Torkra added, striding down the ramp with his brother, Mikal, hot on his heels. “’Tis been a week since I last had female company. I need a gentler touch.”

“Gentler touch?” Heddam scoffed as the teenager drew up beside him. “From the sounds of the shrieks and thumps coming from your room in the tavern in the last settlement, I doubt you know a gentle touch.”

Torkra grinned, his roguishly handsome face alight with laughter. “The wench was a trifle on the wild side.”

“The scratches are still healing on his back,” Mikal said.

“Youths.” Heddam shook his head. “You lack the finesse of experience.”

“Experience?” Shamon gave a snort of laughter. “These lads are in more beds than you can count when we’re in a settlement!”

“So were you before you met Gabie,” Torkra retorted.

“My wench is more than enough for me.” A wicked twinkle lit Shamon’s eyes. “’Tis all I’m saying.”

“Your expression is worth a thousand words.” Torkra sighed. “Ah, you old married men. ’Tis sad to see you go from brawling, wenching men to obedient husbands staying out of trouble.”

Simon looked dryly at Aamun as his friend and oldest crew member came thumping down the ramp. “Apparently we don’t brawl anymore.”

“Really?” Aamun fingered the self adhesive patch on his arm and touched his black eye gingerly. “What was that we were in a week ago?”

“I thought ’twas a brawl in a tavern over the way several idiots treated a tavern wench.” Heddam clipped Torkra across the back of the head. “Which you started and we came to *your* defence.”

“’Twas a good fight.” Torkra grinned broadly. “And the lass was grateful. *Very* grateful.”

Simon rolled his eyes. “And all Des could say when you lot got thrown into the peacekeepers’ cells and they contacted me, was to leave you all there.”

“I thought ’twas a little harsh of her.” Heddam laughed. “She could have pulled a few strings and gotten us out.”

“Have you forgotten she was a peacekeeper once?” Aamun queried.

“And that she threw the lot of us into cells,” Simon added, his smile growing a little hot. “How long until we get home again?”

This time Torkra rolled his eyes.

“I don’t know about you lusty lads,” Aamun said as he walked past Simon, “But I’ve set the security shield and I’m off to eat some good food, drink some good ale, and relax.”

Torkra nudged Mikal. “See? Married men.”

Shamon clipped him behind the head again as he walked past him.

“And betrothed ones,” Mikal added with a laugh.

Heddam rolled his shoulders as they strode along. The stars were bright in the sky above, the moon glowing full and white above the hills. The sounds of the big settlement were busy, as one would expect from one of the major trading areas.

The main street was still full of settlers going about their business, travellers looking for lodgings for the night, and those who simply sought out somewhere to relax.

Entering one of the taverns that stood in the main street, Heddam led the way to one of the tables. The crowd parted before the giant traders, and the tavern wenches watched them with hungry eyes. It wasn’t long before food and drink had been delivered to the table and three of the tavern wenches were perched on the knees of Heddam, Torkra and Mikal, and the traders settled in for a relaxing time.

The married traders spent the time chatting to each other and the various friends they’d made during their trips to the settlement. The single traders disappeared upstairs with tavern wenches.

Heddam was halfway up the stairs with his buxom, raven-haired, pretty wench hanging onto his arm and giggling when five Aora soldiers strode through the doors of the tavern. Their gazes were hard, and he stopped curiously as they looked around.

Michel, the Head Peacekeeper, entered on their heels, three of his peacekeepers following, and he spoke harshly to the soldiers. The lead soldier snapped something back and they got into an argument.

Heddham knew why, too. The soldiers were hunting someone but it was Michel's settlement. And because Michel was a friend of Gabie's, and Gabie was engaged to Shamon, that meant that the Head Peacekeeper was now regarded as a friend by the Daamens. Plus the fact that they quite simply liked the Head Peacekeeper. If things got out of hand, the traders would offer help.

The wench tugging on his arm pouted.

"Just a minute, lass," he said quietly.

The soldiers had fanned out behind the lead soldier and were looking around. Michel was still arguing heatedly and Heddham glanced across the room at his friends. The traders had stopped talking and were watching closely.

Tension flared outwards and several settlers eased away from the group at the door.

Simon stood up slowly, his movements mirrored by his crew, and Heddham started down the stairs again, his attention switching back to the soldiers, but as he neared the floor it looked like Michel had finally talked sense into the soldiers. With a curse they turned and stormed from the room, leaving Michel rubbing his jaw and glaring around at the settlers. He snapped an order to his peacekeepers and they disappeared back out into the night.

Michel saw Simon and walked across the room to him, sitting down with the big traders and calling for a mug of hot una. Talk started up again and everyone settled once more to their own business.

Simon sent Heddham a quick nod and Heddham turned back to the wench waiting for him. For now there was no trouble. Later, mayhap, but right now—

There was a shout, a yell, and the sound of laser fire. Even as Heddham swung around, he saw Michel push up from the table spitting curses. The Head Peacekeeper was out of the tavern like a shot, drawing his laser as he did so.

The wench was big-eyed and Heddham had no trouble towing her down the stairs with him. She got caught up in the crowd that was spilling out of the tavern into the street, where shouts and curses still sounded. Simon and his crew didn't even

try to get through, but simply headed for the back door. Heddam joined them and they hurried out into the alley and around to come up beside the tavern into the street.

No fools, they stopped near the entryway and peered out.

Aora soldiers darted out from alleys and Michel was thoroughly cursing out the lead soldier. The soldier tried to walk past him but the enraged Head Peacekeeper was having none of it, gesturing back to the docking bay with his laser. It looked like trouble was brewing even more and the traders tensed.

Until they heard the word ‘Security’. The soldier went rigid, his face in the lights of the street hardening. He spat something back at Michel, who turned to one of his peacekeepers and ordered something. Before the peacekeeper could obey, the soldier swore and called an order to his men. They immediately holstered their weapons and disappeared into the dark alleys.

Shaking his head, Michel stood with hands on hips and watched, his peacekeepers backing him.

The traders crossed the street to stand beside him.

“Everything all right?” Simon asked quietly. “You need help?”

Michel shook his head again. “Stupid bastards think they can just come in here and shoot at what they like. This is my settlement and I’ll not have my people hurt.”

Heddam gazed after the departing squad. “Who are they hunting?”

“Some criminals.” Michel frowned and folded his arms across his chest. “But twice they’ve fired at someone and twice there’s been no body, no proof, not even a splash of blood. I can’t have them shooting up my settlement because of shadows.”

“You’re sending them away?”

“Can’t. They have a right to hunt their own criminals. But I have a right to protect my settlement, too, and as we come under the IPC the Aoras know I have power to pull if needed. They don’t want that power called in.” He grinned faintly. “Actually, now I know some of that power, I don’t blame them.”

“So what are they going to do?”

“They’re allowed to search but without firing weapons.”

Simon looked dubiously down at the smaller man. “Think they’ll obey that?”

“Oh, they will. I only had to mention Security and the lead soldier pulled his head *and* his attitude in.” Michel’s smile was satisfied. “They won’t risk getting the IPC involved in their problems.”

The soldiers had melted into the darkness, their black uniforms blending in with the shadows, and Heddham had a brief thought of pity for whoever they hunted. These men meant business.

After a few more minutes of chatting to Michel, the traders returned to the tavern where Heddham found his willing wench, and they headed back upstairs again.

Halfway there she suddenly stopped. “You continue on, lover.” She winked. “It’s room eight. I’ll just get us something to eat and drink.”

“Think I’m going to need sustenance?” Heddham’s hand slid down to her lush bottom and gave it a squeeze. “Actually, mayhaps ’tis a good idea. I have a feeling we’re going to be burning some energy.”

Tavern wenches never blushed much but she did at his teasing, and with a flutter of excitement she ran back downstairs.

Looking forward to a relaxing time and soft arms, Heddham wandered up the stairs and down the corridor to room eight. It was the last room near the door leading to the stairwell. Obviously Torkra was not far off, because he could hear the familiar thumps and shrieks of feminine delight.

Laughing to himself, he opened the door to the room and walked in, clicking it shut behind him while glancing around. Hmmm, he remembered this room from a previous visit, though truth be told most tavern rooms were the same. Big bed, small table with two chairs, a bedside table holding a lamp, and a door into a private bathroom.

Reaching for his vest, he started to take it off when a sound caught his attention. Hands on the lapels of his vest, he cocked his head to one side and listened.

Nothing. With a shrug he started to pull the vest back over his shoulders only to hear a whisper of sound again. Frowning, he dropped the vest onto the table and

turned to the window. Drawing back the curtains, he peered out of the window into the night beyond. Lights lit up the streets and as usual it was still busy.

Straightening up, he drew the curtains shut and rolled his shoulders while stepping back.

This time there was a soft moan. He froze. No doubt about it, that moan came from—he glanced over to the door in the side of the room. A whisper of sound and then a sigh. Someone was hiding in the bathroom.

His first thought was that it could very well be a tavern wench who'd been smacked around a bit by an overzealous patron, and one thing a Daamen hated was to see a wench hurt.

"Hello?" He started across the room. "Is there someone in there?"

Silence met this and he frowned. Mayhap 'twasn't a wench. Someone else?

A wet rattle of breath sounded, a sigh, and then silence.

Alarm shot through Heddham. Someone was hurt. In several long strides he was at the bathroom door and placing his hand on the doorknob. "Whoever is in there, I'm not going to hurt you, all right? You sound hurt. I'm coming in."

"Go away." The voice was definitely female. "This room is taken."

As though he was going to believe that. Swinging the door open, he walked in and then came to a complete stop, his shocked gaze taking in the scene before him.

A wench was lying on the floor, her eyes open and staring sightlessly up at the wall. Blood was pooling under her and slipping down the drain in the floor beside her hip. Dressed in a plain gown that came down to her calves, her feet shod in flat slippers, she had several cuts and scrapes on her.

And she was very dead.

The wench crouched on the floor beside her had tears glittering in her eyes and a laser in her hands, the barrel pointed directly up at Heddham. A small pack was at her feet. Dressed similar to the dead wench, she had blood on the side of her gown but didn't seem injured.

But what struck Heddham the most was the tear-shaped topaz *kyrat* in each wench's forehead. The topaz of the dead wench was dull, but the living wench's was darkly bright.

The second shock of the night was realizing that he was facing two Guardians, and outside the tavern were the Aora soldiers hunting them.

The laser didn't waver, her hold steady as she stood slowly. Curly brown hair fell around her shoulders, and once she was standing he could see that she appeared slim beneath the shapeless gown, with a hungry look about her as though she hadn't eaten for days, but her stance was as steady as her aim.

"Easy, lass." Heddham held his hands up shoulder height, palms out. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"And I can't allow you to call the soldiers, either," she said. "So that creates a dilemma, doesn't it?" Stepping over the dead Guardian, she moved forward slowly. "Step back into the room and keep your mouth shut, or I'll shoot."

Cautiously he did as bidden, moving until he was standing in the middle of the room and she'd exited the bathroom. In the brighter light he could see the blood staining her side. Concerned, he said quietly, "You're hurt."

"Put your hands on your head and drop to your knees."

"Lass, you're in no danger from me—"

"Do it." Tears no longer made her eyes glitter. Now she sounded in control, sure of her decisions.

Placing his hands atop his head, Heddham was about to obey when he heard voices coming along the corridor. Voices complaining loudly.

"I can't believe the soldiers are searching the rooms! Think they can just come in here and search, kicking us out and—"

"As long as you've paid me, you'll get laid tonight," a tavern wench's voice responded coarsely.

A door banging sounded further down the corridor and Heddham looked from the closed door to where the Guardian stood. She didn't look frightened but she did look a little desperate. Noticing him watching her, she backed towards the window, reached out with one hand and pulled the curtains back before glancing quickly

over her shoulder. Whatever she saw out there obviously wasn't what she wanted to see.

Heddam remained still, studying her. She looked back at him as the sound of complaining voices and doors banging open continued.

Danger was drawing closer with every minute that passed. Danger to this wench. Heddam looked her directly in the eyes and took a deep breath.

"Lass," he said quietly. "Aora soldiers are coming closer and they're going to find you."

"Yes," she replied. "So you better leave."

That caught him by surprise. "What?"

"Those soldiers are after me, trader, not you." She gestured to the door with the laser barrel. "Get out before it turns nasty."

The wench wasn't going to hold him hostage. She wasn't going to use him as a bargaining tool. Heddam couldn't believe it. Or mayhaps she just hadn't thought of it.

Almost as though she knew what he was thinking, she gave a wry smile. "Those soldiers will do whatever it takes to kill me, trader. Keeping you in here with me will only wind up with you hurt or dead."

"They won't." He lowered his hands. "'Twould bring the wrath of the IPC down on them and they don't want that."

"Trust me, they'll sacrifice one or two of their own soldiers to the IPC just to get me." She gestured once more to the door. "Get out now before they come in."

"What are you going to do?" It was a foolish question. What could she do?

"Hide."

"In this room? Lass, 'tis nowhere to hide. They'll find your dead friend in the bathroom and they'll tear this room apart looking for you." And somehow he just couldn't stand the thought of it.

"I'll fight." The topaz jewel caught the light as she angled her head at the sound of voices coming even closer. The soldiers were closing in. They could only be a

room or two away. “It won’t be the first time.” A slightly self-deprecating smile quirked the corner of her lush lips, though she didn’t have any humour in her eyes. “Might be the last though.”

“You’ll die and you know it,” Heddham stated bluntly, the thought of it making his skin crawl. Standing by and watching her get shot was not something he could stomach.

“I don’t want you hurt.” She looked at Heddham. “Get the hell out now while you still can do so in one piece.”

And leave her to die. Heddham shook his head. A Daamen never allowed a wench to be hurt if he could help it, and he wasn’t about to allow this one to get hurt. Especially when she gave him a safe way out.

Crossing to the door, he said, “Take your gown off and get into bed.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Laying his ear against the door, he listened. Soldiers were entering the room next to them. A thump on the wall separating the rooms made him straighten and swing away quickly.

Passing the wench with the laser now held at her side, he stopped at the bed and yanked the covers back. “Quickly. Take your gown off and get into the bed.”

“Are you out of your mind?” She stared at him.

Toeing off his boots, he sat down. “If you move quickly, we can pretend we’re in bed together. I can hide you beneath me; they won’t see your face.” He looked at her levelly. “I won’t rape you, lass, ’tis a promise.”

“I know you won’t.” A frown creasing her brow, she glanced from the door back to him. “You’re a Daamen.”

“Then you know you can trust me.”

She shook her head. “No. If the soldiers do come in and find you with me—”

“You might be wanted by the Aora soldiers, but under the IPC laws you’re not a criminal. In fact, as far as they’re concerned you’re Aora’s problem, not theirs. Even if they get game enough to actually come in and find you in my bed, I’m not

breaking any law.” Heddham frowned as boots sounded in the room beside them. “’Tis your only chance to get out of this alive, lass, so make haste.”

For several seconds she just stared at him, her hand clenching tight around the laser. Her gaze flickered from him to the bed and back to the door several times before she cursed softly and moved fast. She didn’t bother to run around the bed, simply ran to it and scrambled over the top. Up on her knees, she jerked the shapeless gown over her head to reveal a support garment and panties. Plopping down on the bed, she kicked off her slippers and slid beneath the covers that Heddham held up. The laser she thrust under the covers, close to her side.

He slid in beside her and yanked the covers up to their waists. Without wasting a second he rolled on top of her, nudging her thighs apart and keeping the weight of his upper body off her by balancing on his elbows.

“What the—” she began, startled.

“We’re supposed to be making love.” Heddham settled himself quickly in the cradle of her hips. “Don’t panic. I’m dressed, you’re dressed.” *Sort of*. His hand skimmed up her side, his thumb unwittingly brushing against the swell of her breast. The lace of her support garment felt soft rather than scratchy, and he was surprised he could even notice that right now.

She stiffened.

“Trust me,” he said and gave her a reassuring smile.

Her thickly lashed eyes, which he could see now were a soft, deep, doe-eyed brown, narrowed slightly. “I appreciate your help, trader, but keep your hands to yourself.”

The wench’s warning tickled his humour, but now wasn’t the time to indulge in testing the waters. “Under other circumstances I’d accept that challenge, lass, but right now I’m more intent on keeping you hidden.”

A hard pounding on the door stopped anything else she might say and Heddham gave her one warning look before he glanced over his shoulder at the door. The head of the bed was near the window, the foot of it facing the door. If all went as planned the soldiers wouldn’t get a good glimpse of the wench.

Which reminded him—he quickly brushed the thick fringe of brown hair down over the topaz on her forehead. Their eyes met for several seconds before he looked back over his shoulder and roared, “Who the hell is there?”

“We’ve permission to search these rooms!” A voice called back. “Open up!”

“I’m busy!”

The door burst inward and a young Aora soldier stepped in.

Beneath him Heddham felt the wench stiffen and he pressed his hips against her in silent warning even as he glared over his shoulder at the soldier. “I’m busy with a wench, lad. Get the hell out of my room or I won’t be happy!”

Obviously the Aora soldier had heard of the Daamen traders, and his eyes widened as he took in the width of Heddham’s shoulders and back. He audibly swallowed. “I’m sorry, I have to search these rooms for a criminal—”

“Do I look like I’m in bed with a criminal?” Heddham glared at him.

The soldier took another step inside. “I—”

“If I have to get out of this bed you’ll be needing a new head, boy! I’ve been off planet for a week and I’ve been looking forward to a few pleasant hours in the company of a warm wench.” Careful to shelter the lass from view, Heddham pushed up further, his stance as threatening as his voice and face, the muscles in his arms bunching. “Get out!”

His roar made the soldier blanch and step back. Uncertain, he looked over his shoulder then back into the room.

“Heddham’s getting steamed.” Mikal’s voice came from a distance, sounding amused. “His little tavern wench must be half deaf.”

“Aye,” Simon agreed, laughter in his voice. “And Heddham steamed means someone is going to pay.”

“Which means we’ll have to get involved. I haven’t had a good brawl for a while.”

“’Twas only a week ago and some of those bounty hunters will just be starting to walk now.”

Someone said something sharply and the soldier nodded, stepped back and slammed the door shut.

Heddam listened tensely as the sound of boots went past his room and into the one across the corridor. The soldiers were leaving this room alone... for now.

Relaxing, he lowered himself down on his elbows atop the wench once again and turned his face to look down at her. She was trying to peer around his arm and she shifted. Immediately he felt the cold metal of the laser brush against his waist.

“Getting ready to shoot me?” he queried.

Her gaze switched to him. “What?”

“The laser? You’re pressing it against me.”

“Oh. Sorry.” The metal shifted away from him. “It was just in case they came in.”

“Tsk, lass, I told you to trust me.”

“Nothing is certain right now.” She started to sit up, but when he didn’t shift tension seeped back into her again. “Let me up.”

“Easy, lass. We might not be in the clear just yet. One of those soldiers could still come bursting back in here, so I’m afraid we’ll have to stay like this for a bit yet.” And somehow the thought wasn’t so bad. “Just a few more minutes.”

She regarded him sharply but at the sound of soldiers walking past the door again, she eased back down. “All right.” But she continued to peer around his arm at the door, her attention focused on the sounds beyond it.

Free to study her as the seconds ticked past, Heddam thought how odd the situation really was. Here he was in a big bed with a pretty wench, lying on top of her, cradled in the apex of her thighs, and he wasn’t making love to her.

He wanted to though.

Now where had that thought come from?

She shifted slightly, her breasts rubbing against his chest.

Right, that doesn’t exactly help matters.

Trying to ignore how the warmth of her body and the softness of her curves beneath him were starting to awaken certain parts of his anatomy, Heddham sought to distract himself. “What’s your name, lass?”

“Doesn’t matter.” She looked back up at him.

“I like to know who shares my bed.” When those doe eyes narrowed slightly, he grinned. “For now.”

“In a short time you won’t see me again, so it won’t matter, will it?”

True. But he still wanted to know. “Humour me.” When she started to glance away again without answering, he unashamedly pulled guilt strings. “’Tis a small thing to ask in return for helping you.”

That made her look back at him, and after a small frown she answered, “Tasi.”

“Tasi.” He tested it on his tongue. “Pretty.”

When voices moved past the door again but more approached, she sighed and lay back against the pillow.

Propped above her, Heddham thought how pretty *she* was. Though pale, with a few lines of weariness bracketing her eyes and a tightness to her full lips, she could have only been in her early twenties, late at a stretch. His gaze drifted over her features, all small and neat. Little rounded chin, short straight nose, big eyes, full lips and high cheekbones. The glitter of the topaz amongst the strands of her hair caught his eye once more and he reached up without thinking to brush a few strands of hair back from it.

She caught his hand. “Don’t.”

“Sorry, lass, I didn’t mean to—”

“If the soldiers come back in they might see it.”

“Ah.” Resting his hand on the pillow beside her head, Heddham took a deep breath. A delicate scent filtered through him and it took him several seconds to realize it came from Tasi.

His body liked it as much as his senses did and he couldn’t do a thing to prevent the sudden hardening of his manhood.

It was more than obvious that Tasi felt his masculine response to her nearness, for her eyes widened and she started to struggle beneath him.

“Shhh.” He tried to soothe her. “I won’t hurt you, Tasi, I swear.”

“You said—”

Refusing to lift his weight from her while trying to put her at ease, Heddham allowed a rueful grin. “I’m afraid I can’t dictate some things with my body. ’Tis one of them. Your wriggling doesn’t help.”

Immediately she stilled, a small blush blooming in her cheeks and she dropped back onto the pillow, avoiding his gaze. “I know. I know,” she repeated again, then, attempting a small shrug, she added, “It’s not been a good day.” Her gaze went to the bathroom door.

Shit. How could he have forgotten? Behind that door lay her dead friend. Heddham felt a swell of sympathy and automatically he slid his fingers through her hair. “I’m sorry about your friend.”

“Yeah. Well...” Swallowing, she looked back up at him. “Thanks.”

“You’re a Guardian.”

“Yes.”

“Where are the rest of your friends?”

All expression left her face. “They’re out there.”

“So you won’t be alone—” Heddham stopped as he heard the unmistakeable sound of boots in the corridor.

Boots coming towards the room.

Immediately he swooped down and laid his cheek against hers, whispering, “They’re coming.”

She didn’t fight him; instead, she slid one arm around his back and splayed her palm across his spine. For an instant he felt the touch to the soles of his feet and without a thought he turned his head and touched his lips to her throat.

Warm and soft and with a faint scent that made him shift slightly, nuzzle and—

The door burst open and he didn't have to pretend at anger when he lifted his head and snarled over his shoulder, "Shut the bloody door!"

"Cripes," he heard Mikal say as the door slammed shut again. "You soldiers play with fire."

He'd expected the soldiers to double back and try to catch him off-guard. If the one they hunted had been in the room, they'd have expected to catch her standing inside. Finding Heddham still in bed and on top of a wench was a clear indication to them that he had nothing to hide. Especially when it was clear he was getting *real* cosy with her.

More fool them.

And more fool him because he *wanted* to get cosy with this wench. One brush of lips against her throat just wasn't enough.

He turned back and lowered his head but Tasi was already wriggling out from under him, and God above, her wriggling was making him fire up in his nether regions. Especially when her breasts clad in the lacy support garment brushed his chin.

"Sorry," she said breathlessly. "I need to get up and dressed."

With an inward sigh he rolled off her and sat up. She moved quickly, sliding out of the bed and bending down to grab the gown. Looking unashamedly over his shoulder, Heddham was able to have a good look at her figure as she stretched up and then yanked the gown over her head.

The lass might be slim but the curves he'd felt beneath him were clearly evident. Tasi had an hour glass figure that just made his mouth water.

The gown slid down past her hips and the hem settled just below her knees. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she bent and slipped her feet into the low-heeled slippers and retrieved the laser.

Turning away, Heddham stamped into his boots and turned his attention to more pressing matters. "What are you going to do now, lass?"

"Take care of Acantha and get out of here."

"Acantha?" He looked up.

Before she could answer the door to the room was shoved open again and Simon, Aamun and Shamon spilled through into the room. Shamon slammed the door shut behind him.

Simon eyed the laser that Tasi pointed directly at him with one raised brow. "Hello."

"Easy, Tasi." Heddham stood up and walked to the small table to pick up his vest. "They're my friends."

She studied the traders and they studied her right back.

Aamun grinned and looked at Heddham. "We just knew you were up to something."

"You getting worked up about something so quickly just gave the game away to us," Simon agreed. "Plus the fact that your other wen... ah. Never mind. Going to introduce us to your little friend?"

Heddham shrugged into the vest. "Tasi, meet Simon, Aamun and Shamon, my friends and crew mates."

"I'm actually his boss, lass" Simon told her easily. "They do have a tendency to forget that at times."

"Everything all right?" Shamon asked quietly.

"Sort of." Walking up to Tasi, Heddham laid his hand atop hers and pushed the laser down. "But Tasi's in a spot of bother."

"So 'twould seem, and I'm betting it has something to do with those Aora soldiers." Simon's keen gaze took in the drying blood on the side of her gown. "You're wounded?"

"It's not my blood." Turning away, she looked up at Heddham. "Thank you for your help. I can take care of everything here. Go now before anyone sees you."

Leave her alone in a settlement crawling with soldiers who wanted her dead? 'Twas not going to happen while he lived and breathed. "I can help you, lass."

"You've done more than I would expect." She held out her hand. "Thank you."

“You can’t hope to get your friend’s body out of here without being seen.” He winced inwardly at the brief shadowing in her eyes. “Let me help you with that.”

“I can take care of Acantha myself.”

“Lass, I’m not leaving you here like this.”

A knock sounded on the door and Mikal stuck his head around the door. His curious gaze swept over them all but it was to Simon he spoke. “The soldiers are combing the area, alleys and all. Is everything all right in here?”

“Aye,” Simon replied. “Heddam’s just sorting through a few issues and—”

“You all need to go.” Tasi strode across to the bathroom, opening the door with a quick twist of the knob. “You’ve already risked your life once, Heddam. I’m grateful for that but I don’t expect more.” Pausing in the open doorway, she cast one glance over her shoulder and smiled slightly at him. “Goodbye, trader, and thank you.” The door clicked shut behind her.

~ * ~

The High Emperor crossed the floor in short, angry steps. Moving to the open window, he looked down at the gardens which had been rebuilt from the rubble. Lifting his gaze, he watched as the battle cruiser soared overhead.

The people of Aora had had no choice but to knuckle under to the new High Emperor, but he knew there was still disquiet amongst certain ones. Revolutionists. He’d led the first rebellion, but there were those still loyal to the old High Empress and they had to be hunted down and stamped out.

The only thing that might dampen their spirits would be the deaths of all the Guardians.

Looking across to poles that stood at the entrance to the gardens, he counted the shrunken heads and bleached skulls. Fifteen Guardians had been slaughtered, their heads staked up for all to see. The mighty Guardians. All he needed was the final six Guardians that, so far, he hadn’t been able to find.

His soldiers just had to try harder. While six Guardians still roamed the universe hiding the one remaining thing he needed, he couldn’t get full control of Aora.

They had the one thing he needed most.

Power.

~ * ~

After ensuring the curtains on the window were closed, Tasi knelt down beside Acantha's dead body and bit back the tears that threatened to overspill once more. Now was not the time. She'd been given a reprieve and she had to take advantage of it quickly. There was no time to waste.

Reaching out, she laid her hand on Acantha's cooling brow, feeling the coldness of the once warm topaz beneath her palm.

Looking down into the still face, she whispered, "Sleep, my dear friend. I will see you on the other side. It's time to join your ancestors." And she pressed down lightly upon the topaz.

Light flared, searing around her palm and filling the room, heat spotting on her skin. The light flared brighter and she closed her eyes, tilting her head back, and she felt the warmth slide around her and drift upwards. In a flash it was gone and she opened her eyes and looked down.

Beneath her palm where Acantha had lain was a pile of topaz ashes. A slight wind tugged through the room and she stood up and opened the window just a crack. Immediately the ashes swirled upward and funnelled out through the window, spiralling and disappearing into the night.

It was done.

Turning on the shower, she rinsed the blood from the floor until there was no sign that anyone had bled to death in the bathroom.

Taking a deep breath, she picked up the small pack, stood and wiped her eyes before turning back to the bathroom door and opening it.

Why wasn't she surprised to find Heddiam leaning against the wall waiting for her? The man seemed to do the opposite of whatever she asked. He gazed across the room at her and she couldn't help but really notice him for the first time.

Before, when danger had been everywhere, she'd noted how big he was, but mostly there had been relief that he'd been a Daamen trader. Everyone knew they were basically harmless, they just had a love of brawling and wenching and a good ale, but unless you were an enemy, you had nothing to fear from them. They were peace loving giants who worked hard and enjoyed a good time.

But now she had time to really look at him.

Heddam was a typical Daamen trader in build. Over seven feet tall, with heavy muscles from lifting and hard work, the sleeveless open vest showed the massive muscles to perfection. His smooth chest and stomach were ribbed with dips and swells of power, his long legs encased in rough material pants emphasizing the muscles that pulled taut as he shifted. Big black boots encased his feet. His face had that dangerously, roguish handsomeness that was a trait of all Daamen men, and one that gave them an unfair advantage over other men when combined with their more than impressive builds and heights. A small silver hoop pierced his left earlobe, adding a rough edge. His features were strong cut, his eyes a clear grey, his lips were firm with a quirk at each corner that told her he laughed often, his nose straight and his jaw square. His long, shaggy brown hair with reddish highlights was pulled back into a rough ponytail that fell halfway down his broad back.

If she wasn't running for her life she could appreciate his dangerous good looks, but right now she was tired, heart-sick, sore, hungry and desperate to get back to the cave.

Heddam was looking at her with a determination that didn't bode well.

"Heddam," she said. "I appreciate all you've done, really. You went above and beyond what anyone would expect. But it's time for you to go."

He simply straightened up. "We're getting you out of here, lass."

"What?"

Picking up a cloak that had been draped over the bed, he held it up. "We're getting you out of this place. Dropping you off somewhere safe."

"Are you serious?" Tasi shook her head. "If you're caught—"

"Like I said, you're not wanted by the IPC so no problems if we're caught by any lawful officer of them. But 'tis getting you past the Aora soldiers unnoticed that counts."

It had been awhile since anyone had tried to help a Guardian, awhile since they'd dare trust an outsider, and she felt a small sliver of warmth go through her. "Heddam, you're sweet, but your captain—"

“’Twas Simon that came up with the cloak idea.” He shook it out. “You can leave with us.”

They were really going to help her. By doing so they would place themselves in danger but it would mean she had a better chance to escape, and escape was all she could focus on at this time. Regardless of whatever else happened, she had to escape.

Tasi took a deep breath. “Thank you.”

“Blood!” The shout was clear from the alley below. “There’s blood here! It leads around the back of the tavern.”

Acantha’s blood. Tasi sucked in a harsh breath and started for the door. “You need to go, trader. Now!”

She didn’t hear him move, but the next second the cloak was around her shoulders. When she tried to shrug away, a brawny arm came around her shoulders and she was tucked securely into Heddham’s side.

“Too late, lass.” His voice rumbled deep in his chest. “They’ll track you down now and no amount of hiding in here will save you.”

Tasi tried to back pedal. “They’ll see me cloaked and—”

“Taken care of.” Heddham yanked open the door. “Torkra is good with gadgets.”

The light in the corridor sputtered out and the whole tavern plunged into darkness. Curses and startled cries echoed from not only the rooms around them but also from the tavern room below. No doubt this Torkra Heddham spoke of had done something to cause it.

For a giant of a man he moved fast and she had no choice but to accompany him. The arm around her back was like an iron band, his big hand curling around the side of her ribcage firm. Any plan she might have harboured to slip away in the darkness was stopped by several big bodies falling in around them, hemming her securely in between them.

A small golden glow started and she automatically reached up to block the glow from the topaz in her forehead. For a second she caught sight of Shamon’s startled face before the hood was flipped over her head by Heddham and dragged forward to cover her forehead.

“Let’s go,” Simon ordered from her right.

Soldiers calling to each other outside sounded, combined with complaints from inside the tavern by the patrons and tavern wenches.

“Get back up those stairs and check those rooms again!” a soldier commanded. “And I mean *every* room! You see a Guardian, you shoot to kill!”

Two

It watched and waited. Outside the rain teemed down, drenching the plants and pounding the fragile flowers into the mud.

But the flowers would rise again. It was the life cycle. They would rise and lift their heads to the warmth of the sun when the time came.

Time was what everyone waited on.

Time was what it waited on.

The time would come.

The smoke drifted in the air and it watched the flames leap up to hungrily consume the wood.

~ * ~

It was relatively easy to get down the staircase in the tavern for someone had turned on several lamps, giving the patrons some light, and everyone automatically made room for the giants coming through their shadowy midst.

Tasi wondered just how they'd manage to get outside without being pulled up, but when they exited the tavern she saw that other patrons had left, too, and the peacekeepers were outside keeping a watch on the soldiers.

When one of the soldiers moved towards the group of traders the Head Peacekeeper stepped forward and growled, "They're not under Aora jurisdiction. You are only to detain your criminal and no one else. Now continue your search and hurry the hell up."

The street was brightly lit as always, but the giants surrounding her kept her from sight. She would have slipped away into a darkened alley except that Heddham kept a tight grip on her.

Once the settlement was left behind and the docking bay loomed, she started to slow down, thinking she could slip away into the darkness, but Heddham's arm tightened around her as several soldiers appeared from the bushes beside the road.

"Keep moving," he ordered quietly. "You're not in the clear yet."

Entering the docking bay, he steered her away from the soldiers and the Aora ship and towards the big trade ship on the opposite side of the docking bay.

"Mikal, enter Tasi's body pattern into the security system," Simon murmured and immediately one of the traders broke ranks and strode ahead, his long legs eating up the distance easily.

"What?" Tipping back her head to look up at the big trader walking head and shoulders above her, Tasi felt alarm shiver through her. "I'm not—"

"You're not safe here," Heddham interrupted from her other side, glancing down only long enough to place his hand on her head to tip it back down into the shadows and flip the hood back over her forehead.

"This was not supposed to—"

"But it did."

Frustration coursed through her. Soldiers were looking for her, Acantha was gone, she had to get back to the cave, and these Daamen traders were dead set on protecting her. She appreciated the protection bit but the urgency to return to the cave was getting to her. "I can slip away and—"

"Nay."

The big trade ship loomed up and Heddham slowed down. Tasi had no illusions that it was to allow Mikal time to get her body pattern entered and she sighed. Maybe she should just stop fighting the inevitable and take the shelter offered for a short time. It would be the sensible thing to do. Except she had to get back to the cave and she had to do it alone.

However, getting shot by Aora soldiers wasn't an option.

Sheltering on the Daamen trade ship until the soldiers had gone was a certain option. It also meant time to stop and think things through and cease acting on fear, frustration and urgency.

With a mental straightening of her shoulders she allowed Heddham to guide her up the ramp and into the ship. The ramp rose behind them and closed off the outside world.

In one fleeting glance Tasi saw that the cargo hold was packed with crates and barrels, everything neatly stacked and secured for travelling. It would be fine to wait here, except Heddham didn't let her go but simply took her with him onto a platform lift.

"I can wait down here," she protested, looking up at him again.

"You might as well have something to eat and drink while you're waiting for the soldiers to go, lass." Heddham pressed the button on the side of the wall and the platform lift lurched then rattled upwards. "Rest in safety for a while."

Food. When was the last time she'd eaten? Berries by the stream yesterday morning. Her stomach gave a little growl. Right. Food and drink, regain some strength and then move on. She'd be thinking clearer with a full stomach and a rest, and she'd be in more of a position to help if she had some energy on board. Though adrenaline was good for energy, too, especially the last few hours.

Becoming aware of a steady gaze, she looked up to see Simon studying her quietly, a thoughtful expression on his face as he looked from her to Heddham and back again.

Warily she eyed him back. "If you're having second thoughts about having me on board—"

"Not at all," he replied easily. "You're welcome aboard."

"It'll only be for a half hour or so, I promise."

Simon's gaze lifted to Heddham again as he murmured, "As long as you need, lass."

Maybe the big captain was angry at his crew member taking it upon himself to bring a fugitive onboard, but she didn't sense any tension between the two of them as the platform lift shuddered to a halt.

There was nothing she could do about it, anyway, and she had other pressing matters on her mind.

“The dining cabin is just ahead.” Heddam’s hand was at the small of her back, guiding her down the corridor.

The corridor was wide, as one would expect of a ship built for such big men. The tiles were clean, the air fresh. Doors opened on either side of the corridor to show single bunks in cabins. Some of the bunks were made neatly, others left unmade as though the occupants had simply rolled out of bed and intended to get back in the same way.

Coming to a stop in the corridor, Heddam hesitated and Tasi looked up at him inquiringly.

“No offence, lass, but your clothes are bloody. I can see if we’ve got something ’twill fit you in the cargo hold.”

“Oh.” She glanced down at the blood that had dried on her gown. It was a big patch. Acantha’s blood. She shook her head and held up the small pack in her hand. “I actually have clothes in here. Is there somewhere I can change?”

“Aye. Here, you can use the spare cabin.” He led to her to a door and stood back. “There are towels and things if you’d like a shower.”

He really was the sweetest thing. For the first time in days, the urge to do a little teasing came to the fore. “You think I stink?”

“What? Nay!” Heddam looked horrified. “Nay. I didn’t mean—I only meant, if you wanted a chance to—nay!”

“I did bathe this morn.”

“Tasi, you smell sweet—” Flustered, Heddam stopped. “I mean, you smell just fine to me. I... Are you laughing at me?”

“Never.”

He eyed her closely and she met his regard steadily. Then she smiled just a little bit and looked away.

“You’re laughing at me.”

“I’d not do that to one who saved me.” She glanced up again and saw the crooked smile curve his lips, making him look boyish.

Dangerously, roguishly boyish.

Scrap boyish, the sparkle that appeared suddenly in his eyes was all rogue.

It was also a little unnerving. Time to end the game.

“I won’t be long.” She glanced around the cabin.

The glint of amusement remained in his eyes but he stood back and pulled the door shut behind him, saying as he did so, “I’ll be waiting in the dining cabin.”

When it clicked shut, she took a deep breath and laid the pack on the bunk. The cabin was plain but homey, the cover on the bunk a soft, pale blue, and the desk and chair made for heavy weights and big frames. The furniture was solid and fastened to the floor. A built-in robe with the door slid back to reveal the empty depths was near the desk. In the back wall was a door that led into a bathing cabin.

Tasi changed quickly, shrugging out of the gown and replacing it with long, pale brown pants and a white shirt. Trading in the slippers for a pair of low-heeled boots, she tucked the trousers inside them and placed the brown jacket on the bunk.

Taking a brush from the pack, she moved into the bathroom, yanked off the brown wig and shook out her own hair. Now she felt normal. She hated wigs, even though at times they were necessary, especially when her own white hair was so obvious to hunters. The glint of gold strands entwined amongst the thick white tresses, and she gave it a quick brush before braiding it neatly. Fastening it, she flipped it back over her shoulder and felt the end thump familiarly against the small of her back.

One day she might cut a lot of the heavy weight off but for now it was easier to just keep it tied back.

Going back into the main cabin, Tasi bundled the bloodied gown and shoes into the pack along with the brush. Pulling out a clean bandana, she tucked it into the pocket of the jacket before picking both the jacket and pack up and leaving the cabin.

Hesitating in the corridor, she glanced around. No one was in the corridor but voices were coming from a door not far away. Moving forward, she peeked inside to see that it was indeed the dining cabin. It was spacious. To one side was a large

table and big swivel stools, to the other side a well stocked library of paper and electronic books, a large coffee table, and five big armchairs. A fifteen foot counter was ranged along the back wall, the small glass partitions showing the trays and plates of food inside, everything ready and cooked, sealed hygienically in the bacteria proof containment. A stainless steel door at each end of the counter was undoubtedly for the dirty dishes. On top of the counter were several containers, one an urn which, from the smell of it, contained hot una, another for drinking water and a third for some kind of juice. Every bit of furniture and utensil was fastened securely for travel.

Heddam and Simon were sitting at the table drinking from steaming mugs. Another trader she recognized as Shamon was standing near the food counter with a bowl of some kind of dessert in his hands.

They all looked up as she entered and stood waiting. Their mouths fell open and they blinked.

For a second she wondered what had caught them by surprise, then remembered and reached up to touch her hair. "I was wearing a wig."

"Disguised for roaming the settlement?" Simon queried as Heddam stood up and crossed the cabin to her.

"Mmm." The traders might be no threat to her, but that didn't mean she had to tell them anything.

Taking the pack from her hand, Heddam dropped it against the wall and placed a hand at the small of her back. "Come and get something to eat and drink."

"Take my word for it," Shamon said as she came to the counter, "regardless of what your mother told you, dessert before the main course is perfectly fine."

"I believe you." She smiled slightly.

"I'll tell your mother you said so, Shamon," Heddam told his friend. "But what Tasi needs is a good feed." Heddam pointed down to the hot section of the counter. "Take a choice, as long as 'tis nourishing."

"I don't get to have dessert first?"

Heddam looked down at her. "You want dessert first?"

The man was really too easy to tease. He didn't know her well enough to be able to tell when she wasn't serious. He didn't know her well enough and he never would.

The thought was enough to remind her where she was and she just smiled to let him know she was kidding before lifting the lid of one of the glass compartments and lifting out a bowl of stew. The fragrance was delicious, and the chunks of fresh vegetables and meat floating in it were the best things she'd seen in days.

Within minutes Heddham had her seated at the table with a spoon and a glass of delicious, icy berry juice.

Shamon sat beside her eating his dessert, while Simon and Heddham cupped their mugs in their hands and watched her from the opposite side of the table.

For a few minutes she simply enjoyed eating fresh food. Whoever had cooked the food was an expert cook. The meat fell to pieces in her mouth and the vegetables, though stewed, still retained a bit of crunch.

Having satisfied the first pangs of hunger, she looked up at Heddham sitting across from her and nodded. "It's good."

He looked levelly at her for several seconds before asking, "How long were you in that bathroom with your friend?"

Questions. They were bound to come.

"Half an hour."

"How did you get in unseen?"

She spooned up some more stew, chewing and swallowing before answering quietly, "Before the soldiers got to that part of the settlement, I managed to get Acantha up the back staircase and into the room. We hid in the bathroom."

"You must have known the soldiers would come looking for you in the rooms."

"I didn't have a whole lot of choice." Another spoonful of stew. "Acantha was in pain and dying. There was no one to turn to for help. I did what I could under the circumstances." She took a sip of the berry juice.

"What if those soldiers had found you?" Simon asked quietly.

She gave a small shrug. "Things would have gotten a little nasty."

"They'd have shot you on sight."

"Like I said, it would have gotten nasty." She stared at the piece of beef on her spoon for several seconds. "I'd have taken some of them with me."

Heddam leaned his forearm on the table, his hand hanging loosely over the edge as he leaned forward a little. His grey eyes were intent. "You're a Guardian. You've been on the run for about five months."

"Yep." Just about everyone in the galaxy knew that much.

"You're a long way from home, Tasi."

"Yep." She continued eating.

"Where are you going?"

Sometimes she wondered herself, but then again the Guardians had that which the renegade High Emperor sought, and that which he wouldn't get his greedy, murderous hands on.

Not about to answer that particular question, Tasi met his gaze levelly and shook her head.

Picking up the mug of hot una, Heddam took a careful sip before lowering the mug. "Is there a safe place you can go?"

"Well, you know, I'm trying."

"Where are you headed?"

Amused at his tenacity, she pointed the spoon at him. "You ask a lot of questions, trader."

"I'm worried about you," he returned bluntly.

That did surprise her. "Why?"

Simon slanted a look out of the corner of his eye at Heddam.

Heddam didn't flinch. "You're a wench on your own, you're wanted dead, you're being hunted..."

“A lot of runners are like that.”

“A lot of runners aren’t you.”

The sudden silence in the cabin was almost...heavy. Simon didn’t say a word, his eyes going from Heddham to Tasi and back again, while Shamon made no attempt at hiding his interest.

Wondering what exactly he meant, Tasi took another spoonful of food and chewed slowly while studying him the whole time without answering. What could she possibly say to that? Even though outwardly calm, she searched for a possible meaning.

Swallowing the mouthful of food, she finally replied, “Meeting someone on the run and sharing your food with them would, I guess, make them a little more known to you.” *Not to mention lying under their body.* “But I’ve lasted this long and I’ll last longer.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I have to.” Dropping her gaze to the bowl, Tasi scraped the last bit of carrot up. “I have to.”

The silence this time was full of sympathy and she grimaced inwardly. Moving with a sudden briskness, she set the bowl aside and drained the glass of juice. Standing up, she said, “My thanks, gentlemen. I appreciate what you all did for me. Now it’s time I go.”

Heddham shot to his feet. “Wait.”

Crossing to the door, she picked up the pack. “If someone could just show me the way out—”

A brawny arm appeared before her nose and a big hand slapped against the door frame, blocking her exit. She frowned up at Heddham who towered over her.

“Lass, ’tis soldiers outside—”

“I noticed.”

“I can’t let you just walk out into danger.”

“Look, Heddham, I can’t wait around. You saved me and for that I’m grateful. You fed me and you have no idea how grateful I am for that. But I have to go now.”

He looked across at Simon then back to her. “At least let us drop you off to a safe place.”

There was no real safe place. She had to get through the soldiers to get back to the cave—she blinked.

“You know a place,” Heddham stated quietly. “Good.”

“Yes. Well—” She caught sight of the changing expression on his face and hastily said, “Yes, I do. But I can’t impose—”

“’Tis no imposition, lass.”

“But—”

“’Twould be our honour to drop you off to a place you deem safe,” Simon reassured her from where he still sat at the table. “Just tell me the co-ordinates, or the place.”

Tasi glanced back up at Heddham uncertainly.

“Please,” he said softly.

It would be to her advantage. She didn’t have to let them know exactly where, but they could save her hours of walking. Time was so very important and it had been so long already.

Tasi nodded. “I accept your kind offer.”

She didn’t imagine the relief in Heddham’s eyes and when he smiled warmly down at her, she could swear that warmth went right through her.

~ * ~

The Major of the New Guard entered the throne room. “A sighting has been made of the missing Guardians.”

The High Emperor looked up from the viscomm on his desk. “Where?”

“A planet called Ceron in the Lawful Sector.”

“How many?”

“Four. Three are dead and one is missing.”

“So the last three are unaccounted for.” The High Emperor smiled slightly. “But three are dead. Good, very good. Have their heads sent back immediately to join the ones on the spikes. It will show the people we mean business.”

And the rebels that the Guardians were being hunted.

There would be no mercy for anyone found to be loyal to the Old Ways. There was only one way now.

His way.

~ * ~

She listened in silence before hurrying back through the corridors. The news she carried was bad, but they had to know what they were up against.

Old Ways were good, the New Way was bad.

It was time for the Third Way.

~ * ~

Sitting in the cargo hold, Heddam studied Tasi. Perched on a barrel, she had the small pack hanging loosely between her knees, the bottom of it silently brushing against the side of the barrel. Inside it was a small parcel of food he’d made up for her. He’d tried to talk her into waiting in the dining cabin but she’d insisted on waiting down in the cargo hold, ready to disembark when the trade ship landed.

The co-ordinates she’d given hadn’t revealed much information. It would land them in the middle of a forest. That was all he knew.

The rest of the traders had drifted through the dining cabin, or passed them on their way to their cabins or various other chores. All of them had smiled at her, greeted her in their normally friendly fashion, but had asked no questions. They had all looked at Heddam, and it didn’t take a genius to figure out why. He just knew he was in for some serious ribbing later.

'Twas the least of his worries. His concern was now for a Guardian on the run. A Guardian he didn't know, a wench who'd spiked his interest in a way he'd never experienced before in his life—and he'd known a lot of wenches.

Tasi angled her head down slightly and the light overhead caught the golden glints in her white hair.

"Pretty," he commented.

"Hmm?" She glanced up.

"Your hair." It was beautiful, all white with gold glints. He'd have liked to slide his hand through the tresses but somehow doubted she'd appreciate it.

"Oh. Thanks." She wrinkled her nose a little. "A pain in the arse colour right now, though."

"Because your hunters can spot it."

"Exactly. That was why I had the wig on." She gave the pack a little shake.

Crossing the space between them, Heddam leaned back against one of the big crates within a few feet of her. "Why were you in the settlement, lass?"

Idly she thumped her heels back against the barrel. "Sight seeing."

"You can't tell me."

"Whatever gave you that idea?" Her brown eyes twinkled.

Even in the midst of the horrors surrounding her, the wench still had a teasing sense of humour. It drew Heddam like a moth to a flame.

This flame could end up burning him severely if he wasn't careful.

But what a way to go.

Seeking to divert those thoughts, he looked at the topaz in her forehead. It went perfectly with the gold glints in that glorious hair. "What is the jewel?"

Tasi touched one fingertip to her forehead. "It's a *kyrat*."

"I've been told that different roles mean different colours."

“True.”

“What’s the meaning of the *kyrat*?” When she looked at him uncomprehendingly, he said, “What ’tis for?”

“Looks?” That twinkle was back in her eyes again.

He grinned. “It looks mighty fine on you.”

“Nice of you to think so. Your brawny muscles look mighty fine on you.”

“I think we have a mutual admiration society with just two members.”

“We’re the only ones who think my *kyrat* looks mighty fine?” Tasi sighed. “I’m devastated.”

Thinking of how Torkra and Mikal had been casting her admiring glances, Heddham grinned wider. “Trust me, ’tis more than I.”

“My ego is miraculously repaired.”

“But you still haven’t told me what the *kyrat* does.”

Tasi shrugged. “It shows what role you do in the Aora lands.”

“Anything else?”

“Well, it doesn’t perform tricks.”

Ruefully, Heddham shook his head. “You’re not going to tell me, are you?”

“Whatever gave you that idea?” Tasi rubbed her cheek with one hand. “Turn about. I get to ask the questions now.”

Heddham relaxed, crossing one booted ankle over the other as he stretched his long legs out. “Go for it, little wench.”

“Are you wed?”

“Nay.”

“Betrothed?”

“Nay.”

“Have some—what do you call them? Wench?—you’re seeing?”

“Nay.”

She eyed him closely. “You are into wenches, though?”

He burst out laughing. “Aye, I am. I love wenches.”

“Ah, that explains the hero syndrome.”

“Hero syndrome?”

Leaning forward a little, she pointed at him. “You love women. When you find one in distress, you have to help her.”

Holding up his hands, he spread his fingers. “Guilty as charged.”

“Hmmm.” She rubbed her chin. “You have any children?”

He nearly choked. “Stars, nay!”

“You love so many wenches, you’re bound to have a couple of mini Heddam’s running around.”

“I’ll have you know that no Daamen fathers children out of wedlock.” He cast her a stern look. “When we settle down with the wench of our heart, then we have children. Until then, we ensure our sterility by taking a sterilizing potion.”

“Really?” She seemed both genuinely surprised and impressed.

“Aye, really. A child needs both mother and father in our society.”

“So you men go around sleeping with any woman who’ll have you. What about your women?”

“Our wenches are protected.”

“I thought so!” She laughed in delight. “Your women aren’t allowed to sleep around before they’re wedded. I bet they’re virgins when they wed!”

“’Twould be some wenches who would undoubtedly have slept with other men before wedding.” Heddam was getting a little flustered. “But if the men in their household knew, the man who slept with their sister or daughter or niece would be getting a visit.”

Eyes dancing with delight, Tasi slapped her knee. “I knew it! I knew it! No wonder you went all he-man on me! No wonder all of you just carried me off with you when you saw trouble!”

“Nothing wrong with protecting a wench,” Heddham said staunchly.

“You’re a society where the men sleep with wenches outside of their own society, but expect their women to remain virgins until they wed! You’re a male-dominated society!”

Heddham thought of the many Daamen wenches who ruled the households as well as the markets on Daamen with iron fists. “Not quite. But we don’t let our wenches travel off Daamen without an escort.”

“Of Daamen men.”

“Aye. Or Reeka warriors. For their protection. The universe is a dangerous place to be, even the Lawful Sector.”

“But you can fly off and sleep around.”

“Now, lass, ’tisin’t precisely what we set out to do—”

“You have. You admitted it.”

“What?” He was astonished. “I didn’t—”

“You said you loved wenches. You said you use a sterility potion.” Laying her hands in her lap, Tasi smiled smugly. “Didn’t you?”

“Well, I... yes but...” He was floundering again. The teasing little wench was laughing in delight at him. Heddham eyed her narrowly. ’Twas time to turn the tables a little. “Are you a virgin?”

She dropped her eyes demurely. “A gentleman wouldn’t ask.”

“Who says I’m a gentleman?”

“You’re the big protector.”

Heddham was starting to think he needed protecting from the agile mind of this particular wench, but he was enjoying the sparring too much to stop now even if she did manage to fluster him, something no one else had ever managed to do. “And as the big protector, I need to know what I’m protecting.”

“Nice try.”

“Are you?”

“That’s for me to know and you to find out.”

It was a simple matter for Heddham to straighten and lean forward, his hands resting on the barrel each side of Tasi’s thighs. Her eyes widened as he looked her directly in the eye and queried softly, “’Tis an invite, lass?”

Now ’twas her turn to be flustered. Heddham took a perverse enjoyment from seeing a blush climb those pale cheeks and her brown eyes widen. His gaze travelled leisurely across her fine features, stopping briefly on those plump, pink lips that just begged to be kissed. Lifting his gaze, he looked her right in the eyes. “I could find out for myself, little wench, if you’re a virgin or not.”

“I just... I didn’t...” She took a deep, fortifying breath and told him almost primly, “It wasn’t an invitation, no.”

He smiled lazily and moved forward a little more. “Have you ever been kissed, lass?”

“Of course.”

“By a Daamen?”

“What?” He knew she was getting even more flustered, especially when one of her hands came to rest on his chest and exerted just a little pressure in a silent gesture of pushing him away. “No. And I don’t want to.”

“How do you know?” Heddham knew he wanted to kiss her. He’d wanted to since he’d touched his mouth to her warm throat in the tavern. He moved even closer until her breath from those deliciously parted lips was warm against his own. “You might like it.”

“I’m sure I wouldn’t.” Her heel was thumping a rapid tattoo against the barrel. “Heddham, what are you doing? No. No, Heddham, I’m warning you—”

He stopped the words by the simple pressing of his lips softly to hers.

It was magic. A soft press of sensitive skin to sensitive skin that evoked so much heat between them that Heddham forgot everything else instantly.

Lifting his hand, he slid his fingers into the hair at the back of her head, feeling the silky tresses against his skin. He held her head still as he angled his own head, fitting his mouth securely to hers, moulding their lips together until there was nothing but mouth to mouth, her taste filling him before he'd even begun sipping from her honeyed depths.

She tasted like sugar and spice all rolled into one. She exploded into him in a rush of heat and fragrance and taste, and he swiftly slid an arm about her waist and jerked her up against him so that they were chest to breast.

He felt a warmth and saw the glitter of her *kyrat*. He half expected sparks to arc from it, the glitter was so beautiful. Desire glowing?

The heat surging through him roiled into a hot flow when she kissed him back, her tongue tracing across his lips in a teasing slide. Her hands were under his vest, fingers sliding along his spine, one hand going up, the other—*stars above*. The other hand had just slid beneath the waistband of his pants, the tips of her fingers brushing the beginnings of the crease between his buttocks.

Automatically he drew his hand from her waist to her breast, running his palm under her jacket to unerringly cup one full breast. Even through the shirt and her support garment, he could feel a little nipple budding almost aggressively to snug into his palm as though pleading for him to strip the confinement of clothes away and bare it to his hot touch and even hotter mouth.

Need rushed through him, searing through every nerve ending. He ate her mouth, feasting on her taste. His manhood hardened, pushing aggressively at the confinement of his pants.

Heddam wanted her. Now.

“We’re landing in five minutes.” The crackle of the communications system was an unwelcome interruption.

Startled, Tasi broke the contact of their lips first, removing her arms from around him swiftly. Not relinquishing his hold on her, Heddam rested his forehead against hers as he sucked in several big breaths, trying to steady his slightly ragged breathing.

Looking into her eyes, he saw the desire within them, but it was dampened with something else... sorrow?

Every instinct to protect her slammed to the fore. An instinct that went beyond the normal male instinct to protect a female.

This was something that came from deep inside him. *Personal*.

“Stay,” he said softly. “Stay with me, Tasi.”

She looked silently at him for several seconds before replying quietly, “I can’t.”

“You can.”

“No.” Placing her hand on his chest, she pushed. “I can’t.”

Stepping back slightly he let his hand slip from her head to the small of her back, feeling the end of the long, thick braid brush his skin. Her *kyrat* was still shining, but softer. The glitter had vanished.

“Tasi, I don’t want you to go—”

“I have to.” Taking advantage of the space between them, she slid down from the barrel. Now she was flush against him but without hesitation she moved to the side. His hold on her waist didn’t loosen and she looked up at him. “Let go, Heddam.”

He didn’t want to let go. Everything inside him screamed to hold on, to never let go. To keep her safe in his embrace.

“Don’t.” Her eyes hardened. “I have a job to do.”

“Tasi—”

“No.”

The platform lift descending sounded, the rattling and clanking of it filling the cargo hold.

Gazing into her eyes, Heddam read the determination in them, the sure knowledge that this wench was going to walk away without a backward glance. He didn’t understand why he cared so much, why it worried him. The feeling was so totally alien.

But he knew one thing. This lass had to know she could come to him at any time.

His hand slid to her hip.

“Heddam—”

“Tasi, promise me, if you ever need help, if you ever need anyone, you’ll call for me.”

“I can’t—”

“Promise me.” He gazed intently down at her. “Promise me, Tasi.”

Several seconds passed before finally she nodded. “All right.”

“Send a message to the Daamen Trade Base. Any merchant can get you through to the Base. Tell them you need me and they’ll ensure I get the message fast.”

“All right.” But even as she agreed he knew she wouldn’t contact him.

It cut him, worried at him like a hound with a bone. The sense of urgency bit at him. Lifting his hand he caught her chin and tilted her head back, forcing her to meet his gaze. “I mean it, Tasi. Call and I’ll come. Anywhere, anytime. Under any circumstances.”

“All right.”

“I mean it—”

The platform lift clattered to a halt behind him and Shamon and Mikal’s voices interrupted him as they argued loudly about something.

Stepping back, Heddam released his hold on her chin but his gaze demanded an honest reply.

She gave him a slight smile and a tiny ducking of her bright head, but the smile didn’t reach her eyes. The brown irises were serious, all signs of the teasing little wench erased as though she had never surfaced. Her eyes were clear, alert.

All traces of desire, all heat, all soft yearning had vanished beneath the Guardian that now straightened. She slung the pack over one shoulder and moved away from him.

“’Tis time to go...” Shamon’s voice trailed away as he looked at Heddam.

“Good.” She strode over to the ramp. Taking the dark bandanna from her pocket, she tied it around her forehead to hide the dim glow from the *kyrat*.

At Heddams continued silence, Mikal pulled the lever to lower the ramp. Tasi looked out at the dark forest. Rain sounded beyond, the fresh scent filling the cargo hold.

“You’ll get wet.” Heddams moved forward. “Wait until it stops. Until ’tis light.”

She looked at him over her shoulder. “Rain never hurt anyone and the dark conceals movement. It’s perfect.” She glanced at Shamon. “I thank you all for your help.”

“No problems, lass.” Shamon’s normally merry face was serious.

She gave Mikal a small smile and started to step out onto the ramp.

“Wait. You’ll need this.” Crossing to where the heavy cloaks hung on the wall, Heddams took his off the hook and walked to where she stood watching him.

“No, I’ll be fine—” she began.

“Take it.” He slung it around her shoulders and fastened it at her throat. Lifting the hood he drew it gently over her hair. “At least let me know you’ll be warm and dry.”

She didn’t argue, just gave that little smile again that didn’t reach her eyes, though her hand briefly brushed across his arm. “Thank you.” Turning, she walked down the ramp.

Heddams moved after her, stopping at the top to watch as she stepped down into the grass. He fought the instinct to follow her, to grab her and drag her back inside.

She wasn’t his to capture and hold. He had no right to stop her, to interfere in that which he knew nothing about.

Inwardly he swore, even as he tried to make sense of his feelings.

She wouldn’t look back. Her stride was sure as she reached the darkness that lingered at the edge of the ship. He wouldn’t see her face again.

It hurt.

But then she faltered. She stopped. Looking into the darkness beyond, Tasi lifted her head and breathed deep, straightening her shoulders.

She looked back. Just once. Her gaze unerringly going up the ramp to collide with his gaze. She looked at him for five long seconds. Instinctively, Heddam took one step forwards. *Mayhaps she's changed her mind.*

And then she was gone, the darkness swallowing her, the rain drowning out any sound of her footsteps.

Standing at the top of the ramp, Heddam looked out at the drowning darkness. He felt as though he'd lost something, and the irony of it was that he didn't even know what he'd lost.

Could one lose what wasn't his to start with?

~ * ~

Eighteen bleached heads were now on the spikes lining each side of the gate. In the middle of the forehead of each skull was a teardrop-shaped hole.

In the Ruling Room, the High Emperor sat on the throne and contemplated the glass cabinet that had just had the glass door locked. In the cabinet, mounted on royal black marble, eighteen topaz *kyrats* glowed dully.

Contemplating them, the High Emperor rubbed his jaw. *Kyrats*. The symbols of power. At the top of the topaz *kyrats* was a multi-coloured *kyrat*. It, too, glowed dully. It, too, had held the power.

The power he needed. The power he craved. The power he would use to crush the last rumblings of the revolutionists who wanted the old ways back. The revolutionists, his hidden enemies.

Three people stood between him and that power.

Three Guardians.

Three left to kill.

~ * ~

Looking down at the map spread on the table before them, Vulcan rubbed his forehead. “It’s impossible. How can we get to the survivors? They could be anywhere.”

Miness sighed. “We have to try.”

“We’ve been trying for five months. This is hopeless!”

“We can’t give up. We need the surviving Guardians to return.”

“The Third Way—”

“Shhh.” She glanced around nervously. “Not here.”

Exhaling noisily, Vulcan rolled the map up. “We need a more secure place.”

“Yes. Here is too—” She stopped. “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

The door in the far wall opened and four figures slipped inside.

Vulcan grabbed for his laser only to find one already pointed at him. The colour leached from his face as he stared at Minness. “Traitor!”

“No.” She snatched the map from his hold. “You are the traitor.”

The four figures moved forward and now he could see their faces clearly. He was shocked, his eyes widening. “No!”

“Yes.” Raising the laser to point at his forehead, Minness pulled the trigger.

A hole burned deep between the eyes of Vulcan, and he dropped to the floor lifelessly.

“The Third Way.” Musingly, Minness tapped the end of the rolled map against her chin. “The Old Way, the New Way and the Third Way. It’s a race, is it not, to see who wins?”

“What do you want us to do with him?” the woman standing near the door queried. “The same as before?”

“Most definitely.” Stepping over the fallen body, Minness left the room.

~ * ~

The tiny panel that opened out through the eyes of the painting which covered it, slid shut. He pondered what he'd seen. All very interesting. Yaltan would be interested to hear what was going on.

Very interested.

~ * ~

It could feel the dying of the ones who guarded it. The ones who protected it. Stretching outwards, it scanned the surroundings. Many searched for it. Only one could contain it. If it was the wrong one who took it...

Curling in on itself, it thought about it. Emotions it didn't have, but it knew logic. Logic said that death might happen if everything did not go as it should. Old Ways had always been. New Ways were a threat. The Third Way...

It looked out into the darkness, seeing that which others couldn't see. It knew what was out there, and what was closing in on it.

Darkness came in many forms.

~ * ~

Head bent against the lashing rain, Tasi crept carefully up the slope. The wind pushed at her and she was thankful for the cloak that Heddam had insisted on giving her.

Heddam. So big, so kind, so gentle.

So passionate.

Even now the heat from his kiss kept her warm from the inside. Unfortunately, that's how it was always going to be. A memory to drag out on cold nights to keep her warm.

Shaking away the self pity that for a brief second hovered on the edges of her conscious, Tasi pushed the troubling thoughts aside and squinted up the mountain. The entrance to the cave was close, the wind, rain and bushes combining to make it invisible to those who didn't know its whereabouts.

She had a duty to do and nothing was going to stop her doing it. Unaware of the root now showing above the ground, she tripped and slid ten feet down the slippery slope whilst barely managing to retain her balance.

Well, being dead could severely put a cramp in doing her duty. Shaking her head, she heaved a sigh and started up the ground she'd just lost.

Finally she was walking carefully behind the bushes concealing the entrance to the cave. Once inside, she stood in the dampness and listened. Nothing moved, nothing sounded. Going by instinct alone, she moved silently into the depths of the cave, keeping her hands out until she touched the rock wall.

Trailing her hands along it for guidance, she walked further in, turning with the tunnel. Deeper and deeper into the mountain she went until finally she saw the glow of the fire.

"Who goes there?" a voice asked from the darkness beyond.

"It's me, Balfour." Tasi stepped into the light and dropped the pack on the floor.

"Where's Acantha?"

"Killed by soldiers." Shrugging off the cloak, Tasi spread it out over a nearby rock before turning to face the fire. Holding her hand out to the flickering flames, she watched as Balfour stepped from the dark nook in the wall.

Sadness filled his eyes. He sighed, his face tired. "Was it quick?"

Remembering the slow way Acantha had bled out on the floor, Tasi nodded. Why add pain when there was no need for it? The only one who would carry the memory was herself. Balfour had enough problems of his own.

Namely the fact that he was head of what remained of the Guardians... herself and him.

Coming into the light, he laid the laser down on the rock beside the cloak. Looking down at it, he raised his brows before transferring his gaze to Tasi.

"Daamen traders hid me from the Aora soldiers." She rubbed her hands briskly. "One of them gave me the cloak. They also gave me food." Squatting down, she picked up the pack and delved into it, withdrawing the package of bread and several different spreads.

“Daamen traders, you say?” Balfour watched with interest as she searched in the bag once more and withdrew several emergency packs, full meals needing only several drops of water.

Placing the food on another rock, she dropped to the floor to sit cross-legged while Balfour took several slices of bread and a tube of spread. When he offered her some, she shook her head.

“Ate already,” she informed him. “They fed me well.”

Sitting beside her, Balfour said quietly, “Tell me what happened.”

“They somehow got a lock on us as we drew near to the settlement. They came from nowhere, there was no sign of their presence anywhere near the settlement. One minute they weren’t there, the next they were everywhere.” Pulling the bandanna down, Tasi touched the *kyrat*. “Acantha got hurt, we managed to get into the settlement and hide.”

“The settlement.” Balfour frowned.

“It was safer. The Head Peacekeeper wasn’t happy to have the Aora soldiers searching. He restricted them which gave us time to hide. Acantha died and I got away with help from the Daamens.”

The only sound in the cave was the crackle of the fire. Balfour ate slowly and Tasi glanced at his hands. They shook visibly and the shadow of pain whitened the corners of his mouth.

“I’ll head back now and see if I can get that pain killer—”

“No.”

“They won’t be expecting me back.”

“No. It’s too risky.”

“Balfour, you can’t continue without that medicine.”

“We have no choice.” He licked the last of the crumbs from his fingers. “There are only two of us left, Tasi.”

“I know.”

“It’s time to move.”

“Move?” Startled, she lifted her gaze from the fire to him.

“Yes.”

“But where?”

Balfour stood up. “It’s time we head for home.”

Three

Yaltan watched the new High Emperor give a rousing speech to his subjects. It wasn't going well. Many of them were sullen.

Maybe it had something to do with the skulls of the Guardians at the gates. That would be enough to dim anyone's day.

"He's not holding them," Miness said from beside Yaltan.

"They're still not happy at the damage his uprising caused." Hands linked loosely behind his back, Yaltan studied the faces of the few who seemed happy with the new High Emperor. "Though he appears to have a couple on his side."

"They should all be on his side." Miness's eyes narrowed. "They have no idea of what he is offering them."

"A new High Emperor."

She looked sharply at him.

Yaltan grinned. "Come now, in all honesty, what is he offering them apart from that?"

"Are you saying you're not happy with the change?"

"I'm happy just to retain my head. I'll follow whatever leader is in charge."

"You're saying you're not loyal to one person."

"I'm saying I'm loyal to the High Emperor or High Empress in power at the time." He winked. "Big difference, my dear."

Frowning, Miness turned her attention once more to the crowd below the dais.

Yaltan studied the crowd. None openly rebelled, but amongst the lot were rebels and revolutionists. It was the easiest way to distinguish the two groups. The revolutionists were the ones fighting covertly for the Old Way, while the rebels were those fighting for the Third Way.

The New Way was strong, though. He eyed the High Emperor. He had the charisma, looks, and strength to push onwards.

The speech died to a smattering of applause, and the High Emperor left the dais, coming back into the shelter of the palace.

Scowling, he motioned to Yaltan. "Come with me, Counsellor."

"Sire." Yaltan fell into step behind him, sending Miness another wink as he did so.

Entering the room set aside for the personal use of the High Emperor and his closest consultants, the High Emperor sat behind his big desk and drummed his fingers irritably on the top. "They hate me."

"Putting the Guardians skulls on the wall wasn't the wisest of choices." Yaltan sat in the chair across from him.

"They were put there to demoralize them."

"It's not working."

The High Emperor glared at him. "Once we have the last three, it will. It will be the last crushing of morale."

"These people, Sire, have known the Old Way for so long it's in their very bones."

"Some are embracing the Third Way well enough."

Yaltan shrugged. "True. But for how long?"

"I want these two groups stopped." The High Emperor fisted his hand. "I want their leaders found and annihilated. I want every other person involved to be punished."

"That's not going to be easy."

"I don't care." He glared at Yaltan. "See that it's done."

“Very well.” Yaltan crossed his legs and studied the tips of his shoes from beneath the robes. “I’ll recruit some of the children from the soldiers.”

“Children?” The High Emperor scowled.

“Children can’t keep secrets for long.” Yaltan smiled. “You’d be amazed what they find out from each other. Friendships are so predictable like that.”

~ * ~

The time was almost upon it. Almost, but not quite. There was still much danger, so much depending on so little.

Curled up in the warmth, it waited. Soon. Soon...

~ * ~

“Tis all the information you have?” Heddam looked at the handcomp he’d attached to the viscomm.

“Tis all you’re going to get,” Sabra informed him.

He looked at his friend. “Security surely has more?”

“Tis all you’re getting,” she repeated. Her face on the screen was watchful. “Don’t get too involved in this.”

“I’m not.”

“So why the information?”

“I told you. I just want to have an update.”

“The uprising on Aora has nothing to do with us. Keep your nose out of it.”

“I’m not about to go in there firing lasers, lass.” He smiled at her.

“Keep the charm to yourself, Heddam. It doesn’t work on me.” She looked away for a few seconds as someone talked to her off-screen. When she looked back, her eyes were narrowed. “I don’t want to be coming out to some forsaken planet to drag your arse out of trouble. I’m warning you now.”

“Tsk. Lass. I’m surprised you’d think such a thing.” Heddam clicked his tongue. “I’m not like Jase and Shamon and some of the others.”

“You’re too much like them,” she retorted sharply.

He grinned.

“’Tis all you want?”

“For now. If you hear anything new, let me know. Please.”

She pursed her lips. “This wench, how much does she mean to you?”

“I just met her. She was nice.”

“Nice doesn’t invoke this much curiosity.”

“Ah, Sabra, don’t fret your pretty little head about it.” Heddham disconnected the handcomp from the main console. “You worry too much.”

Sabra snorted.

“Is Des there?” Heddham queried.

“Aye. Why? She doesn’t know any more than I do, so if you’re thinking of pumping her for information—”

“You are such a suspicious wench.” Heddham shook his head reprovingly. “Shame on you. ’Tis just that when I’m finished, Simon is wanting to speak to her if she’s there.”

“Mmmm.” Sabra gave him a last narrow-eyed look. “Right. You just remember what I said.”

Heddham grinned, gave her a little wave and left the control cabin. On his way to his own cabin, he peered in to the dining cabin see Simon sitting at the table. “Your beloved wench is waiting to speak to you.”

Simon’s face lit up and he stood quickly. Picking up the plate of food and his fork, he strode around the table and towards the door. “Thanks, friend. ’Tis been ages since I spoke to her.”

“Aye, last night was a long time ago.”

“Way too long.”

“No doubt you’ll be with her for hours, so I’ll bid you goodnight now.” Laughing, Heddum went into his cabin.

He hesitated for a moment, then placed the handcomp onto the desk, went into the bathing cabin and stripped off. The shower was hot and refreshing, and when he finished drying himself he wrapped the towel around his middle and went back into the main cabin. Picking up the hand comp, he sat down on the on the side of the bunk.

He didn’t turn it on immediately but sat gazing down at it. ’Twas really any point in getting the information? ’Twasn’t anything he could do for Tasi. Aora ran itself, no one else had a say in what they did. If they wanted to hunt their Guardians to death they could, no one would speak against them. They didn’t come under the IPC. They were free to do whatever they wanted as long as they didn’t encroach on planets and people under the IPC protection.

But he couldn’t forget Tasi. She slipped into his dreams, she appeared from a corner of his memories when everything was quiet. She hovered on the edges of his subconscious. The golden ray of the sunset brought to mind the golden glints of her hair.

Even more telling, he’d lost interest in the delightful tavern wenches. They’d landed on three different planets and not once had he gone to bed with a wench. He smiled, he laughed, he joked with them, and he let them sit on his lap. But he didn’t go to bed with them.

He didn’t want to. He’d lost all desire for what had been a very enjoyable part of his life.

Tasi had seriously mucked up his love of wenches. He still liked them but he didn’t want them either in their own beds or his. He had no interest in getting intimate with any of them.

Because Tasi is the only wench I want in my bed. And ’twasn’t going to happen, because she could be anywhere.

She could be dead.

The thought alone had him switching on the handcomp and perusing the latest news. Pockets of fighting were still breaking out on Aora as the control for power was torn between two groups. The New Way was definitely winning, if what was read was true, but how much was propaganda? And how much of the private war

beneath the surface, those run by the rebels and revolutionists, might actually be a huge threat to the new High Emperor? To each other? And who really knew what was happening there?

He scanned through the news. Eighteen of the original twenty-one Guardians were dead. No mention of any further deaths. There was still a huge bounty on the heads of the remaining three Guardians—Balfour, Tasita and Acantha.

Acantha was dead, but 'twas only known by himself, Tasi, and undoubtedly the man Balfour.

But Tasi was alive. Or was she? Heddham rubbed his brow. As good as everyone presumed that Acantha was alive, as good as it could be presumed that Tasi was alive.

When she could be dead.

Heddham's hand fisted. Dead. Tasi of the laughing eyes, the glowing *kyrat*, the keen wit and the delightful banter. Dead. Tasi of the sober mood, the wary expressions, the noble ideas. The duty. The Guardian.

Tossing the handcomp onto the bunk, Heddham ran his hand through his damp hair. How could he find out if she was alive? Where she was?

And what difference 'twould make? None at all. She had a duty to perform and she was determined to see it through.

'Twas nothing he could do.

Frustrated, Heddham dropped back on the bunk and stared up at the ceiling. He had to get a grip on his life.

His life didn't include Tasi. *Couldn't. Wouldn't.* 'Twas not going to happen. Closing his eyes, he took several deep breaths.

You're infatuated with her because she's different, 'tis all. You were drawn to her humour and prettiness, 'tis all. Nothing more.

And if 'twas all, why was he trying to find out more about the happenings on Aora? Why did the wench constantly intrude on his peace of mind?

"Heddham, you silly bastard." Standing up, he placed the handcomp on the desk and went to bed.

However, even in sleep she invaded his senses.

The scent, the taste, the silky skin, the shining hair—it was all Tasi. The heat of her mouth, the glint of laughter in her eyes. The sadness. The determination.

In sleep he reached out for her, drawing her into his embrace. Her protection against the universe, her confidant, her lover.

When he awoke, he automatically reached out for the wench that wasn't there, had never been there. Swearing when he realized what he'd done, Heddham shook the last visages of sleep away and jerked upright.

Glancing at the timer on the wall, he saw that it was barely four in the morning. Deciding he needed something to eat and drink, he yanked on a pair of pants and padded out into the corridor. From the open cabins issued the odd snore, a soft moan, the deep, even breathing of his friends as they slept.

In the dining cabin he poured a cold glass of juice and contemplated the space through the clear shield above the food counter. The stars were brilliant, the space endless. So many lives, so many planets.

And Tasi was somewhere amongst it all.

"You are such an idiot." He shook his head and took another sip.

"I agree."

Heddham turned to see Shamon walking in, his shaggy hair sticking up all over the place.

"You must give Gabie nightmares when you wake up beside her," Heddham said.

Shamon grinned widely. "Nothing puts Gabie off a morning romp." He poured a glass of juice and came to stand beside Heddham. "In fact, nothing puts her off a romp morning, noon or night."

They both turned to look out the space shield.

"You're a lucky man," Heddham stated.

"Aye. You're thinking of Tasi."

"'Tis obvious?"

“More than obvious to us all. Why do you think we’ve taken it easy with the teasing? About all those lovelorn wenches you’ve left behind on the planets we traded on?”

Heddham took a sip of juice.

Folding his arms, Shamon dangled the glass of juice between his fingertips. “Found anything out?”

“’Tis no more than is generally known. I have no doubt the Security know more, but Sabra isn’t sharing.”

“When it comes to Security, my friend, they share only what they want to.” Shamon rocked back and forward on his bare feet. “There are other ways to find out things.”

Heddham glanced at him.

“Elyse,” Shamon said. “If anyone knows anything, ’twould be her.”

“More than likely.” Heddham thoughtfully twirled the juice in the glass. “Aye, Elyse and Shaque. With that bounty on Tasi’s head and Shaque’s connections to the bounty hunters, they might know more than most.”

“And Elyse knows a lot of things.” Shamon emptied his glass in several swallows. “How she knows, I have no idea, but know she does.”

Heddham swung away. “Thanks Shamon. I’ll go see if she’s contactable.”

“She will be if she wants to be.”

In the control cabin, Heddham turned on the viscomm and keyed in the code to Elyse and Shaque’s communication system. Their response would depend on whereabouts they were, Outlaw or Lawful Sector, and what they were doing. If they were hunting a slave ship full of children, or even tracking a single stolen child or youth, they wouldn’t answer anyone.

But if they were free for the moment... well, they could still be doing anything. Elyse and Shaque were both a puzzle at times... dark puzzles.

The screen flickered and then a pretty face with grave brown eyes and a wavy brown bob was looking calmly back at him. A smile curved the full lips. “Heddham.”

“Elyse.” Heddam didn’t bother to try and examine the spill of relief that went through him.

“How are you?”

“Good.” He hesitated. “And you?”

“Busy.” The glint in her eye wasn’t comforting, but then Elyse could make anyone squirm with just one look.

Her winter-eyed, blonde-haired, ex-bounty hunter husband could do the same. They were what the Daamens laughingly described as the ‘spooky’ friends.

One fine brow arched slightly, Elyse waited silently for Heddam to speak. He knew from experience that she could sit there for a long time just waiting. The wench was downright... well, spooky, at times.

“What do you know of Aora?” he finally asked.

“Aora.” She didn’t blink. “An uprising five months ago. The High Empress murdered, the Guardians hunted and killed. Six Guardians survived and they fled and separated, making hunting them harder. The skulls of the Guardians killed are spiked near the gate. The *kyrats* were removed from the skulls. The High Emperor is seeking power but he’s fighting two other uprisings. The Old Way, who are fighting for the way it used to be and the Third Way, who are a group of influential people wanting to abolish both the New and Old Ways and bring about a new rule. It’s said that three Guardians remain alive and on the run.” That slight, mysterious smile curved her mouth. “And you saved one of them.”

“How did you know that?” he demanded.

“You don’t want to know.”

He probably didn’t, but if she knew that much she might know more. “What can you tell me of Tasi? Tasita?”

“Tasita.” She rested her chin on one finger. “The youngest of the Guardians. She’s one of the three on the run.”

So Elyse didn’t know that Acantha was dead. “One of two left,” he said.

“Ah.”

“Where is she?”

“On the run.”

“Ha ha. Very funny.” Elbows on the console, he leaned forward. “Do you know where she is?”

“Heddham, she could be anywhere by now. She could still be on the same planet you left her, she could be in space, or she could be back on Aora.”

“Back on Aora? Of her own free will?” He shook his head. “I doubt that.”

“Doubt nothing. The Guardians have a duty and they’ll see it through.”

“The High Empress is dead. What other duty could they possibly have?”

Elyse studied him. “What do you know of Aora?”

Heddham shrugged. “Truthfully, not much. The uprising brought them to the attention of the galaxy, but their ways aren’t well known because they don’t mix with other races much, and don’t encourage visitors, including traders.”

“Aora is a closed planet. They look after themselves.” Reaching out off screen, Elyse withdrew her hand to reveal an apple. Taking a bite, she chewed thoughtfully before swallowing. “The High Emperor or Empress sees to the well being of the people of Aora. He or she tends to grievances, problems, anything that will disrupt their lives. He or she commands a team of Guardians as well as his or her soldiers. The Guardians are charged with looking after the High Emperor or High Empress and are their personal guards. The Guardians liaison with the soldiers as well.”

“’Twas the Aora soldiers who overthrew the High Empress,” Heddham pointed out. “But the Guardians didn’t pick up on it.”

“It wasn’t all the soldiers, and the Guardians didn’t have access to every soldier. The squads are spread throughout the country. It would be easy to plan a rebellion from a distance. And betrayal can come from a close confidant.”

’Twas true. Heddham nodded.

“The Guardians and soldiers of the palace fought to keep the High Empress safe, but the palace was attacked and many died. Some of the Guardians escaped with the High Empress into hidden tunnels but a cave-in killed her. The remaining Guardians escaped and went on the run.”

“Six,” Heddham said.

“Correct. But only three—sorry, two—still live. The new High Emperor of Aora is determined to hunt them down.”

“But why? What possible danger could the last of the Guardians be to him now? ’Tis not like they can go in there and wage war on him. They wouldn’t know who to trust.”

Elyse took another bite of the apple and chewed slowly, eyeing him the whole time as though weighing up what to divulge.

The wench knew more. Heddham folded his arms and leaned back in the chair. “Spill it wench. What is the catch?”

“Catch?” Mild amusement flickered across her fine features.

Heddham grinned. “I bet you even know why the Guardians are on the run.” When she simply looked at him, he straightened in sudden shocked disbelief. “Elyse, *you know why!*”

Calmly she took another bite of apple.

He could have throttled her for keeping him waiting. “Spill it, Elyse! Why is the High Emperor still hunting the Guardians?”

It was more than obvious that she was debating how much to tell him.

His eyes narrowed. “Wench,” he said warningly. “Tell me.”

“Some things are better left unknown,” she replied. “And why is it such a big deal to you anyway?”

“Because...” He floundered. “Tasi...”

“Ah.” Her head gave a barely discernable nod. “Tasita.” Her eyes were grave. “And tell me, Heddham, if you had the knowledge you seek, what would you do with it?”

He had no idea.

“Exactly.”

“Elyse—”

“Knowledge is a dangerous thing if you don’t know what you’re going to do with it.”

“’Tis not like you’re doing anything with it.” Heddam pursed his lips. “Are you?”

“No.”

“So if you know and you’re doing nothing with it, ’tis the same for me.”

“Ahhhh, there you’re wrong, trader.” Elyse took a deep breath and glanced down briefly. When she raised her eyes, a thin rim of red ringed her brown irises, and her voice had deepened a little. “Because I don’t think you’ll do nothing.”

A chill went through him. He knew exactly who he was looking at. Elyse’s mutant side was hovering close to the surface. He’d only seen it once before when she got news of a slave ship found with dead children aboard it. Shaque had grabbed her arm and taken her away without a word. But he’d seen the red bleed across her brown irises.

The mutant was never far below Elyse’s calm surface. That it started to rear its head now wasn’t a good sign.

“I’m guessing whatever the new High Emperor is hunting the remaining Guardians for, ’tis naught to do with his prestige.” Heddam eyed her warily, glad that he wasn’t onboard the same space ship as her.

Elyse leaned forward and even through the viscomm, he could feel the threat in the air. She looked him directly in the eyes. “I’m telling you to be careful, trader. You’re heading into unknown territory if you’re going to get involved with the Aoras.” The low rasp was evident in her voice.

“I never said I was getting involved.” He attempted to soothe her. “’Twas just curiosity—”

“A Daamen is never curious enough to want to know the finer details unless he has an interest in something. That interest is Tasita. Stay away from the Guardians, Heddam, or you could get hurt.” Abruptly, she reached out to the viscomm. “I have to go. But heed my warning, Heddam. Stay away from the Guardians.”

The screen went black.

Surprised, Heddham remained with his elbows leaning on the console, Elyse's words echoing in his ears. Minutes ticked passed as he thought about what she'd told him.

Most of what she'd said was in what she *didn't* say.

He couldn't figure out what she hadn't said, though. Finally he stood up and walked back to the dining cabin. Getting a hot cup of chocolate, he stood in front of the space shield and sipped and thought. But nothing came clear, nothing shone out to him. Except for knowing that the High Emperor wanted the Guardians dead for a reason, he was no wiser.

And it had nothing to do with reputation.

So what was the reason?

Broodingly, he sipped and gazed out at the stars. Finally, when he still couldn't figure out the puzzle, he put the mug into the cleaning unit and returned to bed. Unable to sleep, he picked up the book on the table and started reading in an attempt to quell the thoughts rioting through his mind.

It didn't work, but eventually he did fall into an uneasy sleep haunted by glowing *kyrats*, mutants, Guardians and war.

~ * ~

The spaceship was old. Checking out the control cabin, Tasi sighed. The controls were still connected to the console, that much she had to be thankful for, but the spaceship just might fall apart if they hit a meteor shower.

Flicking on the radar screen, she studied the symbols. Basic. She could work with that. As long as she knew if a craft was nearing the old ship, she could get Balfour to man the laser gun. Apparently it still worked. For how long, she wasn't sure.

Balfour appeared in the doorway. "Let's go."

"I'm not so sure this is one of your better ideas."

"It's my only idea." He looked around. "It's not so bad. It flies, it shoots, and it can get us home."

"In one piece or many?"

“Just fly it.”

“Can I glue it together first?”

“I have absolute faith in you, Tasi.”

“In me, I do. In this ship, I don’t.”

He gave her a small smile and disappeared.

It was the first time in a long time that she’d seen Balfour smile. Feeling marginally better, she sat down in the pilot’s chair and started the engines. Just as the old man who’d sold it to them had promised, it started immediately. A little noisily, the console shaking a bit, but it started. The noise faded off and she checked the coordinates again.

At Balfour’s instructions it was set for the desolate wastes of the Aora deserts. What he hoped to find there she could guess at. There was a small pocket of soldiers there from the Old Way. She just hoped they were still there. The only way to be sure, however, was to land in the area and go scouting.

She just hoped they hadn’t slanted over to the New Way. Balfour seemed convinced that they wouldn’t, and she guessed he’d know.

Guiding the space ship, she watched through the space shield as the trees disappeared beneath the ship to be replaced with blue sky, and then as they went higher, navy sky and finally the black of space sprinkled with stars.

Studying the radar, she was relieved to see that nothing appeared on it. It looked like they had gotten away from the Aora soldiers for now. One thing she knew about her countrymen, they were determined.

Determined to get that which she and Balfour had to ensure they never got a hold.

Settling back in the pilot chair, she propped her heels on the edge of the console and crossed her ankles.

Balfour came in with two steaming mugs of una and placed one on the console beside her boots. Dropping into the co-pilot chair, he leaned back in the chair and relaxed with a little sigh.

“All right?” Tasi queried.

“Fine. Just want to have a break for a few minutes before we start planning.”

“Planning.

“Everything needs a plan.”

“Ever done anything without a plan?”

“Yep. Got caught by my mother every time.” He tapped the side of his nose. “I learned early to always have a plan.”

Pulling the bandanna off her head, Tasi tossed it onto the console. Her aim was off and it hung crookedly from the toe of one boot. In the reflection from the space shield, she saw the comforting soft glow reflection of her *kyrat*.

Balfour took his bandanna off, folded it neatly and laid it on his thigh, and sipped leisurely from the mug.

The silence between them was comfortable. In the space shield were the familiar soft glow of two topaz *kyrats*. Once, not so long ago, there had been twenty one topaz *kyrats*. The thought was saddening.

Feeling melancholy stealing over her peaceful mood, Tasi glanced once again at the radar. It remained empty. That was a reason to be happy, she assured herself.

And Balfour was with her. Another reason to be happy. She stole a sideways glance at him. A well-built man in his fifties, he was a calm man with an even temper and a sharp mind. He’d been responsible for training the new recruits to the Guardians, and she’d come directly under his tuition. A hard man, he was also fair. With a craggy face and a broken nose, he looked tough. And he was tough. He’d pushed the remaining Guardians to their limit, taking on more and more of the responsibility as each Guardian had died until there was only himself and Tasi.

She turned her attention back to the space shield.

“They’ll be there.” Balfour broke the silence with a quiet, confident voice.

“The soldiers.”

“In the Aora desert. Yes, they’ll be there.”

“They might have turned to the New Way.”

“No.” He sipped from the still steaming mug.

“They could be dead.”

“They could be, but I’d know.”

“How?”

“Trust me.”

Tasi paused before pointing out, “I’ve trusted you all this time.”

“So don’t start doubting now.”

“I don’t doubt you!” She swung around to face him.

He grinned at her.

“If you weren’t my commanding officer, I’d be calling you something.” Tasi relaxed back in the chair. “So what are these soldiers going to be able to do? Storm the keep?”

“We’ll know when we meet them.”

Closing her eyes, she rolled the mug between her palms. “Wonderful.”

He laughed softly. “Always the one wanting to know every step.”

“I’ve never heard you complain before.”

“I’m not complaining now.”

A comfortable silence fell once again until they finished their drinks, then Balfour straightened and placed his empty mug on the console. “Bring up the galaxy map.”

Taking her boots off the console, Tasi leaned forward and pressed the key that brought the galaxy map up onto the console screen.

“We’re here.” Balfour tapped a section of the screen and traced his finger to another section. “Aora is here.”

“A long way in between.” Tasi raised her brows, mildly surprised. “We travelled a fair way in five months, considering the roundabout way we took, the hiding and running.”

“It was necessary.”

“I know.”

“It will take us four weeks to get home.”

“Providing we don’t have trouble, and I don’t mean just the ship falling apart around us.”

Balfour nodded. “Yes.” He pushed up abruptly. “We’ll just have to get home, that’s all there is to it. We don’t have a choice.”

He left the cabin and Tasi continued to gaze down at the galaxy map. Balfour was right, they had no choice but to get home, for to fail would mean everything she’d ever known would be no more.

That wasn’t a choice, that was a fact.

But even though determined to get home, she was no fool. It was a long way and anything could happen.

~ * ~

A week passed without any problems. Balfour had ensured there was plenty of food aboard the ship, but refuelling couldn’t be avoided and finally they were forced to agree that a stop at the nearest repair and fuelling space station was necessary.

Studying the galaxy map, Tasi noted that the nearest space station was two days away. They had enough fuel to get there but she wasn’t looking forward to landing in a place where other people were landing all the time. Some space stations went weeks without visitors, while others were so busy that faces simply blurred in their memories.

“Hopefully it will be busy.” Balfour studied the galaxy map.

“I don’t know if that’s a good or a bad thing. If it’s quiet, the workers will have more chance to study us. If it’s busy, travellers may recognize us.”

“We don’t have much choice. You stay inside and I’ll go out in disguise.”

“No.” Tasi gave him a hard look. “I go outside, you stay inside.”

“Tasi—”

“You have to stay inside.”

Balfour scowled.

“I know,” she said sweetly. “How it must grate on you.”

“I sometimes think you’re enjoying this, girl.”

“Every black hole has stars around it.”

He snorted.

Grinning, Tasi turned back to the galaxy map. It really wasn’t anything to laugh at, but if she didn’t laugh, she’d cry. They’d lost so much since the uprising, family, friends and the High Empress.

She had to laugh when she could, otherwise she’d fold up and howl her eyes out, which wasn’t an option at this time.

Maybe it would never be an option.

“Something’s coming.”

Instantly alert, Tasi looked from the map to where Balfour was now looking at the radar. Sure enough, a blip had appeared on the screen.

Balfour keyed in the blue blip code into the viscomm and smiled. “A fuel space tanker. Tasi, we won’t have to land after all. We can fuel up here in space.”

“That’s one bright spot on the horizon. How far away is it?”

“It’ll be in our vicinity by tonight. I’ll have to send a message otherwise it might veer off course and go elsewhere.”

“I doubt it. The fuel space tankers usually take direct routes between the repair and refuelling space stations.”

“If someone is in need of fuel and sends a message, they’ll veer off course to them. We have no choice but to send a message so they know we’re waiting.”

Tasi frowned. “I hate notifying.”

“We have no real choice. It’s either notify them and meet them halfway, or continue to the space station where there may be loads of people.”

“And I hate when you’re always right.”

Balfour laughed.

Contacting the fuel space tanker was easy. Keeping the screen blank, Balfour ensured they knew he was needing fuel, and then it was simply a matter of staying on course.

The fuel space tanker appeared through the space shield five hours later. Drifting through space, it was a huge, rectangle monstrosity. The small cabin at the front was separated from the huge tanker trailing behind it by several long metal ramps.

Wearing a red wig with a heavy fringe to hide his *kyrat*, Balfour manned the viscomm, not wanting to let it be known that Tasi was with him. Getting the serviceman to think he was alone made the risk a little less. Out of sight of the serviceman, Tasi was still in the cabin monitoring the radar. She watched Balfour program one of the pre-paid code numbers into the viscomm and transfer it to the fuel space tanker.

Balfour, forever the thinking man, had bought the numbers from a fuelling space station months before just in case of emergencies.

The tanker ranged up alongside the space ship, a metal pipe coming from a slot under the tanker to attach itself to the fuelling cap in the side of the ship. Once securely attached, both lids flipped open and fuel poured into the ship’s tanks. It wasn’t long before the caps were securely locked again, the metal pipe withdrawn and the tanker moving away.

“Done.” Balfour stood up and stretched.

When he turned around, Tasi saw the pallor of his face beneath the wig. “You don’t look so good. Go lie down.”

“You fuss worse than a wife.”

“And you look like crap.”

He smiled at her and left the cabin.

“And get something to eat first!” she shouted.

He didn’t reply.

Sitting down in the pilot's chair, Tasi frowned at the space shield. Balfour was looking not only pale, but had dark circles coming under his eyes. In the last month, he was starting to look weaker and weaker.

It was taking a toll on him, but nothing could be done right now. Rubbing her forehead, she wondered if anything was ever going to be normal again.

Feeling more than a little tired herself, she set the ship's alarms and leaned back in the chair, setting her heels on the console and crossing her ankles. Linking her hands on her stomach, she closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

~ * ~

The lurching of the ship woke Tasi two hours later. The ship shuddered and she was nearly flung from the chair.

"What the hell—" Lunging upright, she quickly checked the radar.

A yellow blip showed but it was at least two days journey away.

The ship shuddered again and she flicked on the viscomm. Keying into the service files, she had the scan running when Balfour came through the doorway bleary-eyed.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know yet." Tasi frowned. "With this old ship, it could be anything."

"Nonsense. It may be old, but it's flight-worthy." Sitting in the spare chair, he studied the screen.

"I don't believe it!" Tasi did a rescan, but the evidence was right before her eyes.

"Dirty fuel." Balfour scowled, his face even whiter. "Just what we don't need."

"I'll switch to the reserve tanks."

"That'll get us to the repair and refuelling space station." Scrubbing one hand across his lower jaw, Balfour said almost bitterly, "Only this time, we need to stay longer to get the tanks drained and cleaned. That bastard!"

“Maybe you better get hold of that so-called bastard and tell him that he’s carting dirty fuel in his tanker.” Switching to the reserve fuel tanks, Tasi then checked the coordinates for the space station.

“I’ll get my wig.”

Tasi couldn’t help but smirk. “Not your make-up?”

“I’m not in a laughing mood.”

“You’d look cute in—”

“Don’t even start.” Getting up, Balfour strode from the cabin.

Tasi’s grin faded as she looked at the coordinates she’d keyed into the viscomm. Going to a space station wasn’t something she wanted to do, but there was no help for it.

Sometimes she felt as though everything was pitched against them.

~ * ~

The repair and refueling space station was small, with three docking bays on the left side, each bay able to hold three large ships. Only one bay was full. Next to the docking bays were the fueling hoses, each hooked onto an automatic servicer. The repair building not far off would hold spare parts, over which the computer analysis ruled.

Draining and cleaning tanks was nothing new in space. Now and again an unwary traveler got dirty fuel.

From the glance she swept across the space station as they neared, Tasi saw that the service building was only a double story, the ground floor having the a restaurant and a supplies warehouse. An oxygenated, space shield dome surrounded the space station, enabling the workers and travelers to live inside it.

Guiding the ship to the docking ledge outside the dome, Tasi watched as a shield came down to encompass the ship. The ledge drew them into the dome and placed them in one of the empty bays.

“Right.” Tasi stood up. “I’ll go out and get everything sorted. You stay in here and keep watch.”

Balfour frowned. “Who made you commander?”

“No one. That’s why I’m enjoying it while I can.”

Leaving Balfour watching the viscomm, Tasi pulled the brown, curly wig on, ensuring that the heavy fringe hid her *kyrat*. In the little exit area, she opened the door and trod down the six steps to stand on the ground of the space station.

A bored, bald and unshaven man came across to her. “Fuel?”

“We need our tanks drained and cleaned,” Tasi told him. “The idiot floating around with a fuel tanker has dirty fuel.”

The man squinted. “That’d be Hank. Bastard is so cheap he doesn’t care where he gets his fuel from.”

“You know him?”

“My brother.”

Tasi eyed him closely. “This station a family business?”

He smirked. “If you’re thinking he sells dirty fuel just to get us more customers, you’re wrong. Hank’s a lone wolf.”

“Lone shark’s more like it.”

He peered at the ship. “Old. Right, let’s get to work.”

Tasi stood to one side and watched as he went to the control panel beside the bay. With a press of a switch, a panel in the docking bay directly under the ship slid open. Kneeling down beside it he withdrew a large round hose, flipped open the cap of the fuel tank in the undercarriage of the space ship and connected it.

Draining the tanks took longer than filling them up.

While the draining and cleaning was taking place, Tasi looked around. A few travelers returned to their space ship, and the space shield enclosed it, the ledge lifting it up to set outside the dome. The ship flew off.

No one took notice of her but she didn’t relax. Nor did she trust the bald-headed man enough to go back into the ship. Now she knew his brother was the same bastard who’d sold them dirty fuel, she meant to ensure the job was done properly.

The baldheaded man ignored her as she leaned against the control panel where she could watch him.

Another ship approached the space station and was brought inside. Four men disembarked and looked at her with leers.

“Hey, sweetheart!” one called. “Feeling lonely?”

“You can come with us,” another yelled. “We’ll show you a real good time.”

Tasi ignored them, and laughing, they went across to the restaurant.

Impatiently, she watched the man. It couldn’t be much longer now. Another half hour passed and he finally attached the hose and pumped clean fuel into the tanks.

“Hey, sweetheart.”

Tasi ignored the voice.

“You still here?”

The voice was coming closer, and she glanced over her shoulder. Great. The four louts were back and they were spoiling for trouble. She could see it in their eyes. Their gazes swept over her lustfully, and one of them looked curiously at the spaceship.

“Old ship,” he commented.

The baldheaded man fitted the cap back onto the fuel tank and stepped away from the ship.

“How much?” Tasi asked him.

“Two hundred dinno. You can pay cash or key in the pre-paid code number into the control panel you’re leaning against.”

“Aw, c’mon,” said one of the louts. “Surely you can do better than that for such a pretty lady?”

Knowing that Balfour was watching, Tasi glanced up meaningfully at the spaceship. *Stay right there, Balfour. No matter what happens, you keep your arse in that ship.*

She started to key in the code, only to stiffen when a hand brushed hers away. She felt the warmth at her back. Instinct was to simply turn and run him through, but she was still hoping to get out of the situation without drawing too much attention to it.

Attention was something she was trying to avoid at all costs.

Glancing to the side, she saw that one of the men was standing partially behind her. Another had sidled to the side, and even more alarming, the other two were studying the spaceship.

“Excuse me,” she said politely, and continued to key in the code.

“Oh, I think we can do better than you paying for the fuel yourself.” The man’s hand clamped onto her shoulder and swung her around. His face was hard, his eyes gleaming lustfully as he attempted to draw her closer. “A little kiss, a few hours delight, and I’ll pay for it all.”

“I don’t think my husband and crew would like that,” she replied pleasantly, placing her hand on his chest to prevent him drawing her any closer.

“Well then, your husband can come out here and tell me so himself.”

“You really don’t want to do that.”

“And I don’t think you have a husband on board.” His grin was mocking. “Else he’d be here by now. No man lets someone else muscle in on their woman.”

“Maybe he just doesn’t want to waste his time on you.” Crooking her fingers, she dug her nails into his chest.

With a cry of combined surprise and pain, he released her.

With a nod at the serviceman who was watching with interest, Tasi strode past the man only to find her way barred by another of the louts.

Going by the looks in the men’s eyes as they started to circle her, Tasi cursed inwardly. They weren’t going to let her go quietly.

The one behind her grabbed her shoulder once more and she slammed her elbow back into his stomach, cracking his face with the back of her head as he jackknifed forward. He went down with a groan.

“Like to play rough?” One of the other men looked her up and down with lust. “So do we.”

There was no way of getting out of this without a fight.

She made one last attempt to walk past them, only to have all three lunge for her.

Damn it.

Tasi slammed the nearest one in the throat with her fist, and he went down gasping for breath and his eyes bulging. The second man had his arms around her from the side, and it was a slight matter to reach down and grab a handful of his crotch and twist ruthlessly. He yelled and released her as though she were a hot coal.

She didn’t get a chance to see him fall to his knees clutching his abused privates before the third man reached for her hair with one hand while bringing up a dagger with his other hand.

This one meant more deadly business, she could see the combined lust and fury in his eyes. Stepping to the side, she grabbed his wrist and twisted, at the same time bringing the edge of her other hand slamming down onto the back of his neck.

The four men were down in various stages of unconsciousness or pain. Time for a getaway.

The serviceman was looking at her with a new respect. She gave him a quick nod and then strode to the ship. Once inside, she locked the door securely behind her and hurried to the control cabin. She hadn’t sat down before Balfour had the space shield covering them. Within minutes they were back in space.

Silently they looked through the space shield.

Tasi could feel the anger vibrating through Balfour. “It’s all right.”

“No!” he barked out. “It’s not!”

“There was nothing else we could have done—”

“Once,” he said, his voice harsh, “There was a time we would have stood back to back. Even that is taken from us now.” Savagely he pushed up from the chair and disappeared out of the control cabin.

Sighing, Tasi continued to gaze out at space. The time of the Guardians standing back to back was over. The main priority took precedence and it was hard to handle sometimes.

Hard to handle, but a must. There was no other choice.

~ * ~

Leaning back against the wall of the warehouse, Heddham closed his eyes and enjoyed the warmth of the sun on his skin. The sound of Simon's voice haggling with the merchant came from inside, children's laughter and squeals came from the street, the sound of a planet cruiser soaring overhead and the giggling of wenches nearby.

Opening one eye a crack, he saw that Torkra and Mikal were charming a pair of pretty wenches who were gazing up at them in flustered awe. They looked prim but the expressions in their eyes were anything but innocent. Those two wenches were making a play for the handsome young brothers.

Torkra and Mikal were having a wonderful time, flirting and grinning broadly.

Closing his eyes again, Heddham smiled. The lusty brothers wouldn't diddle with any settlement wench except for tavern whores. 'Twasn't the way for Daamen traders. Whores sold their favours, and the traders were willing to pay for some soft, sweet company. But settler wenches were hands-off. No trader fooled with a settlement wench unless he meant to pursue her to the altar.

It didn't stop them flirting with the lasses, though.

"Finished."

Heddham opened his eyes to see Simon standing beside him watching Torkra and Mikal with amusement. "Get a good price?"

"Of course." Simon stepped down off the veranda. "I'm going for a drink before we leave."

Falling into step beside him, Heddham looked around. As had become his habit lately, he looked for Aora soldiers. There were none, but a pack of bounty hunters strode along the opposite boardwalk.

He recognized them. The pack leader, Abra, strode at the front of the pack, his black mohawk gleaming in the sun, his long braid hanging down to his waist.

Ricna, his second-in-command, walked beside him while the rest of the pack—Vane, Jarvis, Nat and Menac—followed. Like just about every bounty hunter Heddam had ever met, they all had the same hard-eyed, hard-faced features, the alertness a part of them, as much as their grimness and sometimes vicious ways. Some of them had machetes tucked into their belts, most had long bullwhips coiled on their belts, and every one of them carried daggers and lasers. They were armed to the teeth.

Predators hunting their prey.

His blood ran cold suddenly. *Was their prey Tasi?* The Guardians had a huge price on their head; they'd be fair game for any hunter.

Without thinking he changed direction and started towards them.

"Heddam?" Simon kept pace.

"Huh?"

"What's wrong?"

Realizing what he was doing, Heddam immediately slowed down and again changed direction. "Nothing. Sorry. My mind was elsewhere."

Simon looked towards the hunting pack. "Ah. You're thinking they may be after Tasi?"

"Aye." Even though he was heading once again for the tavern, Heddam kept looking at the hunters.

"They could be after anyone, Heddam. There are plenty of outlaws around with big rewards posted on them."

"I know." *I know, but what if 'tis Tasi they're hunting?*

"She could be anywhere."

"I know." *She should be here with me. Damn it, she should be here with me!*

Heddam couldn't help but glance once more at the pack as they disappeared into the Enforcement Building. No doubt they were there to collect bounty or information on outlaws. He relaxed a little as he entered the tavern and the familiar

sounds and smells surrounded him. If they were hunting the Guardians, they wouldn't be going into the Enforcement Building.

Following Simon to a table near the window, he sat down.

Like moths to a flame, three tavern wenches immediately appeared at their sides.

"Something we can get for you gents?" A big, buxom blonde licked her lips and looked directly at Heddam's crotch.

"A drink," he replied, shorter than he normally would have done. When she looked a bit startled, he was immediately embarrassed by his lack of manners. Smiling, he softened his tone. "Sorry, lass. I'm a bit tired. A cold ale would do me nicely."

Not at all put out, she fluttered her lashes. "I'll get you something right now, big boy."

The other two tavern wenches smiled at Simon.

He grinned. "Ale for me, too, please."

The tavern wenches eyed each other, obviously trying to decide who went for Simon's drink, and who would stay to work her wenchly wiles on him.

Simon gave a little cough. "I'm wed."

Their faces fell. They looked longingly at him, and then with a sigh they walked away.

"Works every time." Shamon dropped down into the chair next to Heddam, the wood creaking alarmingly under his weight.

"'Tis because they know we love our lasses and trying for a bit of bodily delight with us is a waste of time." Aamun took the chair next to Simon. His gaze settled on Heddam. "You, my friend, however, are single."

Heddam raised one brow, though he knew where Aamun was heading.

"And normally you would be carting one of those lovelies up the stairs by now."

"We have to leave soon." Heddam took a mouthful of ale.

“We can wait for you single blokes to have some fun,” Simon said. “’Tis no real rush, as long as we’re gone by nightfall.”

He shrugged. “Mayhaps later.”

Aamun eyed him shrewdly. Simon did his normal quiet study, and Shamon looked worried.

“What?” Heddam finally demanded.

“You,” Shamon replied. “That lass has been on your mind since she left.”

“Who?”

“Tasi. Who else?”

“Just wanted to make sure we were talking about the same wench.” Heddam grinned, though he felt far from happy.

“You need to pull yourself up from the doldrums,” Shamon continued.

“Doldrums?”

“Aye. Do you know how quiet you’ve become?”

“Me?”

“Aye, you.” Shamon turned to Aamun. “Tell him.”

“You started it,” Aamun said.

“I’m not doing a good job of it.”

“You don’t say.”

One arm on the back of his chair, Simon swirled the ale in his mug and gazed at Heddam. “We’re just a little concerned. ’Tis been a couple of weeks since you met Tasi and ’tis obvious you’re still thinking of her.”

Heddam shrugged. “Kind of hard not to.”

“’Tis naught we can do for her. We don’t know where she is. We don’t know where she’s headed.”

“We could have found out.”

“Nay. She had her mind made up, Heddham, ’twas nothing we could do. The only way we’d have kept her with us would be if we’d locked her in a cabin.”

Heddham swallowed his ale in three big gulps. Aye, his friends were right. The wench was consuming his thoughts, and ’twas nothing he could have done. She had her own agenda and it hadn’t included him.

Tracing the bottom of the mug in the wet circle on the table, he sighed inwardly. He had to forget about her.

Looking up, he met his best friend’s worried gaze. “You’re right, Shamon.” He glanced at the others. “You’re all right. ’Tis nothing I could have done. I have to accept it.”

His friends didn’t look convinced.

“I didn’t say ’twould be easy,” he added. “I’m not going to be able to just forget her like that. I’ll be fine. Truly. Some lass will come along and knock my boots off and...” *And nothing. Who am I kidding? How can I just forget Tasi?*

Simon looked gravely at him. “You need to learn to live with it and get back to enjoying life, Heddham.”

“Easier said than done.”

“’Tis true.” Simon placed the mug on the table. “Can we help in any way?”

“Unless one of you can turn yourself into Tasi, nay.”

“And have you groping me?” Shamon shuddered. “Not in this lifetime, friend.”

They laughed and by unspoken consent turned the conversation to other matters. A half hour passed in pleasant companionship and Heddham started to relax.

Suddenly the loud chatter in the tavern died down and the traders looked up to see the bounty hunter pack come through the door. They swept the room with a hard-eyed gaze before going to the bar. While Abra and Ricna spoke to the bartender, Vane crossed to the door and tacked a notice to the board.

The bartender shook his head and Abra spoke to the tavern whore who was helping the bartender. She shook her head also. After a few more words, they left the tavern.

“I wonder who they’re hunting?” Aamun mused.

The same cold feeling was inside Heddham. He knew. He just knew. He didn’t know how, but he just *knew*.

Getting up, he walked through the crowd and looked at the board. The notice that Vane had tacked up seemed to jump out at him.

It was a wanted poster with the stamp of the Aora High Emperor on it. A reward poster for any information on the three missing Guardians. Their faces were on the poster along with their names and descriptions, and underneath was the staggering amount for each one. The contact code to the bounty hunter pack was printed clearly at the bottom of the poster.

Reaching out, Heddham grabbed the poster and tore it down. Ignoring the startled and curious faces of the settlers around him, he swung around and strode through the door.

The bastards were hunting prey, all right, and their prey was the Guardians. Tasi.

Four

“Abra!”

The hunters turned at the deep voice, and Abra’s eyes narrowed. “Trader.”

Heddam stepped down off the veranda and approached them. He didn’t miss the wariness in the hunters, the way they fanned out to each side of Abra, ready for trouble.

Ignoring them, he held up the poster. “Why?”

“Bounty,” Abra replied harshly.

“The Guardians have nothing to do with the Intergalactic Peace Council.”

“Bounty hunters go everywhere.” The hard gaze raked over him. “Why the interest? Do you know something?”

“If I did, I wouldn’t share it with you.” Fury pumped through Heddam. “Just this once, Abra, don’t hunt these people.”

Now the hunters looked at Heddam with suspicion.

“What is it to you, trader?”

A muscle jumped in Heddam’s clenched jaw. “Just don’t.”

Ricna raised one brow. “You know them.”

Heddam cut him a hard look. “I don’t know where they are, hunter.”

“But you know something.”

Simon came up to stand silently beside Heddham. Heddham didn't have to look to know that Shamon and Aamun were right behind him.

"Tell me what you know," Abra said.

"These people don't deserve what has happened to them."

"Really?"

"Don't hunt them." The words were bitten out between Heddham's clenched teeth.

The pack looked at him. Abra studied him closely before saying tightly, "We hunt criminals with a price on their heads. These Guardians are now considered criminals by the Aoras. Unless you give me a good reason why I should not hunt them, trader, we go ahead with it."

What good reason could he possibly give? Heddham ground his teeth in frustration. Goddamn it, saying he'd met Tasi and felt something for her wasn't going to stop the hunters.

Stepping forward, he crushed the poster in one big fist and glared down at the pack leader. "Because I'm telling you not to."

The threat in the air was tangible. Settlers backed away and a hush started to fall across the busy street.

Abra looked up at the giant towering over him. "What are you going to do, trader? Beat the shit out of me if I don't agree?"

"Aye," Heddham growled.

He felt Simon glance at him and half expected him to say something to try and diffuse the situation. Surprisingly, his friend kept quiet.

"Back off, trader." Abra's voice was rough, his body tense.

"Don't hunt them."

"We have a problem, then, don't we?"

Heddham could feel the fury cursing through his veins. Every little potent, frustrating, totally bloody helpless feeling reared its ugly head inside him.

Tasi was out there somewhere and this cutthroat pack was going to hunt her down and kill her.

Abra was fingering his bullwhip warily even as he said, “We hunt.”

Rage roared up through Heddham and he saw red.

No one knew who moved first. One minute there was tension in the street, and the next second a fight exploded.

With a roar Heddham picked Abra up and threw him through the tavern window. Ricna dived for him, catching him around the waist, but Heddham grabbed the back of his shirt and yanked him upright. One fist to the jaw and Ricna slammed back into the crowd of patrons who were spilling out of the tavern to watch the fight.

It was all that was needed. Within seconds the watchers turned on each other. Fuelled by ale, excitement and both old and new grudges, the tavern patrons were in a full on brawl.

In the middle of them Heddham went head to head with the bounty hunters. Frustration poured through him, and he fought with more than normal aggression. A brawl was normally fun. This was pure fury.

The bounty hunters disappeared into the midst of the yelling, cursing and swearing crowd, and yet another bounty hunter pack joined in. Heddham recognized Creed’s gold tooth glinting in his hard-featured face right before he broke Creed’s nose.

Peacekeepers appeared in the side of Heddham’s vision but they meant nothing to him. He was after bounty hunters.

The last thing he remembered was seeing Aamun plant a fist into another bounty hunter’s stomach, something hit him in the back of the head, and everything went black.

~ * ~

It stretched, peering out. No, not there yet. Too far away still. But the time was coming closer. It had to be there. It had to forge onwards to reach its goal.

~ * ~

Miness strode across the marble floor, her heels clacking irritably with every step. “Have you heard anything?”

Yaltan looked up from the viscomm. “They think there’s been a sighting of a Guardian at a space station.”

“What? Where?”

“Here.” He pointed to a section of the galaxy map that took up the whole far wall of the communications room.

Arms folded, Miness frowned thoughtfully. “Where are the soldiers?”

“On their way.” The High Emperor strode through the door, his cloak swinging around his knees. “Coordinates have been sent.” Stopping before the map, he clasped his hands behind his back and looked up at the section to which Yaltan had pointed. “Soon the heads of the last remaining Guardians will be taking pride of place on the wall.”

“And their *kyrats* on your wall,” Yaltan added.

He smiled. “Yes.”

Miness rocked back and forth on her heels. “Have you thought of having one taken alive and brought back?”

“For what purpose?”

“Having a live Guardian might make the rebels and revolutionists back down.”

“It might even bring them out of hiding,” Yaltan drawled.

“A live Guardian is too dangerous.” The High Emperor shook his head. “It might work the other way and give the revolutionists new hope.”

“It might turn the rebels and revolutionists against each other.”

“Too dangerous. Too unstable.”

“We’re unstable now,” Miness said.

The High Emperor swung on his heel to pierce her with a narrow look. “Bringing back a live Guardian is too risky. We show the rebels and revolutionist that death is all they can expect for traitors.”

“What of mercy to those who come your way?”

“A Guardian would never come our way.”

“True.” Miness shrugged. “What’s one more dead Guardian now, anyway?”

Yaltan smiled in amusement.

The High Emperor moved to sit at his desk. “What’s your opinion, Yaltan?”

“My opinion would be to bring the Guardians back here alive. Take the *kyrat* from their foreheads while they still breathe, and then behead them and set their heads on the wall. Now that’s making a statement.”

The High Emperor frowned.

“Kill the Guardians yourself.” Yaltan continued to smile. “Raise the power of your own strength through their deaths at your hands, rather than the hands of your soldiers. Show the people of Aora that you’re not afraid to take matters into your own hands.” He studied his nails. “Show them that you’re more than capable of dealing with the problems yourself.”

“Too dangerous—” Miness began sharply.

Yaltan shrugged. “The High Emperor asked my opinion and I gave it.”

The High Emperor regarded him in silence.

“Killing a Guardian in full view of the people.” Miness looked at him. “It’s too dangerous. It *would* incite a riot.”

“Not if it’s done swiftly,” Yaltan said. “Done just right, my dear, it will totally demoralize the rebellions.”

“Or make it worse,” she added angrily.

“Well, there’s always a risk.” He grinned widely. “I never said it was foolproof.”

The High Emperor shook his head. “Miness is right. It’s too dangerous in such an unstable environment.”

Miness smiled triumphantly.

“But then again, it could be so entertaining, too, and if done the correct way it will show the people that the New Way will rule regardless.”

“By blood,” Yaltan said. “By wisdom, blood and strength.”

Miness scowled.

“Something to ponder,” the High Emperor mused. “Something to ponder indeed.”

Yaltan smirked at Miness.

~ * ~

The fire cast flickering light over the watcher’s face, and she stared into the flames. A cry sounded from far away but she didn’t flinch. Sobbing came from nearby, but she didn’t move. A whisper of sound, a gust of wind. She maintained her vigil.

~ * ~

The children slipped into the games of the others. Their voices filled with cheer, and they giggled and chatted. They played, they befriended, and they really had no idea what they were doing, only that they had been given an important task.

They weren’t even sure of the task. *Just be friendly* they were told. *Play with the children, be friends with all. And tell me what you hear, all right? Tell me what fun you have.*

And so they befriended and played. They fought and quarrelled a little, too, as children were want to do, but they quickly resolved conflicts and continued playing.

Unlike adults, children forgot the slights and stayed friends. Those that didn’t, well, they soon drifted off to other children who were more like them in nature.

And so the children played and talked.

And later, behind closed doors, Yaltan listened to them.

~ * ~

Someone was pounding inside his head. His skull seemed to echo with it. Opening his eyes a slit, Heddarn took stock of his surroundings. He was lying on a

narrow bunk on top of a thin mattress. Simon was leaning against the bars, his face calm as usual and a big bruise blossoming on his massive bicep.

They were in a gaol cell, which meant they were in the Enforcement Building.

Memory came rushing back. The bounty hunters. The reward poster. The brawl.

Opening his eyes a little more, Heddam winced against the light above that immediately penetrated his sensitive eyes.

“The master fighter is awake.” Shamon’s face loomed above him, blocking out the glare of the light. “How are you feeling after that blow to the head?”

“Like shit.” Heddam squinted up at him. “You don’t look too good yourself.”

Shamon grinned, only to split open the cut on his lip. He touched a finger to the blood. “Aye, well, the hunters got off worse than we did, so I’m not worried.”

“Be an embarrassment if they weren’t worse off.” Aamun leaned over Heddam as well. He had a graze on one cheekbone. “How’s your head?”

“I think someone is using it for a drum.”

“Sit up, you’ll feel a little better.”

Aamun and Shamon grabbed an arm each and hauled him up to a sitting position. The world spun before Heddam’s eyes and he had to close them.

“That good, huh?” Shamon laughed a little.

“Open your eyes, Heddam.”

He obeyed to find himself looking directly at Simon, who was now squatting in front of him and holding up three fingers.

“How many?” Simon queried.

“One.” When Simon frowned, he said, “Three. Just kidding.”

Simon grunted and moved his hand. “Follow my hand with your eyes only.”

“I don’t feel so good.”

“Going to vomit? Aamun, get that bucket—”

“Nay.” Heddham closed his eyes briefly. “My head is pounding.”

“Never mind the pounding. Open your eyes and follow my hand.”

Heddham did so and Simon nodded. “Now stand up and walk a few steps.”

That took a bit more doing, but Shamon and Aamun helped by simply hauling him up to his feet and steering him around the cell.

“I’m fine.” He pushed their hands away. “I can do this.”

They watched as he took several slow steps. Carefully he angled his head from side to side and took slow, deep breaths. The pounding was still inside his skull but he did feel a little better.

Shamon handed him a mug of water and he took several sips. The water almost came straight back up, but he held it down by sheer will. The next mouthful roiled a little in his gut but the last swallow didn’t bring any unwanted reaction.

Placing the mug back on the window ledge high above, Heddham slowly walked around the cell under his friends’ watchful gazes.

“All right?” Simon asked.

“Aye. Much better.” Heddham glanced around.

Torkra and Mikal were in a cell on the opposite side of the corridor watching him with concern. Apart from being covered in dirt and looking dishevelled, the brothers looked okay. He sent them a small wave and they grinned back in relief.

The other three cells were packed full of men, most bloodied, some still unconscious, some swearing, a couple arguing, and a few just waiting quietly for someone to bail them out of gaol.

A cell at the end of the corridor contained five tavern wenches. Their hair straggled around their shoulders, and a couple sported scratches. One wench had a black eye. They were having a game of cards and gossiping.

Heddham shook his head. Nothing would keep a tavern wench down for long. They knew the tavern owner would bail them out sooner or later.

Turning around, he leaned back against the cell bars and looked at Simon. “What happened?”

“Oh, just a brawl,” Simon drawled. “Bounty hunters, us, and whoever wanted to join in.”

“Free for all.” Shamon grinned.

A brawl he’d caused. It wouldn’t be the first time that any of the traders had started a brawl, but Heddham’s reasons hadn’t been for pleasure alone.

Feeling guilty, he looked at Simon. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” his friend replied easily. “Since when do we apologize for letting off some steam?”

“Don’t know about you,” Shamon said, flexing his hands. “But I had fun.”

“Nothing like a good workout to ease the kinks,” Aamun agreed.

Simon smiled faintly. “Aye, ’tis good to clear the cobwebs.”

A sound in the corridor caught everyone’s attention, and they looked out to see the Head Peacekeeper walking down the corridor.

He stopped in front of the traders’ cells and glared from the brothers on one side to the Daamens in the opposite cell. “Your fines have been paid.”

“Then we’ll be going,” Simon said easily.

“If I had my way, you’d be in here rotting for the rest of the week.” He gave them a baleful glare. “Though maybe not. You’d eat us out of our food budget.”

Heddham, Shamon and Aamun followed Simon out when the cell door slid open. They waited for Torkra and Mikal and then filed out the door at the end of the corridor out into the main office, where Etol and Kel were waiting with grins on their faces.

“Here we were, being good little boys, doing the upkeep on the ship like you told us to,” Etol said cheerfully, “And while we were slaving away, you were all playing with the bounty hunters. I’m crushed.”

“Aye,” Kel added. “Crushed that you didn’t invite us to play. First we knew about it ’twas when one of these happy peacekeepers came to the ship with your fines in his hot little hand.” Kel shook his head. “Desdemona will not be happy with you, Simon.”

“Des doesn’t need to know.”

“Des will know, trust me.”

Simon grinned.

“She won’t be happy that her daddy, Creed, got a broken nose and had to have his gold tooth put back in by the medic.”

Simon’s grin slipped a little.

Uh-oh. Heddam winced inwardly. Shit, how could he have forgotten that Simon’s father-by-marriage was Creed, the bounty hunter? He just hoped he hadn’t been the one to knock his tooth out. Des would make Simon’s life hell.

For about all of five minutes. One thing Simon was good at was charming his bad-tempered, foul-mouthed wench out of a bad mood. She’d start yelling, he’d get that gleam in his eyes and then next thing they’d be behind closed doors and wouldn’t be seen for hours. When they did reappear, Des would be all dreamy and Simon would look like the lycat that had gotten the cream.

Only Simon wasn’t able to get his hands on Des, ’twas physically impossible with the wench on a mission somewhere. She’d be doing some yelling over the viscomm and all he’d be able to do was try to placate her with sweet talk.

“Don’t worry,” Shamon told Simon. “By the time the wench finds out what happened you’ll both be home and you can distract her like always.”

“Meanwhile don’t answer the viscomm,” Aamun advised him with a snort of amusement.

Simon arched one brow but didn’t say anything, but here was a definite gleam in his eyes. Aye, he’d been a little concerned at the thought of his wife finding out about Creed, but obviously his thoughts had looked a little further into the future to the diversion time.

Everyone knew Simon loved to *divert* his red-headed wife.

Walking out onto the veranda, Heddam took a breath of clean air and felt the drums inside his head ease a little. He still had a hell of a headache but he’d live through it. It wouldn’t be the first one he’d ever had after a brawl, though he’d never been knocked out before in a fight.

The walk back to the docking bay cleared his head and he was feeling a lot better by the time he walked up the ramp, though he still took some painkiller in the dining cabin.

Simon entered and sat down opposite him at the big table.

“You didn’t stop the fight.” Heddham looked at him.

“Like I said, nothing like a good brawl to clear the cobwebs.” Leaning his folded arms on the table, Simon studied him. “And you needed a bloody good fight before you exploded.”

“’Twas obvious, huh?”

“Aye, and I don’t blame you. I’d be the same.” Simon was as calm as always. “Want to talk about it?”

“Nay.” Heddham sighed. “’Tis nothing to be done, is there?”

“If we see her again, Heddham, we will offer her sanctuary aboard ship once more.”

“But we can’t force it on her.”

“Nay.”

“Darvk forced it on Tenia.”

“Tenia was a claimed outlaw whose race had come under the IPC. ’Tis different with Tasi.”

Frustration started to simmer once more and he slapped his palm on the shiny wood of the table. “Aye.” He wished ’twasn’t different. If Tasi had been an outlaw under the IPC, he’d have simply claimed her and had every right to keep her with him. He looked at Simon. “It sure as hell would have been easier.”

Simon laughed. “Since when have things with our wenches ever been easy?”

“Never.”

Simon stood up. “But if I think of a way, I’ll let you know.”

Startled, Heddham looked at him.

Simon's smile was slow but sure. "Daamens always back each other, Heddham. Don't forget that."

After Simon left, Heddham looked at the empty doorway for a long time. He had the backup of his friends, but he didn't have Tasi. He had no idea where to look. And even worse, now the bounty hunters were aware that he knew of the Guardians.

They'd be watching the traders.

Shit. Heddham rubbed his throbbing head. *When had life gotten so complicated?*

"Since a wench walked into your life."

Heddham took his hand down as Shamon entered the cabin. "How did you know what I was thinking?"

"I've been there, done that," his friend replied. Crossing to the urn, he poured two mugs of hot una and took them back to the table. Placing one down in front of Heddham, Shamon sat on the stool opposite him. "Wenches complicate things."

"Gabie wouldn't be pleased to hear you say that."

"Think on it," Shamon continued without batting an eyelid. "When we're single, we wench, we brawl, we drink, we trade, we travel, and we have fun and not a worry. Then we meet a certain wench and suddenly we're chewing our nails, biting our lips, and our nether regions can't control themselves. We fret, we worry, we rant and rave." Shamon sipped at the una and pointed a finger at Heddham. "Wenches are trouble, my friend."

Heddham couldn't stop the grin creeping across his face. "Are you saying Gabie is trouble?"

"Gabie is *huge* trouble. That little wench can't keep herself out of trouble to save her life. I thought Jase's mother was going to kill her when she found her talking to Oriel about a new merchandise Gabie assured her would sell like hot cakes."

"The problem being...?"

"The problem being that the merchandise itself was hot. *Red hot.* Misha had told Gabie all about it, said she could get her some, and Gabie thought it sounded promising."

“Stars.” Heddam laughed. “The merchandise was smuggled goods?”

“Aye. Gabie was just joking, but Jase’s mother didn’t know. I thought she was going to lynch the wench, I had to go in and rescue Gabs.” Shamon grinned. “Dana was after Gabs for cheating her out of fifty dinnos during a card game.”

“Gabie cheated a Reeka? Is the wench insane?” Heddam guffawed. “I wouldn’t be game to cheat a Reeka!”

“It gets better,” Shamon assured him. “Gabs undercut one of our stall holders on some cloth and then resold it for three times the amount to Marten from Argon. You know he’s a sucker for anything pretty for Lysie.”

“Shooting stars of Cyron. Marten? Your wench has a death wish.”

“Marten informed me over the viscomm that she’s not to visit Argon unless I’m with her and she’s on a tight leash.”

Heddam guffawed.

“Meekta was visiting and she tried to sell him a necklace for his wife.”

“Oh my God!” Heddam’s mouth fell open. “She tried to sell something to the head of the IPC?”

“Even scarier, that necklace looked like one of those that were on her ship. The one she got from another smuggler during her smuggling days.”

“God above.” Heddam started roaring with laughter.

“Aye. My mother has been trying to keep tabs on her and my father is going greyer than ever while I’m gone. Trouble, my friend. Wenches are trouble and Gabs is the worse of them so far, I swear.”

Heddam was laughing so hard tears came to his eyes.

“Even scarier, Sonja has taken a liking to her and has taken her under her wing.”

Tears ran down Heddam’s face.

“Red made me swear to do a thorough body search of Gabs before I leave and when I return. Jase made me swear to search my home high and low for anything illegal before I leave on trips and when I return.”

Heddam nearly fell off the chair laughing.

“Gabs said she didn’t understand why.” Shamon took a big swallow of una and grinned hugely. “Red gave me the perfect excuse to do a very thorough strip search every time I see Gabs.”

“You need an excuse?”

“Hell, nay. It just sounds good.”

Heddam wiped his eyes. “Stars, Shamon, you’ve got a wench and a half there.”

“And I wouldn’t trade her for the universe.” Shamon placed the mug down, his laughing eyes turning serious. “She has brought me so much joy and love, Heddam. I know what ’tis like to worry about the one I love and to feel helpless. ’Tis why, if you find the wench you seek, if she’s of your heart, then I’ll be right by your side through hell and high water to save her.” Shamon leaned forward. “Guardian or not, IPC or not, I’m with you all the way, Heddam.”

The lump in Heddam’s throat just wouldn’t go away.

Shamon stood up, a small smile on his face. “We all are.”

“Shamon...”

“Aye?”

“I don’t know that Tasi is the one. I think she’s just a friend.” *I think?*

“Doesn’t matter. Whatever little wench steals your heart, Heddam, if you need help, we’ll be there.” Clearing his throat, Shamon started for the door. “Bloody maudlin. I don’t cope well with these feelings. I’m going to pick a fight with someone to regain my self-respect.”

Heddam was again left looking at the empty doorway when Shamon walked out. He had to blink the tears from his eyes. He had the best of friends. Life would be perfect if ’twasn’t for one little thing. One little wench.

One little lass.

Did he have feelings for her? He didn’t know just how far his feelings went. To be honest with himself, he’d never gotten into such an internal knot over one lass. He’d fought side by side with his friends when they’d fought for their wenches,

he'd stood by them all without a thought, but he'd never gotten into knots over a wench.

Not like he was with Tasi.

Did that mean he lov—he shied away from the thought. He didn't know her well enough. Couldn't know her well enough.

Heddam closed his eyes. *Shit. I don't cope well with these feelings, either.* Life had always been a ball of laughs interspersed with work and helping out his friends. Now it was... what?

The hell if he knew.

Pushing his troubled thoughts aside, Heddam dropped his mug into the cleaning cupboard and left the dining room to help ready the ship to leave the planet.

~ * ~

The alarm pierced the air, bringing Tasi and Balfour to their feet in the dining cabin. They ran to the control cabin and looked at the radar screen.

“Ships,” Tasi said. “Two of them coming in fast.”

Balfour locked onto the coordinates and did a search scan. “Aora.”

“They found us.” Cursing, Tasi sat down at the controls and switched the automatic pilot onto manual.

“I'll be in the laser pit.” Balfour left the cabin.

She'd been hoping to outfly the approaching military ships, but no such luck. The old ship just wasn't built for fastness.

“Guardians,” the harsh voice snapped over the viscomm. “Give yourselves up.”

“Who are the Guardians?” Tasi queried. *Play dumb, they can't be sure—*

“Last warning.”

“We're not—” *Oh, bugger it.* The Aoras meant business. “Go take a flying leap, arseholes.” Tasi slammed the accelerator switch and the ship cut a large swatch and headed up into space.

“Nicely put,” Balfour’s voice said over the internal communicator.

“You will be shot—” The Aora’s voice was cut off when Tasi snapped the viscomm communicator off.

“Whatever you reckon,” she said. “Balfour, you better be able to shoot straight still.”

“Hey, you fly this ship, I’ll shoot.”

A laser cannon flare sheared past the space shield and Tasi swore. “Then shoot, Balfour! I nearly had a close shave, and I don’t shave my chin!”

The sound of the laser cannon from the pit overhead sounded dimly in the control cabin. Another laser cannon fire skimmed across the bottom of the ship, sending it into a shuddering flight.

Tasi wrestled with the controls, dodging the two ships that flew at her from above and from the left.

The old spaceship responded to her hands, swinging sideways and flying directly underneath the right hand ship. Laser fire flared, the ship above her sparked and then just as they cleared it, half of it exploded.

“Do I get a thank you for that?” Balfour queried through the communicator.

“You get a chocolate bar. A gold star. You get whatever you want if you blow the hell out of the other ship.”

“You owe me.”

“I just want to be alive to pay.”

“Your wish is my command.”

The remaining ship soared out directly in front of Tasi and she had to pull up fast to avoid running into it. She saw the laser pit rise up before her eyes and clenched her teeth as the cannon spat a flare.

It caught the old ship directly below the shield. It shuddered and veered away, leaving a shower of sparks and bits of iron in its wake.

“We’re hit!” Tasi yelled.

“Sorry about that.”

Grimly Tasi tried to bring the ship under control but the control panel directly behind her suddenly sparked. She looked behind her and saw the smoke coming from the panel. “Oh, hell.”

“What’s wrong?” Balfour asked sharply.

“Not much. Keep firing.”

Another blow hit the ship, and Tasi was almost thrown from the seat. She heard the sound of the laser cannon atop the ship, but couldn’t see the laser fire from Balfour, which meant the Aora ship was behind them.

A red light flashed on the control panel and she felt the dip of the ship. Doing a scan, she read the results and cursed.

“Hang on!” she yelled at Balfour. “Things could get rough.”

“What’s wrong?”

“They’ve hit the engine. I’m going to switch to the emergency back-up.”

No sooner had she done so than another shudder bespoke of another direct hit. An alarm sounded and then an explosion rocked the ship.

Gripping the armrests, Tasi grimly held on as the ship lurched and dipped. The glow in the corner of the space shield faded and everything went quiet.

Tasi looked at the radar. There were no blips on the screen. “Balfour?”

“Got it.” His voice sounded strained. “Both ships gone.”

Two spaceships of Aora soldiers gone.

Tasi looked out at the black space interspersed with stars, and her gut clenched. “Balfour—”

“Wait.” He sounded slightly breathless. “Just... wait.”

In the blackness of space she saw them, tiny little red balls of glittering light. They swooped, arced up in the air and then conformed to one bigger ball. It hovered in space, growing bigger as a few stray red lights joined it, and then it rushed for the ship, disappearing from view above the spaceship.

Unseen but tangible, she felt the rip in the psyche. Closing her eyes, she concentrated, trying to absorb some of the pain from the impact. Reaching out mentally, she focussed with her *kyrat*, sending out the thought path to link with Balfour's.

She felt the fullness, the heat. More coming in, filling and—

No. The reprimand was sent calmly and the thought path was abruptly cut off.

Swearing softly, Tasi tried again, but the thought path was firmly blocked. No amount of concentrating was going to open it, not when he held it shut.

“Damn it,” she snarled. “I trained for this.”

It's not your time yet.

Something rolled through the ship. Standing, Tasi turned to the doorway. A bright redness filled the corridor and blossomed into the cabin, filling it. The scent in the air was light, almost undiscernible. The light slid everywhere, touched everything. It caressed her skin, played through her hair, and she felt the kinship.

But she also felt sadness.

The red glitter pulled back on itself, withdrawing abruptly, disappearing back through the doorway and down the corridor.

It was gone.

Taking a deep breath, Tasi left the control cabin and strode through the corridor, opening the door at the end to climb the stairwell to the laser pit. Opening the door, she caught Balfour as he pushed up from the chair.

Without a word he slung one arm around her shoulders and she slid her arm around his waist. Bracing herself against his weight, she led him back down the stairwell to his sleeping cabin. Laying him on the bunk, she grabbed a towel and wiped the sweat that was dripping down his face. His eyes were like black pools in his stark-white face, and his chest rose and fell rapidly.

“Rest,” she said softly. “Close your eyes, Balfour, and rest.”

As soon as he closed his eyes, he fell into a deep sleep.

Leaving the door open so she could hear if he called out, Tasi went back to the control cabin and assessed the damage. The control scan on the engines showed the trouble areas.

Before going down to the engines, she opened the control panel on the back wall and grimaced. The computer chips were black and smoke trailed out from the middle of it.

“Bloody hell.” Rolling her head on her neck to ease the kinks, Tasi eyed the controls. “Here goes nothing.”

She spent the next three hours trying to replace fried computer chips before finally heading down to the engines. This, she thought sourly, looking at the twisted metal and jagged parts sticking through the side of the wall into the next compartment, was Balfour’s domain. It would have to wait until he woke up.

Returning to the control cabin, she ran another scan over the ship. The outside hull was damaged but not in danger of leaking or falling apart. For now, all she could do was watch the radar and hope that no one appeared while she waited for Balfour to wake up. At this moment, they were sitting ducks. The ship was going nowhere.

~ * ~

The scout ships flew low over the hills, the soldiers studying the ground radar for signs of life. Nothing came back but the heat of animals and birds, and the marine life in the oceans as the scout ships skimmed along the wild, desolate coast.

Standing by the empty co-pilot’s chair, the Aora Military Sergeant saw a flicker of heat on the ground radar by her arm. Narrowing her eyes, she glanced around to see who else had noticed. She met the gaze of her corporal and nodded to him.

A person was hiding where no one should be hiding. They’d found possibly a revolutionist’s hideaway, or maybe a surviving family member from the Guardians.

Life could swing either way. The AMS looked back down at the radar. Ironic. She snapped out an order.

~ * ~

“We can’t repair the engines up here.” Balfour walked into the control cabin.

“What? Oh, crap.” Tasi swung around in the chair to look at him. “Please tell me you’re kidding.”

“Wish I was. The engines took a direct hit twice. Those engines are dead.”

“So we’re only on the emergency backup.”

“And that’ll last only so long. We need to find a safe place to land and either sell or fix up.”

“A safe place. Right.”

“Sounding a little sarcastic there, Guardian.”

“No, really?”

Balfour grinned. It was a relief to see the colour back in his face.

Tasi looked at the galaxy map. “So, what safe place should we land on, do you think? There’s just so many to choose from.”

“What takes your fancy?”

Tasi snorted. “None of them.”

“Not an option.” Balfour traced a hand over the map. “We’re here. This planet is closest. Let’s head for it.”

Setting the coordinates, Tasi kept a wary eye on the radar. The closer they got to a planet, the closer they came to other ships. The closer they came to discovery.

Restlessly, Balfour paced around the cabin. She watched him, seeing the energy in his movements. He reached out and touched the space shield, paced across the cabin, touched the wall, traced the map again, walked back outside and down the corridor. Within moments he was back again.

She wondered how long he’d last, though she knew the answer anyway. He’d last as long as it took, or until he was dead.

Feeling suddenly tired, she rubbed her forehead, her fingers sliding over her *kyrat*. And then she felt it. Warmth, someone calling to her through the thought path. For a brief second she was so caught off-guard, she almost slammed the thought path shut herself. Then, with a curse, she regained control of herself and cautiously reached out down the thought path.

It was there, small and warm and beckoning. *Wanting. Needing.* And then it was gone.

A shiver went down her spine and she swung around to look at Balfour. He was watching her, his eyes dark, his skin almost ruddy.

He nodded. “Yes. Finally it’s almost time. We have to get home fast.”

The urgency thrummed through the room. Swinging back to the control panel, Tasi tapped on the keys, trying to get more speed from the ship.

“There’s a ship approaching.” Balfour reached past her to tap on the radar.

“And it’s coming in fast.” Tasi started to key in the scanner to identify the unknown ship when the viscomm flashed on. “What the hell...? No one should be able to—”

There was no time to cover her *kyrat*, no time to try and cut the communications system before a hard face appeared on the screen. Brutal, with a hit of cruelty in the dark brown eyes, and a twist to the thin-lipped mouth.

“We have you in our laser gun sights,” the man said. “Surrender now and we’ll bring you back to Aora alive.”

“Is that right?” Tasi said, her fingers flying over the keyboard. The identification of the approaching ship flashed across the bottom of the scanner. *Bounty hunters. Oh joy.*

“Dead or alive, it doesn’t matter to us,” the hunter stated. “Be easier on you alive, Guardian.”

“You reckon?”

“Where are your friends? How many are onboard with you?”

With a rush of relief, Tasi realized he hadn’t seen Balfour, who was out of sight at the side of the cabin. “Just a couple of hundred.”

The hunter’s mouth tightened.

“And I really have to go.” Tasi flicked the viscomm off and turned to Balfour, but he was already gone, running for the laser pit.

Winging back to the control panel, she set her jaw and concentrated on trying to get more speed from the old spaceship. On the radar she could see the bounty hunter's ship closing in fast. It was gaining on them and there was nothing she could do about it.

Minutes later laser fire flared in the sky, and the ship suddenly appeared. Long, black and sleek, it soared straight at them.

"Balfour!" she yelled. "You locked onto our visitor?"

"Got him in sight," Balfour confirmed. "Just fly this thing."

A flare from below the new ship slammed into the side of the old ship.

She heard Balfour swearing, saw the answering flare of laser fire sear across the top of the ship and into sight of the space shield. The hunter's ship was fast, angling away, and the flare seared harmlessly past it.

The ship shuddered under another blow and then sirens started going off. The ship pitched and started to die down.

"Oh no," Tasi muttered. "We're not going to be sitting ducks now!" Frantically keying in commands, she shouted, "Balfour! Strap in and hold on! I'm taking us down!"

There was no answer and all she could do was pray Balfour was okay.

And that they'd make it out of this alive.

Snapping the safety harness on, Tasi blocked three of the main electrical lines. It was a dangerous manoeuvre, but the only one left to do. The space ship simply plunged through space on one engine.

Keeping only one main electrical line open to steer with, Tasi guided the spaceship downwards. Heart pounding, she saw the planet below looming closer and closer.

The black hunters' ship swooped after them, the lasers flaring, searing the hull of the old spaceship. In the space shield she saw the flames flaring bright, licking at the shield. The space shield cracked but held.

"They're following," Balfour said.

“We need to hit the ground and then bail,” Tasi replied. “I just hope we can bail, because if I’m wrong...”

“You can do it,” Balfour said. “We’ve practiced this.”

“I know. It’s just that was in our own ships, not this piece of junk.”

“Oh ye of little faith.”

Tasi snorted.

The planet loomed up, forests and oceans and mountains. She kicked in the three main electrical lines and the backup engine roared fully to life, the ship shuddering as it was suddenly forced from the plunge into a straight flight.

The ship hit the tops of trees, parts of the undercarriage torn away as it glanced off the top of a hill. The ship tilted, crashed sideways into another hill and then slid down the remainder to come to a stop at the bottom in a cloud of dust and smoke.

Ears ringing with the alarm blaring, Tasi released the safety harness and bolted from the control cabin. Smoke filled the corridor but she could see Balfour coming through the stairwell door.

“Run!” he ordered.

The alarm was deafening, and she caught a glimpse of fire flaring from a torn panel in the side of the corridor as she passed it. An explosion at the back of the ship rocked them almost off their feet.

Balfour grabbed her arm and dragged her through the blinding smoke. Another explosion shook the floor under their feet as they threw themselves out of the doorway to the ground below.

They hit the ground running and made for the trees. No sooner had they hit the tree line than a deafening roar sounded from behind them and the blast from the exploding spaceship threw them several feet into the depths of the forest.

Slowly the sound of the explosion faded and Tasi sat upright. Looking back over her shoulder, she saw the fire billowing up, the flames consuming the twisted metal that had been their only mode of transport.

“Guess we’ll be buying a new ship after all,” Balfour said from beside her.

Pushing upright, she stood on slightly unsteady legs and looked at his soot covered face. “You think so?”

A black shape swooped low over the tree tops and circled. The hunters’ ship had caught up with them.

“I think we better run.” Balfour gave her a shove. “Let’s go.”

The forest was thick, the branches flicking against their faces as it got denser. Tasi thought for sure they’d gotten away when suddenly she heard something. Motioning to Balfour, she dropped down behind a thick trunk, trying to steady her breathing as she peered around it. Balfour knelt behind her, his panting breath hot on her neck as he peered over her shoulder.

There was a faint noise but she couldn’t place it. But the hunters were coming closer.

“We have to find cover.” Turning back, she got a look at Balfour.

His face was white, his eyes a burning black. He was shaking but he didn’t look weak.

“Balfour.” She grabbed him.

“We have to separate.”

“What?” She stared at him.

“We have to separate, Tasi.” He looked back towards the direction of the faint noise.

“You can’t go on alone—”

He looked down at her and she could feel the force of his gaze. “If we stay together, they could kill both of us. Separated, we have a better chance of one of us surviving. It’s the only way.”

“Separating? Are you sure? What if—”

“We’ve done it before.” Balfour stood up. “We have to do it again.”

She straightened. They had done it before; it was how they’d all managed to survive for so long.

“Guardian.” His voice as low, but hard and authoritative. “We do what we must to protect it.”

Protect it at all costs.

It was their duty.

“Run.” Tasi drew the laser from her holster. “I’ll draw them off you.”

“Do not sacrifice yourself.” Balfour’s touched her shoulder. “Not unnecessarily.”

Tasi smiled slightly. “Don’t go soft on me now, Balfour.”

He reached out with one hand to ruffle her hair, and she saw that he no longer trembled. “I’ll see you again.”

“Yeah, well, I certainly hope so.”

Silently he laid his hand over her *kyrat* and she felt a flood of kinship, and then he was gone, running through the trees and disappearing from sight.

Taking a deep breath, Tasi deliberately broke one of the branches of the tree and scuffed the grass with the toe of her boot before running in the opposite direction. Leaving an obvious trail would bring the hunters after her, leaving Balfour time to get away.

It wasn’t her intention, though, to be caught by the hunters, either. Once she was sure they were on her trail, she was going to give them the slip.

Tasi ran for two hours, skidding down gullies and scrambling up the slopes of hills. She crept through bushes, crawled under heavy undergrowth and ran through open areas.

The hunters were relentless. Whatever they were using, they were faster than she was, and able to move through the forest at a faster speed.

The bounty hunters were bloody good at tracking her, no matter how careful she was being.

A sound from above brought her wheeling around, her laser aimed high. Leaves showered down from the treetops, and something flashed behind her. She swung

around, only to drop to a crouch as yet something else flashed just in the corner of her vision.

Suddenly bounty hunters were flashing around her, cutting through the trees and bushes. They circled her, and she fired her laser. One hunter spun away, cursing. Something hit her in the back to send her sprawling, and the laser was wrenched from her grip. Hitting the ground, she twisted quickly and sprang back up in a crouch, moving as she did so, trying to keep the hunters in sight.

They were standing on discs of some kind, their boots securely held to them by straps. Tasi hadn't seen anything like it but she cursed whoever had invented them. No wonder they'd been able to catch up to her even through the denseness of the forest. They were able to travel among the tree tops.

"Well, well." The hunter she remembered from the viscomm screen floated down in front of her. "Hello, Guardian."

He was the pack leader. "Come to kill and drag me back for the bounty?" She kept her gaze on him.

"That's the plan, but first I'm interested to see what the fuss about Guardians is all about."

"The new High Emperor doesn't like us."

"I think there's more to it than just dislike." He eyed her hungrily. "I've heard you have unusual fighting skills."

"Oh?" She flexed her fingers.

"Yeah."

There was no warning, just a crack of a bullwhip and something snaked around her throat from behind. Jerked off her feet, she was dragged, choking and clawing at the lash, backwards to tumble down a slope.

The lash unwound from her throat as she fell. She was sucking in lungfuls of air when she pushed up onto her hands and knees.

"Get up, Guardian." The pack leader stood before her. "Show us how well you fight."

Anger burned through Tasi as she slowly stood up. One hand at her throat, she looked around at the pack as they closed into a loose circle around her.

“Don’t worry,” the pack leader sneered. “He didn’t mark your pretty throat with the bullwhip lash. My men are very handy with the whips and things. I don’t want you damaged, anyway, because once you’ve shown us how you fight, I intend to have a private little wrestle with you.”

The lust in his eyes was easy to read.

More fool him.

Tasi smiled at him. “You think you can handle me, hunter?”

His hot-eyed gaze fell to her breasts. “If I can’t, I’m sure a couple of my men will hold you down for me. But yeah, I reckon I can handle you. I’ve handled tougher.”

Tasi held her arms out to the side and angled her head slightly. “Yes, but you have never handled a Guardian.” Hands outstretched, she touched her middle fingers to her palm.

“A bit of fancy fist fighting?” The pack leader stepped forward, a dagger appearing in his hand. “Show me what you’ve got, Guardian.”

“Sure,” she said.

The *kyrat* crackled in her forehead and the line of topaz energy seared straight through her veins and out of her palms. Closing her fingers around the rod of glittering topaz that came out of her palm and slid along her fingers, Tasi swung her hands in front of her, criss-crossing them, and there was a searing sound in the air as two sensor swords of topaz energy appeared in her hands.

“What the—” the hunter began, only to stare as the rods flashed before him.

His head rolled onto the ground and Tasi sprang forward.

There was a second of stunned silence, and then the hunters exploded into action, fingers clawing at weapons as they lunged for her.

Tasi moved fast, ducking and side stepping, lunging in fast, dropping to a knee here, pushing upright there, spinning and moving continuously, the deadly hiss of

the sensor swords firm in her hands, the glow running through her veins directly from her *kyrat*.

Within seconds the only one still standing in the clearing was Tasi. On the ground lay dead hunters, some parted from limbs and heads, others from deadly placed thrusts of the sensor swords.

Rolling her head on her neck to ease some kinks, Tasi released the sensor swords and the topaz energy slid back into her palms and up through her veins before lodging once more in her *kyrat*. It crackled and then settled to the normal soft glow.

“And that, gentlemen, is what I’ve got.” Crouching down, she took back her laser and added a few daggers to her belt. “Thanks for the extras.”

Moving quickly, she continued through the trees, leaving the bodies in the clearing. She had to find a settlement, and then a spaceship. Then again, if she doubled back the way she’d come, she might find the bounty hunters ship. It was fast and no one would guess who was flying it. It would be a chance, a very good chance, to get back to Aora.

Turning back the way she’d come, she ran.

Darkness was falling by the time she came close to the area where the destroyed wreckage of the old spaceship sat. Beside it sat the bounty hunters’ ship. Long, low, sleek, built for speed. Perfect for a getaway.

Except for one thing. Stiffening, Tasi watched in disbelief as another ship swooped low overhead.

Aora soldiers.

Somehow, the Aora soldiers had known she was being hunted nearby. It was doubtful that they’d been told by the bounty hunters. The hunters would have caught her first, then turned her in for the reward.

But somehow they’d known. Maybe from the space station, maybe from something else. However the hell it had happened, the Aora soldiers were on her trail.

A sound from her left had her peering through the trees, and she watched grimly as a battle cruiser landed and soldiers disembarked.

Bloody hell.

Tasi turned and disappeared into the forest.

~ * ~

Laser fire sizzled through trees, the burning smell of wood filling the air. Day flyers scattered into the skies, screeching their displeasure. Woodland animals flitted through the bushes to get away from the hunters.

Trying to keep low, Tasi ran fast.

Laser fire singed past her head to bore a hole in the trunk beside her, and she swung around and fired several shots up the slope. Skidding down the wet grass, Tasi veered away from another tree and crashed through a bush, breathing heavily.

Would the damned soldiers never stop? They'd found her trail and had been hot on her heels for two days now.

Hiding and running, drawing closer and closer to the settlement she'd seen from the top of a mountain the day before, Tasi drew a ragged breath. The soldiers were trying to cut her off, knowing they risked losing her amongst the settlers. It wouldn't stop them looking for her, though. They'd hunt her through the settlement, but Tasi had more chance at escaping in the midst of settlers and buildings.

Maybe.

Whatever, she was a sitting duck in the thin density of the forest tree line, and the settlement was her only hope.

There were also medical supplies there. Trying to ignore the blood seeping through the rough bandage wrapped around her middle, and the heat of fever that flushed her face, Tasi focussed on running.

When she broke from the dubious shelter of the forest, dusk was falling and she sent up a silent prayer of relief. Dusk led to dark, which led to more cover. The settlement was already lighting up against the gloom and clouds rumbled ominously overhead.

Rain. Rain was good. It provided cover, made it harder for the battle cruisers and spaceships to see her from the sky, and the soldiers from the ground. And it would cool her off, she was so hot. So very hot.

She heard the shouts behind her grow louder and then the distant whine of a battle cruiser. In one last burst of energy she tore through the gloom, orange laser fire spitting dirt up around her boots. The battle cruiser whined overhead and started to swoop down upon her.

Run, run, *run*!

One explosion to her left blew her off her feet but the main blast missed her. Adrenalin pumped through her and with a thundering heart she pushed upright and made the last hundred feet dash for the settlement.

Laser fire peppered around her, and Tasi felt a burning across her temple. It burned through her bandanna and she hissed as the pain slid through her, and she swiped the blood away as the shadows of an alley swallowed her up.

The startled voices of settlers were joined by that of soldiers cursing behind them.

The alleys were littered with debris and a few shadows that slunk away in the darkness, not wanting to be seen by anyone who even represented a sniff of the law.

That was fine by Tasi. One hand pressing a scrap of material against her temple, she kept to the darkest places and strode stealthily through the back alleys and over a couple of fences. All she needed was to pinpoint where the soldiers would start searching and from there try to keep ahead of them.

Stopping beside a tavern, she edged as forward as she dared and saw immediately what she looked for. The soldiers were gathering in the area in front of the Enforcement Building, the Captain of the Aoras squad talking low and rapidly to the peacekeeper who had come out of the building. For several seconds they blurred before her eyes, but she shook her head and her vision cleared. Now was not the time to succumb to fever.

The soldiers needed permission from the Head Peacekeeper to hunt through his settlement.

And that just might keep her from being shot on sight, especially if the peacekeeper refused to allow laser fire in his settlement for fear of an innocent settler being killed. Tasi stepped back and looked up at the stairwell that sat against the outside of the tavern. A high point might be a good hiding spot, for the soldiers wouldn't look up straight away, and she'd have a clear view of the lay of the land.

Except for the battle cruiser flying nearby. If the soldiers got the go-ahead to hunt, the cruiser would fly over the settlement and attempt to spot her.

Sucking in her bottom lip thoughtfully, Tasi leaned back against the wall. Her side hurt and her shoulder throbbed. Her hands shook and shivers wracked her body. The side of the bandanna on her head was soaked in blood. The tumble down a ravine had resulted in collusion with an outcrop of rock. Add that growing bruise to the laser burn on her side and she wasn't feeling optimistic.

Sore. Bloody sore. That's what she was feeling.

Tasi glanced up at the tavern. Hiding in it wasn't an option. Now she knew just how bland the rooms were and how she could get trapped inside one. No, she needed a space craft.

Glancing around, Tasi tensed and slid further back into the shadows. The soldiers were starting to fan out in the street and the peacekeeper had returned to the Enforcement Building. The Aoras must have been given permission to search. Soon they'd be all over the settlement. It was time to head for the docking bay and see what she could steal.

Keeping to the darkness, she crept through the alleys, hiding behind debris when soldiers' voices got too near. Several times soldiers walked into the alleys, and it was only by the skin of her teeth that Tasi managed to stay a few steps ahead of them.

The streets still had settlers thronging it, but many of them were now heading for home. Travellers headed for taverns, and it wasn't long before the only noise came from the taverns, music pounding out loudly onto the streets and laughter and curses and voices of the occupants drifting out onto the streets.

The docking bay gave no joy. Even from where she stood in the shadows at the edge of the settlement, she could see the Aora soldiers stood at the entrance gates and several patrolled the perimeter. Their red *kyrats* shone in the night.

Maybe she'd do better to head back to the forest while the soldiers were concentrating on the settlement. They wouldn't be expecting that. She could find a cave and curl up and rest.

No. No rest. Can't rest. Have to keep going.

A flash caught her eyes and she lifted heavy eyelids to see two Aora battle cruisers sweeping through the sky, their searchlights illuminating the area like daylight.

“Damn it.” Closing her eyes briefly, Tasi took a deep breath. She had to focus, had to concentrate, get above the fever burning through her, push past her limits and keep going.

If she faltered now she’d die, and all would be lost. For all she knew, she was the last Guardian standing.

If she didn’t move, she’d be the last Guardian on her knees. She almost giggled at the thought, and then laid a cold hand on her burning cheek. *No time to fall apart, old girl. Move.*

She shifted back into the shadows, turning her gaze towards the forest. If she ran now, they’d spot her. She had to find a place to hide until it was safe enough to head back to the forest—

A shout sounded. “Over there! Behind that building!”

Damn it all to hell and back. Tasi spun around and ran. The battle cruisers wheeled in the distance and started towards the settlement, the search lights sweeping across the docking bay and then the road leading into the settlement.

Soldiers appeared, running into the alleys, their lasers held up in their hands.

Five

Tasi swung into a narrow alley and threw herself at the fence. As she scrambled over the top and fell down the other side, she saw smoke filling the alley behind her. A soldier loomed out of the smoke, a mask across his face. His eyes glittered behind the shield and he lifted the laser in his hand.

Tasi lifted her own laser and fired twice, dropping the soldier on the spot, but more loomed behind him out of the smoke and laser fire tore smouldering holes through the fence beside her leg.

Forcing all thought of weakness and pain from her mind, Tasi tore into the darkness, hearing the sound of the soldiers as they climbed the fence and then their boots thudding as they resumed pursuit.

Harsh voices sounded ahead of her, voices to the right, and when she swung into yet another alley she heard voices coming from ahead of her.

Heart pounding, trying to control her ragged breathing, Tasi looked around wildly. There was only seconds, a minute if she was lucky, before the soldiers searched here for her. There was no way out. She looked around and her eyes caught the ladder high up on the side of the building.

No way out but up. It was an escape route for now and one she was going to take.

The ladder was five feet above her. Taking a deep breath, she stepped back to the other side of the narrow alley and ran for the ladder. Pushing with her legs, she touched her fingertips to the bottom rung but it wasn't quite enough.

And her side hurt like hell. Her head spun, the world taking on a weird, lopsided look.

Don't think about it. Don't think about it! Leaning against the wall, she narrowed her eyes, precious seconds passing as her vision returned to normal.

Once it had, she glanced around and saw a broken barrel under the nearby window. Perfect. Quickly she shoved it under the ladder. Climbing up onto it, she straightened, gritted her teeth and sprang upwards. This time her hands wrapped around the bottom of the ladder and she pulled herself up, sweat trickling down her brow as pain flared through her side.

Swarming up the ladder, she rolled onto the roof and peered around.

The battle cruisers were still a fair distance away. Crawling to the edge of the roof, she looked down. The barrel beneath the ladder was a dead giveaway, but if she could pull the ladder up onto the roof, the searching soldiers wouldn't realize that she'd escaped onto the roof.

As she'd hoped, the ladder was attached to the wall, but loosely, the brackets holding it barely hanging on. It only took two quick twists to tear the ladder free of the brackets, and she hauled it up onto the roof and laid it down.

Ignoring the pain in her side and her thumping head, she crawled on her belly to the edge of the roof and scanned the alleys below. Swearing mentally, she watched as soldiers appeared out of the smoke further down. Wriggling to the other side of the big roof, she saw that yet more soldiers were searching.

The settlement was crawling with soldiers. She glanced up. It was only matter of time before the battle cruisers swept their lights over the rooftop of the building she was perched atop. She had to get out of sight, and fast. She had to find a way through the roof into the building.

Crawling over the roof, she tried to spot a manhole or something, anything, to enable her entrance into the building. It was several precious minutes before she stumbled across the manhole, and she carefully lifted it a tiny bit and peered in. Though gloomy, she could see that it was a crawl space of some kind. It would have to do.

Lifting the door up, she slid into the manhole, bending her knees as her feet touched the floor. Crouched down, she dropped the door securely into place, forced onto her knees by the narrow height of the space.

Now that the door was shut, she was engulfed in darkness. Seeing a sliver of light not far off in the floor, she crawled quietly along to it on hands and knees.

Lying down on her stomach, she placed her eye to the broken slab of wood and peered down.

The room below was huge and filled with crates and barrels, cloth bundles and steel chests. She was above an empty warehouse.

Sitting up, she leaned back against the wall and concentrated on steadying her breathing. For now, she was safe. For how long she didn't know, but for now she could rest and take stock of her injuries.

Lifting her jacket gingerly, she noted the blood soaking her side. The blood from her temple had stopped but she could feel the wetness of it on her cheek. She swiped her jacket sleeve across it. Sweat stung her eyes and she blinked, wiping the sweat away with the sleeve as well. She probably looked like shit, no doubt having smeared blood and sweat all over herself.

Like anyone would care what she looked like. If the soldiers saw her, she'd look a lot bloodier with a lot more holes letting out her life's fluid onto the ground.

Her shoulder was throbbing and she had the giant of all headaches. Her head literally pounded, and she leaned back gingerly against the wall.

As the adrenaline started to seep away, weariness and pain replaced it. As the minutes passed she fell into an exhausted, light doze before jerking awake abruptly, blinking her eyes.

She couldn't sleep now. *Damned blood loss, no doubt, but I don't have the luxury of resting.*

Deep voices approached, rumbling voices that filtered up through the roof.

Biting back the moan of pain as she moved, she forced herself to lie back down and press her eye to the crack, watching as big, brawny, muscle-bound giants, all standing seven and more feet high, stepped into the light. They wore coarse pants tucked into low-heeled boots and sleeveless vests that left their muscled, smooth chests almost bare. Shaggy, long hair, some wearing it in a rough ponytail, others loose with just a bandanna around their heads to hold the hair back.

Daamen traders. Tasi glanced around. They had either bought some of the contents of the warehouse or were delivering it. Even as she watched, a hover tray came into view and stopped at the side. Immediately they all started unloading the cargo, their muscles bulging impressively.

Delivering, then.

Lifting her face from the floor, Tasi sucked in her bottom lip. If they were buying cargo, she might be able to hide in something and get unknowingly smuggled out. But how to get into something, and were they even going to load anything up? She had no idea.

They didn't sound happy, their voices sober. Other voices sounded and she peeked back down to see Aora soldiers enter the warehouse. The captain spoke and one of the giant traders with fair hair stepped forward. The Aora captain handed him something and when Tasi squinted she could make out a large photo image with different faces on it. Even though she couldn't see it properly, she had no doubt her image was one of them.

The big Daamen shook his head and passed the photo image around. Each trader looked at it, shook his head and passed it on.

While this was going on, the Aora soldiers were wandering amongst the different cargoes, checking seals and lids, rapping lightly against different barrels to judge the fullness.

Searching for her.

You won't find me down there.

Unconcerned, the Daamens watched the soldiers. Several of the traders leaned back against the crates while others sat up on the hover tray in the empty spaces where they'd taken the cargo off. The fair-haired trader talked to the captain.

She glanced up, startled, as rain sounded on the roof above her. Big heavy drops, by the sounds of it. She returned her attention to the goings-on below.

Ten minutes later the soldiers left, closing the big door behind them to stop the rain blowing in.

The traders stood quietly for a minute, and then they gathered around the fair-haired trader. One of the traders who was speaking and gesturing had dark brown hair with glints of red in it.

Catching her breath, Tasi blinked a drop of sweat from her stinging eye. *It couldn't possibly be... could it? What were the chances? And even more importantly, if it was him... hope flared inside her.*

Bracing her hands on the floor, she started to rise to her knees with the intention of finding a spot she could more clearly see the traders' faces, only to freeze as the wood gave an ominous crack. There was no further warning. The wood gave beneath her and she fell straight through the ceiling and plummeted towards the floor.

Or more precisely, straight down towards the group of Daamen traders. Startled, they looked up as bits of broken wood cascaded down. There was only time for shocked recognition to briefly register on their faces at the sight of her and then she was directly in their midst.

Tasi hit hard, the breath knocked from her and the pain searing through her making her head buzz. Blackness danced before her eyes and desperately she tried to force it back. Beyond her blurred vision she saw that she was surrounded by big boots and rough pants.

Lifting her pounding head, she discovered that she was lying across a heavy chest, and bracing her hands on the ground beside him, she looked around to meet startled grey eyes. The shaggy hair spilling over broad shoulders and pooling on the wood floor was dark brown with red highlights.

It was Heddham. Thank you, God. Relief poured through her.

For several seconds they stared at each other, and then Tasi shook her head, trying to clear it, immediately wishing she hadn't as nausea roiled up inside her.

"Tasi? Thank God!" Heddham started to push upright. "Are you all right, lass?"

At the feel of massive muscles flexing beneath her, Tasi started to scramble upright, only to sway and roll back to sit on her heels. Bile clawed up the back of her throat and she pressed one hand to her mouth. The fall hadn't made her condition any better, surprise surprise. As if the day could get any worse.

A big, gentle hand settled on her shoulder and warmth was suddenly close against her. When she managed to open her eyes just a crack, she could see that Heddham was down on one knee beside her, his strong face full of concern. "Lass?"

"Remember you said I could call you if I needed help?" she whispered. "Help."

His hand touched her face even as his gaze swept up to the blood trickling down from the bandanna. "You're burning up." He glanced up and spoke to someone. "She's hurt. We have to get her away from here."

“Aye.” Simon’s face was suddenly in her blurred vision, and he touched her cheek. “The ship is the safest place for her.”

“We need to move fast. We can smuggle her out in a crate.” Heddham’s arm was around her shoulders now, and all she could do was lean into his side and hold onto his vest with a violently shaking hand.

Suns, she’d held it all together until now. Surely she could manage to remain upright for just a bit longer?

Pain rolled through her again along with the nausea and the black spots in her vision grew bigger.

“Don’t worry,” Heddham said quietly. “We’ll get you to safety.”

She tried to straighten up but the buzzing in her ears grew louder. Panic started to set in. She couldn’t die now. She couldn’t. *It isn’t finished, there are only two of us now, I have to... go... back...*

From afar she heard voices, but nearer was the pain. It welled up when something brushed her side and her vision went black. Every breath was suddenly hard and desperation fought with pain to reclaim her.

“I have... to... go...” she whispered.

“Easy.” She felt herself shifted and then she was lying down, but she couldn’t see through the blur.

The voices faded and desperately she clung to consciousness, but nothing made sense anymore. Her hand was fisted around rough material and strong fingers gently but firmly pried it from her grasp. The bandanna around her head was slid free and she lifted her hand weakly, trying to touch the *kyrat* in the middle of her forehead. A bigger hand nudged hers aside.

Everything was happening in such a haze. The pain in her side burned fiercer when something was pressed against it. Someone murmured an apology from afar and dimly she felt herself lifted and the sensation of something wrapping around her.

And with each blurred second that passed her heart beat a tattoo of protest, urgency urging her to get up even while her weakened body slumped against a supporting body.

She felt herself lifted again, something rough against her cheek and then darkness. She must have faded for several seconds because the next thing she heard was rain against the wood above her. Opening her eyes, she saw nothing but darkness, beneath her the feel of soft cloths. The sensation of moving was very clear and she drifted off again.

When next she regained consciousness, she was being carried down a corridor, the lights in the pale grey tiled ceiling above flicking past her bemused gaze. A turn, and then she was lying on something soft and warm.

Heddam's face hovered above hers, every strong line taunt with concern. "Tasi?"

She wanted to reach up and touch him, but darkness was tugging her down. Exhaustion filtered through her. Her eyelids closed against her will.

"You're safe on our ship." With a surprisingly gentle touch for such a big man, he smoothed the hair back from her face. "We'll tend your injuries."

That was the last thing she remembered.

~ * ~

Supporting Tasi with one arm, Heddam carefully peeled off the jacket to reveal the blood stained shirt beneath. The wad of material that Aamun had fastened to her side had stopped further bleeding, but she'd lost a fair amount prior.

Worriedly he felt for her pulse, reassured only when he felt the steady beat beneath his fingertips. Looking down into her ashen face marred with the blood that had dried on her face from the head wound, he felt that familiar clench in his gut.

Someone had been shooting to kill. *What do you expect? She's being hunted.*

Simon entered with the medi-kit and a bowl of hot water. The smell of antiseptic was strong in the room when he added some to the water.

Glancing across at Heddam, he said calmly, "The wench is holding up well, friend."

"Aye." Heddam eased her out of the bloody shirt, holding her close to him as he slid the sleeves off her arms. The shirt puddled on the bunk behind her and he dropped it onto the floor.

He had the insane desire to keep her held to him, to let her feel the heat from his skin, his nearness. The safety in his arms.

Laying her back down on the bunk, he slipped her boots and pants off and pulled the sheet up to her waist. Only then did he remove the wad of material on her side. The wound was nasty, the edges blackened and burned, the flesh beneath raw and red.

“Laser,” he said grimly.

Pouring a small amount of anaesthetic onto the wound, Simon picked up the scissors and started trimming the blackened skin away. “We need to get this cleaned before an infection sets in.”

Gently Heddham eased the bloody bandana from her head. The *kyrat* glowed dully. Picking up a clean swab, he started to clean the wound. “Flesh wound, but it bleeds a lot.”

“Head wounds always do,” Simon murmured, his attention on the black skin.

“’Tis a laser wound, too.” Heddham picked up the bottle of anaesthetic. “She’s had a close call.” *Too close*. His gut clenched.

Simon swabbed the wound down with hot antiseptic water, blotting at the welling blood before smearing antiseptic cream over the wound. Quickly he smoothed a self-adhesive patch over the wound, sealing it.

Sitting back, he watched Heddham apply more antiseptic cream on Tasi’s head wound. “The lass has a few bruises and scratches, some minor cuts. She’s been running.”

“Aye.” Smoothing the self-adhesive patch over the head wound at her temple, Heddham reached for a clean swab and wiped at the various scratches on her hands, and a particularly nasty scratch that carved the whole curve of her cheek. “And how the hell did she get to this planet?”

Simon shook his head.

Silence fell in the cabin as they tended the last of the minor wounds. When they were finished, Heddham pulled the sheet up to her shoulders. Going into the bathing cabin, he took a face washer from the little cupboard under the sink, wet it with cold water, wrung it out and brought it back to the bunk, where he folded it and laid it gently across her forehead.

Straightening, he looked down at her. Simon came to stand silently by his side.

Her face was pale. Dark shadows underscored her eyes. Lying there so still, she was vulnerable. If she'd collapsed somewhere else and the Aora soldiers or bounty hunters had found her, she'd be dead. If anyone else had found her, some low life scum...

"Shit." Heddam rubbed his eyes with the fingers of one hand.

"She's safe," Simon said quietly.

"Aye, but for how long?"

"For as long as she wishes to stay with us."

"Mayhaps we could just keep her sedated for a couple of years." The words popped out of his mouth unbidden, but hell, 'twasn't a bad idea. "Just until everyone forgets about her."

Amusement glimmered in Simon's eyes. "'Tis one idea. But I'd hate to be in your boots the day she comes out of sedation."

Heddam gave a small grin.

Simon turned and crossed to the table, gathering the medical supplies together. "Once she wakes up enough, she needs to take this painkiller. I'll leave it here for you."

"Thanks." Heddam looked around at him. "Really. Thanks."

Simon shrugged, smiled and left.

Heddam sighed.

"Am I such a problem?" The words were whispered.

Instantly Heddam's attention switched back to the bunk. Tasi was looking up at him with sleepy eyes still glazed with fever. Relief washed through him and he knelt by the bunk, resting one elbow on the mattress as he leaned forward.

"Are you feeling better, lass?" He turned over the damp face washer, placing the cooler side onto her brow.

"I could dance all night."

“’Tis right?” Smiling, he ran his thumb down her cheek. “I doubt it.”

“I could dance you under the table.” Her lashes fluttered down but she refused to sleep. Taking a careful breath, she opened her eyes and looked him full in the face. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Helping me once again. It would seem I’m notching up a debt with you.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll collect on it one day.” His thumb slid down to brush across the pulse that beat in her throat before he finally settled his hand on her shoulder, though he continued to caress her skin with his thumb.

“I’m so worried.”

“Trust me, ’twill be my pleasure to collect on that debt, and ’twill be your pleasure, too.”

“Flirting even when I’m down, huh?” She shifted slightly and winced.

Getting to his feet, Heddham crossed to the table and measured out the painkiller into a glass. Returning to the bunk, he sat down beside her, took the face washer from her forehead, eased his arm under her shoulders and carefully lifted her up. “Drink this.”

“You’re bossy.” Obediently she swallowed, wrinkling her nose when she’d finished. “Nasty stuff.”

“Painkiller.” Heddham could feel the fever in her, the heat from her body seeping into his where she rested against him.

“You didn’t put a sedation in it, did you?”

He laughed softly. “Nay, though ’tis an idea.”

He should have simply laid her back down but he couldn’t do it. He didn’t want to leave her, not just yet. Not when she was finally safe in his arms.

Placing the glass down beside the bunk, he adjusted his position, leaning back against the wall and keeping his arm around her back.

With a small sigh of pleasure, Tasi rested her cheek against his chest, her arm sliding across his abdomen. Snuggling close, she whispered, “You feel nice. Like a big bear.” And she fell asleep instantly.

A big bear? With a smile, Heddham reached to the side and retrieved the face washer from the little bedside table. Laying it carefully across her forehead, he winced a little at the cool dampness against his skin, but ensured it was secure. Only after that did he relax against the wall.

Looking down at her, he saw that her braid was messy, and he plucked a leaf from it. Without thinking he took the tie from the end of the braid and unravelled her hair, running his fingers through the silken tresses. The white was startling against his tanned skin, the golden glints amongst the white strands beautiful.

Like Tasi herself.

He could imagine that hair spread out on a pillow beneath her, as he rose above her and—*for stars sake, the lass is hurt and unwell. Get a grip!*

Deftly he re-braided her hair neatly, and when he’d finished, he slid his arm once more around her back, rubbing his thumb gently back and forth across her smooth skin.

Tasi made a barely discernable noise and nestled closer. A shiver went through her, and he drew the sheet up to cover her shoulders.

Always a dilemma. She had a temperature that needed to come down, at the same time she was shivering. A light sheet was the only compromise he could make, considering that he didn’t want her shivering, a body’s natural reaction to get warmer.

Looking down at her, Heddham remembered the cold dread that had run down his spine when he’d seen the Aora soldiers in the street and the battle cruiser overhead. His first instinct had been to grab one by the throat and demand to know who he was looking for, though he already knew. The traders had all known.

The Aora soldiers were hunting the surviving Guardians.

It also hadn’t gone unnoticed that the soldiers had been eyeing them with suspicion. Calm as always, Simon had ordered the cargo be unloaded and taken to the warehouse as usual, to prevent further suspicion. Heddham had had to fight his

own desire to simply go into the night and try to find the Guardian. But Simon had been right, to do a hunt would bring further suspicion.

Once inside the warehouse they'd unloaded the cargo, but at the same time they'd been talking quietly, planning a search, trying to figure out a way to scour the settlement without the Aora soldiers seeing them.

When the soldiers had entered the warehouse, all Heddham could do was watch them search the cargo and try to take comfort in the fact that since the search was still on, Tasi—or the other Guardian—hadn't been found. And when she'd literally fallen directly into the traders' midst, all he could do was thank God first, and then worry himself sick when he'd seen the blood on her. When she'd fainted... suns, he could still remember the fear that had clutched at him.

Now Tasi was safe in his arms.

And if he had his way, 'twas where she was going to stay.

Closing his eyes, he rested.

When he awoke, it was to the feel of something not quite there. Opening his eyes, he saw a fuzzy golden glow, and he had to blink to clear his eyes from sleep.

Aye, 'twas a golden glow, and it came from the wench who was sleeping so peacefully against him. Startled, Heddham started to straighten, only to have her sigh softly and tighten her arm across his stomach. Immediately he quietened but he eyed the golden glow warily.

Her skin seemed darker, making the white of her hair startling. The golden glints seemed to pick up life from the glow and almost shone.

Carefully Heddham angled his head to see her face better. Aye, 'twas as he'd thought. The glow was coming from her *kyrat*. It glittered in her forehead, and he could actually see the darker topaz in the centre. As it came out to encompass her body, it paled to a golden glow.

Experimentally he waved his hand back and forth through the glow. His hand passed through it as though it wasn't there, yet he felt *something*. A trace, a faint touch, a tickle on his skin. Something not quite there.

All right, Heddham, the wench is from Aora. We don't know anything about them. Mayhaps 'tis what happens when an Aora sleeps.

Settling back against the wall, he watched the glow for a minute, then gave a mental shrug and closed his eyes again. 'Twasn't the strangest thing he'd ever seen.

~ * ~

An hour later Shamon relieved him while he had something to eat but he returned quickly. Simon and Aamun took turns during the night to relieve him, but apart from a quick freshen up, Heddam didn't leave her side.

She didn't wake up. The sleep lasted all day, and that night found Simon, Aamun and Heddam standing by the side of the bunk.

"'Tisn't normal." Arms folded, Heddam looked worriedly down at the still figure in the bunk.

"She's breathing normally." Aamun frowned. "No temperature."

"She's not responding to any stimulation?" Simon queried.

Heddam shook his head. "When she didn't move for hours, I called her name and shook her gently, but she didn't respond, didn't wake up." He looked at Simon.

For once, his calm friend looked a little lost. "I don't know, Heddam. I don't know anything about the Aoras. Mayhaps 'tis normal for them. Like the glow."

"Sort of a healing hibernation?" Aamun scratched his head. "'Tis possible."

Heddam looked down at her. She *looked* peaceful. There were no lines of pain furrowing her brow, no sweating, and no signs of distress. The *kyrat* glowed softly in her forehead, the golden glow covering her from head to toe, yet it didn't seem to colour anything.

"She hasn't stirred at all?" Simon asked.

"Nay. She went to sleep last night after we spoke a little, and 'twas that. She hasn't moved since." Heddam rubbed his brow. "She might need a medic, but who could we possibly trust out here?"

"Nobody," Simon said grimly. "All we can do is watch her and wait."

"And mayhaps she might not need a medic," Aamun pointed out.

“Aye.” Simon nodded. “I think all we can do for now is monitor her, Heddham.”

“’Tis not like we have a lot of choice.” Heddham frowned. “The only medics I’d trust are too far away.”

“Then for now we monitor her.” Simon turned away. “I’ll get a roster organized—”

“Nay.” Heddham looked at him. “I’ll take care of her.”

“I understand, friend, but you need a rest, too.”

“I’ll be fine. I can nap in here.”

Simon looked from Tasi to Heddham and gave a small nod. “Very well. But you call me if you need a break.”

“Aye.”

Simon left the cabin and Aamun stood quietly for several seconds before turning to Heddham and laying his hand on his shoulder.

Heddham looked at him.

“I think the lass will be fine,” Aamun said. “I’ve been through childhood illnesses with my own daughters, and she rests as peacefully as they did when they were simply sleeping after an illness.”

“They never slept this long.”

“Nay. But as Simon said, the Aoras are unknown to us. Mayhaps this sleep is normal for them.”

“You think so?” Heddham was ready to grasp at any hope.

Aamun looked down at Tasi again. “I hope so. All I know is that she doesn’t look ill anymore.”

He left soon after and Heddham settled down in the chair at her side once more to keep watch.

The traders went about their trading business before leaving the planet that night. Torkra reported back that the Aora soldiers had given up the search in the settlement and had gone back to the forests.

Tasi remained asleep as the hours slipped past slowly. Heddam maintained his vigil, dozing at times but always alert for any sound from Tasi.

~ * ~

Yaltan listened to the news from the parents of the children.

Ahhhh, children. They played with their friends and then shared what they'd said and done with their parents, and those loyal to Yaltan reported back to him. From there he gleaned what was happening.

Or tried to. Not everything the children said actually made sense.

A drawback of trusting a child's perceptions and memory.

Ah well. It was a time of turmoil and trouble, so it was his job to wean out truth from fiction and hope he got it right.

~ * ~

It turned, listening. The sound of rushing wind, though it couldn't feel it. The patter of rain, though it had no idea what it felt like. Even after all this time, it didn't know what the elements of nature felt like. It knew loss, though, but it didn't cry, just as it knew laughter but didn't laugh, and knew anger though it never got angry.

It knew emotions though it never felt them.

Except for now.

But it knew what it was, and it waited for the right moment.

Soon. Soon, it would be time. Soon.

~ * ~

Standing at the entrance, she looked up at the skies. Nothing marred the stillness, only the lazy flight of the carrion eaters. They circled high above and finding nothing of interest, they slowly flew away.

From behind her came the crackle of flames, the scent of food cooking. She looked to the empty skies once more before going back inside.

~ * ~

The High Emperor was brooding. Miness eyed him warily. He could be unpredictable at times like this. As unpredictable as the day he led the first rebellion. One minute all had been quiet, the next minute the soldiers had come from every corner and filled the palace.

They came from everywhere, and they fought, soldier against soldier, military brother and sister against military brother and sister. Loyalties were broken and betrayal tore through the corridors of the palace. The rebellion was a long fought battle and when it was over the floors were red with blood and the cries of the grieving filled the air.

She remembered that day, the stench of blood and smoke, the sight of the fires and bodies. The Guardians lying on the floor. They'd fought the hardest, their topaz rods cutting a swathe through the rebels, their lasers flaring death.

They'd fought to protect the High Empress and her family, and they'd succeeded at the cost of their own lives.

Miness remembered the Guardians with a sad fondness. She'd known some personally, some had been her friends. She remembered the look on Lita's face when she'd cut her throat from ear to ear. Lita had been her friend since birth.

Ah well, some things had to change. And some people had to go with the winners.

She looked at the High Emperor sitting on the throne, his chin on his fist, his eyes gazing unseeingly at the far wall. He was a winner. He'd risked all for everything and gained what he'd set out to get—the throne, Aora, and the deaths of the Guardians.

Some of them, anyway. But he still didn't have it all. Not all.

He still needed the power.

Pursing her lips, Miness picked a crumb off her deep purple gown and flicked it away.

The far door opened and the Major of the New Guard walked in. He crossed to the high Emperor and spoke quietly.

With a curse, the High Emperor lunged upright. "Damn it all to Hell! How can you let a Guardian slip through your hands *yet again?*"

Oops. Miness thoughtfully took a nibble of the biscuit she held.

The Major simply waited with his usual bland expression as the High Emperor swore and cursed and stormed around the room.

Finally he stopped and bellowed, “There are only three Guardians left! Bring me their heads, and bring them *now!*” He stalked from the chamber, the door slamming behind him.

Nothing like an impatient High Emperor.

Miness daintily finished her biscuit and brushed a few more crumbs off her gown before getting up. Time to try and calm him down. One thing she’d learned quickly about the new leader—he wasn’t a man to cross.

Not if you wanted to keep your head.

And not if you had plans.

~ * ~

Tasi woke abruptly, instantly aware of her body. As it should be, there were no aches and pains. She looked around, her gaze falling on the giant who was dozing in the chair by her bedside. She was in a sleeping cabin, and by the looks of it she was on the Daamen trade ship. A furtive peep under the sheet revealed that she was dressed in underwear only. At least she hadn’t been stripped completely.

And Heddam was by her bedside.

Coming up on her elbows, she studied him. He looked tired, a small frown marring the smoothness of his brow. His hair was held back in a haphazard ponytail. Long strands lay across his brawny shoulders. His arms were folded across his massive chest, his biceps bulging. Long, muscular legs were stretched out and crossed at the ankles.

Testosterone plus wrapped up in a mouth-watering package. *Yummy.* For a few luxurious minutes she allowed herself to drink him in. *All right, I admit I’m attracted to him, but then who wouldn’t be?*

But now wasn’t the time for it. There were things to do, plans to make, places to go, people to see. With a sigh she sat upright.

Immediately Heddham's eyes opened. He looked directly at her for a few seconds before he blinked and sat up. "Tasi?"

"The one and same." She grinned at him.

"Lie down." He was up and leaning over her, his hands on her shoulders. "I'll get you painkiller and—"

"I don't need it." She resisted his gentle attempt to push her back down on the bunk.

"You do." He exerted a little more pressure and next thing she knew, she was flat on her back. "Stay there."

As soon as he turned around and crossed to the table upon which sat a small bottle and a glass, Tasi sat up and swung out of the bunk. Wrapping the sheet around herself, she walked up beside him. "I'm fine."

He nearly dropped the glass. "Tasi!" In one swift move, he reached for her. "You shouldn't be out of bed!"

Leaping agilely back out of reach, Tasi arched one brow and spread her arms out. "I'm fine. Fit as anything . Look at me."

He nearly got an eyeful when the sheet slipped. She grabbed it just in time.

Heddham was looking at her with clearer eyes. "Tasi?" He looked her up and down, a frown of bewilderment on his face.

"I'm fine. Really."

Slowly he reached out and laid his hand on her brow. "The golden glow is gone." Slipping his hand to her chin, he tilted her head back and swept his gaze over her face. Finally he looked into her eyes. "I don't understand. You should be weak or something. Pain?"

She shook her head. "I'm fine. Back to normal."

"But—"

She understood his puzzlement. "Heddham, Aoras heal quickly. As long as our injuries aren't fatal and are treated in time, we go into what we call a healing sleep."

“Healing sleep?”

“Basically our bodies repair themselves while we sleep.” She winked. “Handy, huh?”

Heddam just looked at her for several seconds, his expression unreadable.

“Look.” Pulling the sheet aside, she peeled the self-adhesive patch off her side to show a newly healed, pink scar. “Nifty, eh?”

He just looked from the scar to her.

Her grin wavered and faded. “Uh... Heddam?”

He stared at her unblinkingly.

Uncertainly, Tasi took a step back.

Suddenly he moved forward, one big step and he was right up against her. His fingers caught her chin and tilted her face up. Big fingers gently peeled the self adhesive patch from her temple, and he stared at what she knew to be a newly healed scar.

“I don’t believe it,” he finally said, and then looked down at her.

It was a little disconcerting because she had to tilt her head right back to meet his gaze. Having a man stand head and shoulders above her was something she didn’t come across every day.

“Better believe it,” she replied. “You can’t refute what your eyes can see.”

Those grey eyes looked directly down at her and she could swear she felt something go to jelly inside her.

“You don’t even look tired.”

“Want to try dancing me under the table now?” She couldn’t stop enjoying his surprise. “I’ll win.”

Heddam shook his head and stepped back. “I just... Lass, you were sick with fever and blood loss, and within twenty-four hours, you’re standing up bright as the sunshine.”

“That is so poetic.” She gripped the sheet again when it threatened to slip. “Um... did you by any chance keep my clothes?”

Eyeing her doubtfully, Heddham still didn’t look totally convinced. “Are you sure you should be walking around so soon?”

“Want to wrestle me and see?”

“Lass, the kind of wrestling I’d do isn’t appropriate for this moment.”

Caught by surprise, Tasi actually blinked, and then she grinned widely. “Why, Heddham, you hound. Did the sight of me lying helpless in the bunk do something for you?”

Instead of laughing, his face was serious. Reaching out, he wrapped one hand around her nape and drew her forward until she stood up against him. The heat from his skin seeped right into her, and now she could smell his unique scent, all male and freshness and *male*. Warmth swept through her, trickling through her veins until it pooled heavily in her loins.

Her gaze was locked onto his and for the life of her Tasi couldn’t look away.

Heddham bent down until they were almost nose to nose. His breath was warm on her skin. Now she could see the black ring that outlined the clear grey of his irises, and her senses swam a little at his nearness.

“Heddham,” she began breathily, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“Do you know what the sight of you lying helpless in the bunk did to me?” His words were a warm caress across her lips.

Nervously she moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue.

His gaze dropped to follow the movement and when he slowly lifted his gaze back to hers, the grey had darkened to an almost stormy colour. Hot passion simmered in his eyes.

“Heddham.” She cleared her throat and tried to pull back, her nerves jumping all over the place, but he was unyielding. Never had anyone rattled her so much. She felt like her blood was surging through her veins at the same time something so heavy tugged at her womb. His nearness was making her body do crazy things. Making her think crazy things. Bracing her hands on his chest—*suns, his skin was so warm, his muscles so hard*—she tried to speak again. “I—”

“I felt helpless. I didn’t know if you’d make it. I didn’t know what the golden glow was. I didn’t know any medic close by that we could trust to see you.” His breath was warm and smelled faintly of mint. “I held you for awhile while you slept. I saw you bleeding, Tasi. I saw the pain and then ’twasn’t there. Or was it? I didn’t know. All I know was that you’d been hunted once again and I hadn’t been there to protect you.” By now his lips were almost brushing hers.

“That’s not your fault.” He towered over her, almost surrounding her. One brawny arm had slid around her waist and his big hand was pressing against the small of her back, holding her against his hardness. Tasi swallowed, almost lost in his scent and the very presence of him. “I’m not your responsibility.”

“Mayhaps not.” His lips tickled her lips and his grey eyes pierced hers. “But from now on you will be.”

Surprised, she opened her mouth to argue, only to find her very breath taken away as his mouth finally—*finally*—claimed hers.

Every thought fled from her mind. Tasi didn’t even pretend to struggle. Instead, she melted into his arms, into his kiss, sliding her arms up the heavy muscles of his arms, settling her palms on the massive biceps that flexed as he drew her closer, though how he could manage that was beyond her. She’d thought she was as close as she could get, but obviously she was wrong because he drew her even closer until not only was she pressed flush against him, but her legs were between his, his heavy thighs braced outside her own as he bent down over her, making her arch back, totally dependent on his hold.

Suns, they were as close as a couple so unevenly matched in height could get without actually being sexually joined.

The kiss was almost sexual in itself.

Heddam’s mouth took hers, his tongue sweeping in to claim every bit of her, licking at her essence, taking it inside himself and replacing it with his minty taste. He gave no quarter, plundering her mouth, claiming it, taking what she had and demanding more.

So much more.

He ate at her mouth, nipping, kissing, his hand at her nape holding her still for his claiming. When he left her mouth so she could gulp in air, it was only to press kisses against the corner of her mouth, his hot lips trailing briefly around to nuzzle

the tender skin beneath her ear. One hot lick across her pounding pulse and he was back at her mouth, ravishing it as surely as she knew he'd be ravishing her on the bunk any second.

Her blood sizzled in her veins, rushing through her like sparks in the wake of a fire. All she could feel was heat and hardness and skin, her heart pounding in her chest, need roiling deep in her loins. *Oh yes!*

Suddenly she was free, her lips startlingly cool when his hot mouth left hers. Lifting her lashes, she stared up into his hot eyes. He released her, straightening and stepping back while reaching up with one hand to rub across his face.

"Heddam?" She hesitated.

"Give me a minute." He turned away. "Mayhaps ten. Or twenty." His breathing was heavy and he tipped his head back, sending that glorious, shaggy hair spilling down his broad back as he sucked in a deep breath. The muscles in his arms flexed when he placed his hands on lean hips. "Twenty minutes sounds good." He sucked in another deep breath. "Or thirty."

Fisting the front of the sheet in her hands, Tasi clasped it to her breasts and nibbled her kiss-swollen lips. "Ummm..."

"I'll be back. Get some more rest." In several long strides he left the cabin, the door clicking shut behind him.

He left? Tasi stared at the door before slowly shaking her head. She could still taste him, feel his warmth, and it was playing havoc with her nerves. Not to mention her woman's parts. Rolling her head slowly on her neck, she eased out a tense kink and dragged in her own deep breath.

Fine. Common sense came trickling back in as the cool air took away the warmth of his skin. Heddam was a dangerously handsome, rugged giant. He made her mouth water and her privates even more so, no denying that, but now wasn't the time. *Places to go, plans to make, people to see.*

And what the hell had just happened? Closing her eyes, Tasi bit her lip. He'd kissed her. Held her. Made her hot and sweaty and breathe fast. *And now was not the time! Stars!* Obviously he'd had enough brains to realize that, because he'd left the room and she was still standing there with her knees all but knocking and her womb giving little heaves of expectant delight.

Damn.

She needed a cold shower. She needed to forget about the handsome trader and get on with her duty. Just the thought was enough to calm her down a little. Now was not the time. *Will it ever be the time?*

“No,” she said quietly to herself, a little sadly. “Most likely it never will be the time.”

The words were enough to bring her back into full focus. Straightening her shoulders, she pushed all thoughts of attraction to Heddham to the back of her mind and strode to the bathing cabin door. Entering, she slipped the sheet off and stripped out of her underwear. Turning on the tap, she stepped under the fragrant, soapy water and washed the sweat of fever from her body. Tipping back her head, she let the soap slip through her hair and then scrubbed it briskly.

She had things to do, such as figure out if they were still on the planet, and if not, how she could get to Aora. And where was Balfour now? He was still out there somewhere with soldiers and bounty hunters combing the forest. Unless he'd managed to get off the planet.

Suns, life was getting more and more complicated. Rebellions, murder, broken loyalties and power. A dangerously handsome trader. Frowning, she turned off the soap dispenser and rinsed quickly. She had to concentrate on those things most important right now, and Balfour and Aora were in the lead.

Not a dangerously handsome trader.

Swearing softly, she stepped out and dried off briskly. Picking up her underwear, she wrinkled her nose at them. After wearing them for several days, she wasn't wholly keen on getting back into them.

Maybe there was something she could borrow in the built-in robe, and she still had to find her clothes.

Wrapping the towel around herself, she padded back out into the sleeping cabin and crossed to the built-in robe. Opening it, she saw her pants and jacket hanging up, all signs of dirt and blood washed away. Beside it hung a shirt that looked to be her size. Her boots were on the floor. On a little bench were several clean panties and bras. Picking up the panties, she shook them out. *Oh, nice.* Lacy and cute, they even had a little bow on the front. Tasi couldn't stop her grin. Picking up a bra, she found it to be dainty and lacy.

Sweet. It sure beat her plain cotton underwear that were more serviceable.

Grabbing her clothes and the underwear, she went back into the bathing cabin and dressed quickly. Her damp hair she combed out and braided efficiently. Back out in the sleeping cabin, she pulled her boots on.

Straightening, she rolled her shoulders and took a deep breath. Time to thank the traders and leave.

And face Heddham. Just the thought made her cheeks flush and she took a few extra minutes to compose herself before she opened the door and stepped out into the corridor. Voices came from the dining cabin.

It was déjà vu all over again.

Tasi strode to the dining cabin and walked inside. This time it seemed that most of the traders were sitting in there, either drinking something hot, eating, or just slouching in the big armchairs.

Heddham was sitting on a stool at the table, a mug of hot fluid cradled in his big hands. He looked up when she walked in, his expression bland, but she didn't miss the heat that flared briefly in his eyes before it was replaced with the same blandness.

Stopping just inside the doorway and avoiding his gaze, Tasi looked directly at the captain. "It seems I owe all of you thanks again, Simon."

"Not necessary, lass." He looked her up and down curiously. "You're really all right? Heddham said you'd healed in your sleep?"

"Perk of being an Aora." Hands clasped behind her back, she said, "Are we still planet-bound?"

"Nay. We lifted off nearly twenty-four hours ago."

Damn. She couldn't double-back to the planet, not with the Aora soldiers everywhere, though maybe they'd already left. Balfour still had to be alive.

"You're safe here," Simon added.

"I appreciate that." She flashed him a smile, acutely aware that Heddham was watching her intently. All the traders were watching her, but not as intently as he was watching. His gaze she could feel like a lick of flame on her skin. Pushing that

disturbing thought to the back of her mind with the other thoughts she didn't want troubling her right then, Tasi unconsciously started rocking back and forth on her heels. "I can't stay here."

"Why?"

"I have things to do."

"Duty." Heddam's voice was low, but it seemed to cut through the cabin.

Every trader looked from him to Tasi. Shamon's brows rose in intrigue.

"Got it in one," she replied easily.

"Your duty will get you killed."

"They're trying, but so far with no success."

"Because we found you in time."

"I beg to differ. *I found you.*"

"You fell into our midst seriously wounded."

"My luck is holding out."

His big hands tightened on the mug but his gaze remained steady. "Your luck could have easily run out, Tasi."

"But it didn't."

"And I'm going to see it continues that way."

She frowned. "You're what?"

Shamon took a sip of his juice, his avid gaze missing nothing. Torkra and Mikal were sitting open-mouthed on each side of him. Aamun had his lips pursed, Simon simply looked calm, and a couple of other traders whose names she didn't know looked both amused and surprised.

"I'm going to see it continues that way." Taking his hands from the mug, he folded his arms on the table and continued to look steadily at her.

"It's not your business, so thanks but no thanks."

“You don’t get a choice.”

Annoyed, Tasi said, “You want to repeat that?”

“You don’t get a choice.”

“You’re an arse.”

“Whatever it takes, wench.”

Crossing to the table, she placed her hands on the table between two of the traders whose names she didn’t know and leaned forward to glare at Heddham. “Listen to me, trader. I’m a Guardian, I have a job to do and it doesn’t include you. I don’t need nor want a babysitter, and I don’t have time for your he-man antics. They might thrill other women but it does nothing but annoy me. Got that?”

Maddeningly, he raised one brow. “I hear you, wench, but it makes no difference.”

She switched her gaze to Simon. “Say something.”

“He has a point.”

Annoyance turned to anger. “Maybe the point is that I owe you all? Is that it?”

Simon’s expression remained calm. “Nay. The thought never crossed my mind, little wench.”

“So maybe it’s just Heddham who thinks I owe you all? Or maybe he thinks I owe him?” She refocused on Heddham, pleased to see his eyes turning an angry, stormy grey. “Is that it, trader? You reckon I owe you?”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. “Don’t even think it, Tasi.”

“What am I supposed to think, Heddham? Twice you helped me, and suddenly you’re trying to take over and tell me what to do. What’s that supposed to mean, huh?” Angrily she shoved back from the table.

The silence in the cabin was almost loud. The traders exchanged glances.

Heddham continued to look steadily at her.

She scowled at him. “I’m out of here.” Swinging on her heel, she started for the door.

“Tasi, wait.”

Like that was going to happen. Striding out into the corridor, she turned to her left and started down the corridor, only to stop because she didn’t know where she was going. *Damn it. Good exits always got stuffed up by things like this.* She was confused, angry, worried and she didn’t need that on top of everything else. Maybe she should just go back to the cabin, it was the only thing she could think to do right now, anyway. It wasn’t like she could storm off the ship.

Shaking her head, she swung around and thumped straight into a big, hard body. Big hands firmly grasped her shoulders, preventing her from stumbling backwards. Tipping her head back, she scowled up into Heddam’s face. “Let go.”

He didn’t look angry. Instead, his expression was a little rueful. “Lass, we need to talk.”

“Talk? About what? You being an arse?”

Even his smile was rueful. “All right, I deserve that.”

“Damn right you do.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You should be.”

“You’re not making this easy.”

“After the little stunt you just tried to pull, you think I should make it easy on you? Boy, have you got the wrong woman.”

His hand came up to gently push back a lock of loose hair behind her ear, and his expression was tender. “Nay, I’ve got the right wench.” He smiled. “On that I’m not wrong.”

And just like that, she felt her anger start to crumble. This was trouble. One smile, one gentle gesture, and she was ready to throw her anger away, climb up that big body until she reached his mouth and kiss him blind. Her *kyrat* was pulsing a little, she could feel it.

Uh-oh. Tasi stepped back, hanging onto the remnants of her anger to keep her thoughts clear. “Fine. You’re sorry. The end.”

“Oh, nay.” His hand slid down her arm until he wrapped it around her hand, his big palm swallowing her hand easily. Walking past her, he started for the platform lift at the end of the corridor. “We need to talk.”

She tried to yank her hand free, only to find herself tugged along behind him. It was either keep up or fall to her knees and get dragged along. She had no doubt that would result in him picking her up. She could scream but the bloody men in the dining cabin wouldn’t come to her rescue, that was an instinctive knowledge. Somehow, she just knew this was between her and Heddam.

Oh joy. Oh boy. Oh no.

~ * ~

It reached out, sliding through the night, barely discernable. It touched, probed. It slipped through the palace, hovered over the High Emperor where he slept in his bed, flowed past the guards and twined around the glass cabinet containing eighteen topaz kyrats that flared briefly before returning their previous the dull glow. The multi-coloured kyrat stayed dull.

Slipping from the palace, it flowed around the people in their homes. It curved through the street and it saw all, the plotters, the planners, the double-crosses, and those who followed the New Way and the Old Way and the Third Way.

It hovered over the gates, sweeping across the skulls that were a dull white blur atop spikes.

It would have wept if it could feel anything.

It twined through the trees, rolling through the flowers and skimming the ground. It spiralled high into the sky and followed its pathway back to its refuge.

~ * ~

The Aora Military Sergeant read the information that came scrolling across the screen.

“What is it, AMS?” Aora Military Corporal Mendon queried.

“Sightings, AMC.” She leaned back in the chair. “But which Way are they?”

“We can capture them and find out.”

“Prisoners.”

“How else are we to know?”

“We have to be careful, AMC.” She tapped the console. “One wrong move and we’ll be on the High Emperor’s bad side. That’s not a side I want to be on.”

~*~

She stood in the entrance and breathed deeply. There was a disturbance in the air.

“Not yet,” she whispered. “It’s not time.”

The disturbance was there for a long time, and she knew what it searched for, and she watched until dawn chased the stars away and light replaced the darkness.

And emptiness replaced the promise.

Six

Heddam was thankful that they were in space because he had no doubt if the ship had still been on a planet, Tasi would have been out of the door and down the ramp. This way he didn't have to try and make her stay, because that would have just made things worse.

As if he hadn't made things worse anyway. To be truthful, he'd been a little shocked at his own terse behaviour. He glanced sideways at Tasi standing by his side, her mouth set grimly and a frown marring her smooth brow. One booted foot was tapping irritably on the floor of the platform lift. No doubt her arms would have been folded, too, but he kept a tight grip on her hand and after the first few angry tugs she'd given up. Wise wench. Now if he could only make her see sense. If only he could see sense. Heddam sighed silently. He'd botched it all up and now he had to fix it. Before she walked out on him. Because, truthfully, he couldn't force her to stay. *Damn it.* If she'd been an outlaw, it would have all so simple. Claim her and keep her and nothing she could do about it.

The platform lift rattled to a halt at the top floor and he drew Tasi after him as he strode down the corridor and turned into the solitude cabin. Immediately the soothing dimness enveloped them. Most of the wall ahead of them was a space shield. Stars shimmered in the blackness beyond, the different colours of nearby planets passing like colourful balls thrown by children.

In the centre of the room was a big chair which could be swivelled to face either the cool dimness of the cabin or the beauty of space beyond. It was the place the traders came to for peace and quiet, for solitude. Music played softly in the background, and that, too, could be turned on or off, depending on the mood of the cabin occupant.

It was also a good place to talk in private. He flicked off the intercom that went to every floor to ensure that privacy.

He released Tasi's hand and she immediately stepped back several paces and turned to face him, folding her arms beneath her breasts just as he'd known she would do. Even in the dimness he could see the anger burning in her beautiful, doe-brown eyes.

"Tasi—" he began.

"You better have a bloody good reason for what you pulled back there," she snapped.

"I'm not sure I do." He shook his head. "Nay, I do."

"I'm glad you're so decisive."

"Firstly, I apologize."

"That's a good start."

The wench had a bite like a piranha. He had to force his grin back. Now was not the time to be amused.

"Lights," he ordered quietly, and lights came on in the roof, bathing the cabin in a soft glow. Now at least they could see each other.

The wench simply glared at him.

"Tasi," Heddham said, "I'm sorry I kissed you and then walked out. Things were getting out of hand and with your recent injuries—"

"That's not the problem," she retorted. "My problem was the big talk in the dining cabin."

"Fair enough. But let me just say if I'd stayed in your cabin any longer, I'd have tipped you back on the bunk and right now I'd be so deep inside you that you'd be feeling me there for the rest of the week."

Tasi blushed.

"And even though you say you're healed, the speed of that is not something I'm used to." Heddham looked directly into her eyes. "And when I take you, 'twill be where no-one will hear you scream and moan."

Her eyes darkened but it wasn't with passion. "Is that right?"

“Aye, ’tis so.” Wanting to touch her, he took a step forward, but she lifted one hand and pressed her fingertips against his chest. Just her fingertips, but it was enough to make Heddham halt.

“Let me see if I have this right. You’ll *take* me and make me scream and moan?”

She sounded so annoyed that Heddham knew he should be careful of his next words, but he couldn’t stop the little grin from tugging at his mouth and the very confident “Aye”.

“You’re an over-inflated jerk.”

“Nay. I just know what I want.”

“What about what *I* want? Have you ever thought of that?”

“Lass, I felt your response. If I hadn’t stopped you’d be under me right now, willing and hot and delicious.”

A muscle ticked in her jaw. “Maybe you were just a way to pass the time.”

“Nay.” He smiled. “You wanted me as much as I did you.”

“Suddenly that want has gone and I doubt it’s ever coming back.”

“’Twill be back.” Reaching out, he ran one finger down her cheek to her lips, where he tapped gently. “One kiss, lass, and I bet you’ll go up in flames.”

She slapped his hand away. “Don’t play with me, Heddham. I’m starting to think I don’t like you as much as when we first met.”

That sobered him. “I’m sorry.”

“You helped me, Heddham, then you pull this crap?”

He sucked in a deep breath. “Tasi, I wouldn’t force you into my bed. I’m sorry if you think that, ’tis my fault, I—”

“Stuff the sex bit, Heddham. Your flirting is something I understand. But that other crap. What the hell was that?”

Shit. ’Twas what he’d meant to talk to her about, not get caught up in teasing and sexual innuendos. This was going to be even trickier.

He studied her, wondering the best way to explain.

“Just tell me,” she demanded tersely.

“All right. Tasi, twice you’ve been trapped, the last time badly hurt. I can’t stand seeing it happen again.”

“Pfft! You think those were the only times? Wishful thinking.”

He didn’t like what he was hearing. “There were other times?”

“Heddam, we’ve been on the run for five months. Before that, we had to fight in the palace and on the grounds, and then get through a cave-in. I’ve been injured before, only you can’t see the scars because of my healing abilities.” Tasi waved a hand nonchalantly in the air. “My friends tended the wounds and I healed. End of story.”

“End of story?” Heddam repeated in disbelief. “This last time you were badly injured, and if you’d fallen prey to someone other than us, you would be dead or worse.”

“Not going to happen.”

“*Not going to happen?*” He stared at her. “How can you be so sure?”

She shrugged.

“You can’t guarantee that.”

She shrugged again.

“Nay,” he said.

One brow rose coolly as she eyed him.

“That chance isn’t going to happen again.”

“I agree.”

“Because you’re not leaving my side.”

She looked at him for several seconds before saying, “As soon as we land, I’m out of here.”

“Not without me.”

“You even try to follow me and I’ll hurt you.”

“The only way you could hurt me, wench, would be to kill me.”

“I can arrange that. Now or later?”

Taking a deep breath to calm himself, Heddham wondered where his normal sensible self had gone. Pushing Tasi was not the way to deal with her. *Talk to her, lunkhead, not deal with her.*

“This isn’t going the way I’d planned,” he said.

“You plan a lot of things that I just bet don’t work.”

“Actually, planning around you isn’t something I do commonly.”

“Fortunately for you.”

Turning away, Heddham rubbed his temples with one hand while trying to sort out his thoughts. Hell, Simon was good at this kind of thing. Even Shamon, his best friend, had known how to handle Gabie. *Sort of. Nay, he hadn’t. Hell. Darvk had handled Tenia. Nay, he hadn’t, either. He’d tried but she’d given him the slip. Reya had nearly driven Maverk to distraction. Dana had tied Garret in knots. Cam. Now Cam was the one who handled Sabra. Happy, thoughtful Cam who could make his lass laugh or go all soft with a few words and a simple look.*

Mayhaps he should be asking Simon and Cam what to do with Tasi. How to handle her. Even as the thought crossed his mind, he disregarded it. Every wench was different. And he wasn’t going to *handle* her, he was trying to *reason* with her. *Aye. Reason.* That sounded better.

Turning around, he leaned his hips against the ledge of the space shield and looked at Tasi. She still stood in the same spot, arms folded and a frown on her face. Her *kyrat* had a dark yellow glow. Anger?

Stars, the wench was beautiful.

“Well?” she demanded.

“Tasi...”

“Let me make it easier for you. I am grateful for you saving me twice. I don’t know how I can repay you, but if I make it, I will someday—”

“And ’tis the catch,” Heddham interrupted.

“What?”

“If you make it. I can’t live with that assumption.”

“I don’t intend to die.”

“But you can’t guarantee it.”

“I can’t die. I won’t.”

“Tasi, are you hearing yourself? You could have died the other night.”

“I didn’t.”

Heddham looked steadily at her. “You could have.”

“I didn’t.”

“Be honest. If we hadn’t come along and you’d stayed hidden in the roof, you’d have died from your wounds not being tended. You were sick and running a fever as well.”

“I didn’t, though.”

Heddham straightened. “For God’s sake, Tasi!” His voice was both loud and sharp in the cabin.

Tasi scowled at him.

Reining in his frustration, Heddham leaned back against the ledge and took a deep, calming breath before saying, “Face reality, Tasi. You were badly injured, we tended your injuries, and you recovered.”

“Right.”

“If you’d fallen through that roof into the midst of the soldiers, you’d have died. If anyone else had found you, you’d have been turned over to the soldiers. And if some low life scum had found you, you could have been raped before being turned

over to the soldiers.” When she opened her mouth with a mulish look on her face, he said, “Answer me as a Guardian would, Tasi.”

That made her swallow her words. She looked at him angrily for several moments and he returned it with calm regard. *Ah, now I have you.*

And then she changed slightly, he couldn’t see how but it was there, barely discernable. The *kyrat* paled to a true topaz colour and she lifted her chin, all anger draining away, or being pushed down, he wasn’t sure. It was interesting to watch, though.

“You’re right,” she finally said. “I could have died. I acknowledge that, just as I’ve acknowledged that twice you have saved me. But that doesn’t mean I have to do as you say.”

“True.” But at least she’d admitted it. “But you could die next time if I’m not there.”

“I could die next time with you there,” she replied. “And you could die, too.”

True again.

“And I’m not taking the chance of you dying because of me.”

“And I’m not taking the chance of you dying because I’m not there.”

She was silent as she studied him, her gaze probing in the soft lights. Slowly she moved towards him, stopping at arm’s length to continue studying him.

Heddam could swear he felt that intense gaze burning a hole in his head as she tried to look into his thoughts.

“Why is it so important to you, anyway?” she finally asked quietly.

He didn’t hesitate. “Because you’re important to me.”

“Friends don’t risk this much.”

“I never said we were just friends.”

“We’re not exactly best friends.”

“Nay. We’re much more than that.”

She truly looked puzzled.

Reaching out, he took her hand. "'Tis something between us, lass, can you not feel it?"

"Lust?"

"Nay. More than that. I think I may be falling for you."

She stared at him. "What?"

Linking his fingers through hers, he tugged her closer. "I've not felt like this around any other wench. Tasi, I want you by my side. I want you at my home. I want you."

Those big, brown, doe eyes blinked, and she pulled her hand out of his hold. "You don't know me."

"I like what I know so far. Let me know the rest of you."

He wondered what she was thinking. There was no expression on her face, nothing to indicate her thoughts.

She took a step back and he said quietly, "Don't. Please."

Tasi sighed, looking suddenly tired. The change from anger to exasperation, to blankness to tiredness was like a switch turning on and off. Placing one hand on her hip, she pushed back a stray tendril of white hair glinted with gold, and looked at him. "Heddam, this is just curiosity about someone new. I'm an oddity, an unknown to you and your people. To many people. I'm wanted dead or alive, and that's enough to kick off some men's hero fantasy. But—"

"You're not a fantasy," he said bluntly. "You're flesh and blood and I know you're in trouble. I have no illusions, lass. We've helped too many people from different backgrounds for me to have illusions."

"Good. Then you won't be disappointed."

"Nay, I won't." He rubbed his thumb across her knuckles. "I want to help you."

She looked down at their joined hands. "No one can help me. This is something I have to do myself."

"What do you have to do?"

The *kyrat* in her forehead suddenly darkened almost to a burnt amber. “That is Aora business.”

“You’re wanted on Aora.”

Her fingers tightened slightly though her face remained calm when she looked at him.

“Where are you heading, Tasi?” Heddham asked quietly.

“Nowhere—”

“You don’t just turn up on different planets for no reason.”

“I’m on the run, in case you hadn’t noticed. Manages to help me keep my weight down and fitness levels up, too. Always a bonus.”

“You seem to be getting closer to Aora than—” A sudden thought struck Heddham and a chill went down his spine. “You’re going back to Aora.”

Nothing in her posture gave away her thoughts, and her voice was mild when she asked, “Why the stars would you say that?”

“Why the stars are you closer to Aora than previously? Being on the run, you should be moving further out of the reach of the Aora soldiers, instead of which you’re nearer to them than when we last met.”

“Bad navigation on my part.”

“And just how did you end up on that planet?” His gaze sharpened. “Where are those friends you were going to meet?”

She started to pull her hand from his grasp but he didn’t let go. After a few more tugs, she looked him right in the eyes and ordered softly, “Let go.”

“And have you run before you answer anything? Nay.”

“Heddham, I’m warning you.”

He shook his head.

The *kyrat* in her head flickered and suddenly he felt a sting in his flesh, right where their palms were pressed together. With a startled oath he released her and she stepped back. Lifting his hand, he couldn’t see a break in the skin but there was

a definite tiny round red mark in the centre of his palm as though something had pricked him without drawing blood.

“What the hell was that?” He reached for her. “Are you all right? Did you get stung, too?”

Tasi remained just out of reach. “No. But if you don’t release me again when I ask, you might get worse than a sting next time.”

Startled, Heddham looked back at his palm then at her again. “You did that? But how?”

“I’m sorry, but you’re so damned stubborn.” Folding her arms, she rested her weight on one foot. “And you ask too many questions which aren’t your business.”

The sting was fading fast, but he still gave his hand a few shakes while contemplating her. How had she done it, and what else could this wench do? What was the purpose of her *kyrat*, apart from healing?

“See?” She shook her head. “You don’t know what you’re dealing with and now you’re wondering.”

“Oh?”

“You’re having second thoughts and that’s a good thing.”

He stopped shaking his hand. “’Tis right?”

“Yes, that’s right. And that’s good. Stay out of my troubles, Heddham, because you don’t know what you’re messing with.”

He arched one brow. *Fascinating*. “So tell me what I’m messing with, lass.”

For two heartbeats she looked at him, a trace of sadness flickering briefly across her face before calmness wiped it away. “You want a future, trader. You want someone to love and hold and to be there waiting for you when you get back from trips away. You want children.”

She knew him so well, but— “Most Daamen men do.”

“You won’t find that with me.” The words fell between them and lingered as though they could be actually touched.

He regarded her steadily, not reaching for her, knowing instinctively if he did that she'd move away again. Honesty was in her eyes and for a few fragile minutes she was being totally candid with him.

"I don't know that," he said.

"I do."

"Give me the reasons."

"You know them."

"You have a price on your head, but 'tis only from your own people. You're not part of the IPC, so for them you are not an outlaw. 'Tis nothing stopping you coming to my planet and being under my—our—protection."

"Sooner or later the High Emperor will track me down, and then whoever stands between him and I will die."

"He wouldn't dare come to Daamen. If he attacked a planet under the IPC protection, the consequences for Aora would be devastating."

"And there you go, two good reasons not to go to Daamen. One, people not of Aora will die. And two, Aora is..." Her voice trailed off.

Heddarn was instantly alert for any hints. "Aora is what?"

She shrugged.

"Tell me." His gaze hardened when she didn't reply. "Tell me or mayhaps I'll have to start some serious questioning of people I know."

A shadow of a grin curved her full lips. "If you could do that, I wouldn't have to tell you, would I?"

"Don't play games—"

"But games are so much fun."

Stars, how could the wench even think of laughing at a time like this? During a conversation like this?

He refused to be beguiled by her humour, even though her eyes were starting to sparkle with mischief. "Aora is what, Tasi?"

It almost hurt to see the sparkle fade to be replaced with seriousness. She regarded him steadily and he could almost hear the seconds tick past, but he had a well of hope. She was debating something.

Silently he willed her to tell him.

Finally, she said, "Aora is in a rebellion. My friends are waiting for me. I have things I need to do for them. I can't tell you anything more, Heddham, other than our paths are going separate ways."

It wasn't what he'd wanted to hear. "I can help you."

She gave him an odd look. "Trust me, you couldn't."

"If you'd tell me—"

"Let's not hammer at this. I can't and won't tell you, there's no need. This kind of thing is something not for outsiders."

Outsiders. Heddham took a deep breath. "It stopped being outsiders when outsiders started hunting you, when the Aora High Emperor made you free game for the bounty hunters and anyone else who wanted to collect that reward on your head."

"Rather stupid of them." She surprised him by nodding. "But desperate, too."

Desperate? Heddham looked at her closely. *Desperate? Aye, 'twas a desperate move for Aoras to put a reward on Tasi's head for anyone to collect. For outsiders to collect. A closed planet like Aora, why would they allow outsiders to hunt their own? Especially wanting the Guardians dead. What are the Guardians to Aora?*

"You guarded the High Empress," he murmured. "But she's dead, a new High Emperor has taken over, and there're only two of the Guardians left alive. So why are you such a threat to the High Emperor, Tasi?" His gaze sharpened, raking over her with renewed intensity.

He could almost see her retreating behind a blank mask.

Now he looked at her from a totally new perspective. What was it about her that made the High Emperor desperate to kill her?

The thought brought enlightenment. "You're a threat to the throne."

Not a twitch crossed her suddenly bland face.

“You’re a threat to the High Emperor.” Standing, Heddam took the two steps needed to bring him close to her.

“Is that right?” she asked quietly, looking up at him.

“Aye.” He gazed down at her, alarm and curiosity both sliding through him. “But why?”

“You think you know all the answers, so you tell me.”

“Two Guardians against the whole of Aora, two Guardians against the High Emperor and those that follow him.” His mind was working fast, pieces of a puzzle falling into place. “A Guardian guards. You’re the enemy of the new leader, he wants you badly... desperately. You’re a threat, but your old leader is dead. So why are you such a threat?”

Her face remained expressionless but his gaze was drawn to her *kyrat* which flickered. It shimmered, flashed gold and dulled once more to the soft topaz colour.

Heddam looked down at Tasi, the truth slamming into him. “You’re still guarding something or someone.”

The smile that curved her lips didn’t meet her eyes. “Nice theory.”

Their gazes locked and held. For the first time he saw the inner strength in her, something that was hidden before because he hadn’t known what to look for. Now he knew. He’d known she was a Guardian, but this time he was *seeing* the Guardian.

A Guardian who was a threat to the High Emperor and for all he’d fought. No wonder she and the remaining Guardian had a price on their heads.

They held a secret that could topple the power of the High Emperor of Aora.

The *kyrat* in her forehead glowed dully, reflecting in the brown of her eyes. In the soft light she looked suddenly remote, a touch dangerous, and he remembered the sting in his palm. What power did she hold?

“Feeling worried?” Her voice was low, her face blank.

“Nay.” Intrigued, he studied her closely. “What are you, Tasi?”

“A Guardian.”

“And what is the secret you hold?”

Her gaze locked with his and he felt the intensity of her regard. Seconds ticked past before she leaned forward and crooked her finger.

His heart leaped. She was going to tell him. Heddham leaned down and she locked her fist into his vest, drawing him further down so that she could place her mouth next to his ear. Her breath was warm against his skin, each little puff sending little sparks along his veins. Even on the verge of learning her secret, he was intensely aware of her.

“You really want to know my secrets, trader?” Huskiness layered her low voice.

“Aye.” He took in a lungful of her scent and felt a stirring deep inside him.

Intrigue and lust, what a combination, but one he was coming to understand when it came to this wench.

“The secret...” She sighed. “I have a weakness for chocolate, lycats, books and summer rain.”

Chocolate, lycats, books and summer rain? Heddham blinked.

“Shocking, I know.” Her breath tickled his ear. “Totally shattered your expectations, didn’t it? Sorry about that.”

Incredulous, Heddham pulled back enough so he could see her face.

Solemnly, she added, “I’ll grow plump one day, bound to happen. My mother was plump and so are most of the women in my family as they get on in years. Actually, the females of my family *all* get plump as we get older. It’s in our genes.”

“Plump,” he echoed.

“Yep. And we tend to have a lot of lycats.”

“A lot of lycats,” he repeated.

“I’ve been known to stand naked in the summer rain.”

“Naked,” was all he managed, a picture of her naked with rain running down her soft swells into delicious, hidden crevices rising to tantalize him.

“Shocking.” She shook her head sadly but her eyes sparkled, belying the soberness of her tone and face. “But you asked and I crumbled beneath your charm.”

Heddham scrutinized her face. “You’re not going to tell me, are you?” He felt like shaking her, amongst other things.

Her lashes dropped demurely. “Will you still love me when I’m old and fat and have a lot of lycats and insist on running my fat arse naked in the summer rain?”

Still bent down enough so that they were almost eye level, Heddham braced his hands on his thighs and studied her face. She still had her head bent slightly, lowered eyelashes making black crescents against her pale golden skin. Her lips trembled slightly and she bit them lightly, and when she raised those thick eyelashes to peek up at him, merriment danced in the depths of her eyes.

He should have been angry. The wench wasn’t telling him any of her secrets. She *was* laughing at him.

“Tasi,” he began.

“Yes, Heddham?” She smiled winningly.

That smile took his breath away. Mischief danced in her eyes and her *kyrat* sparkled. He had to fight an answering smile and remain focused on the main topic. “You’re wanted by the High Emperor. Why?”

“Maybe he wants to see me dancing naked in the summer rain?”

“I don’t think so.”

“You never know. Maybe he wants to find out where I stashed my hoard of chocolates. That’d be a secret worth dying for.”

Reaching out, Heddham caught her chin gently between thumb and forefinger. “Nothing is worth you dying for.”

“Well, he’s not going to find out where my books are. He wants them, he fights me for them.”

A mixture of tenderness and frustration whirled through Heddam. “Be serious, Tasi.”

“That’s not as much fun.” The sparkle in her eyes faded. “You have to laugh sometimes, Heddam.”

“In a situation like this, ’tis not much to laugh about.”

“If you don’t laugh, you cry. I’d much rather laugh.”

The simple words touched him deep inside. The sparkle of her *kyrat* dulled to the normal soft golden glow. The curve of merriment left her lips and her face grew serious once more.

The silence in the cabin wrapped around them both as they gazed at each other.

Running his thumb down across her jaw line, Heddam felt the frustration slip away as he faced the truth. “You’re not going to tell me, are you, Tasi?”

“No.” She continued to look at him without flinching.

“You don’t trust me?”

“It’s not safe to get mixed up with me, Heddam.”

“Too late, lass.” *Much too late.*

“Simon will drop me off on your next stop and you can continue your life.” She gave a small smile. “Go back to your brawling and wenching and trading. Find a nice woman who’ll do what you want and never give you a hard time. I just know there’s any number of them out there who will come running at one crook of your finger. You can have your pick and live happily ever after.”

He thought about it. Long years stretching ahead with a biddable wench who lived to please him. Who smiled and hungered after him, who would raise his children and keep his house.

Only it wouldn’t be a home. It wouldn’t be the wench he wanted to have carry his children and raise them. It wouldn’t be a wench with mischief dancing in her eyes and the confidence in herself to tell him no, and who would drive him to distraction. It wouldn’t be the wench he loved.

Heddam looked at her. The wench wouldn't be Tasi, and he would settle for no other wench but Tasi.

There was no doubt she knew exactly what he was thinking when she said, "No."

Without a word, Heddam slid his fingers down her throat and around her nape.

"I'm not the one for you," Tasi stated.

There were no words he could say that would convince her. It made no difference. Heddam knew who he wanted. Tasi was meant for him and there would never be another wench in his life. His need for her rose up in him. Her look, her scent, her humour, her stubbornness... he wanted it all. He wanted her.

All of her.

Now.

He expected her to protest when he closed the distance between them to kiss her, but instead she gave a soft sigh and met him partway. The first touch of her lips was like a brush of silk, and Heddam moulded his lips lightly to hers, fitting them together in a gentle press of delicate skin.

The little sparks skittered along his veins, needing no encouragement to start heating up. Just the brushing of her lips against his had his desire flaring.

It caught him by surprise when she slid her hands around his waist to his back and then ran her palms down to linger at the top of his pants waistband, her fingers tracing a little pattern lightly on his skin, provoking a shiver of enticement along his spine.

Without taking his lips from hers, he responded by sliding his hand from her nape and bringing his other hand up to slide inside her jacket and up to her shoulders, pushing the jacket back and drawing it from her, dropping it carelessly on the floor behind her. The soft cotton of the shirt didn't prevent the warmth of her body from beckoning to him, and needing to feel the direct heat of her skin, Heddam slowly slid the buttons free from the eyes until he could push the shirt from her, his fingers smoothing down her arms in the wake of the sleeves as the shirt slid to the floor to join the jacket.

He deepened the kiss as she pushed the vest up and over his shoulders and then she was against him, the lacy support garment scratching lightly against his chest as her breasts brushed against him.

Laying his hands against her waist, he splayed his fingers, pressing his palms against the sweet silk of her skin, feeling the warmth of her body and the smoothness of her. Such a simple matter to slide his hands up higher until he cupped her full breasts in the lacy cups. Through the material he felt the hard little nubs of her nipples and the urge to feel them flush against his palms had him reaching behind her and unsnapping the support garment, allowing it to fall from her body to lie discarded on the floor in a delicate pile.

Then his wish was granted, the tight little nipples pressing urgently into his palms as he cupped her naked breasts. Flexing his hands, he gripped the delicate flesh of Tasi's breasts in a careful hold, loving the sensation of fullness that filled his hands.

The whole time he was kissing her and now his tongue slid deep, flickering through the honeyed cavern of her mouth, tasting her, feeling like he was home. Her taste filled him, spilling through his senses as surely as did her scent and the feel of her skin against his.

It wasn't enough. It wasn't all of her, not yet.

Sliding his thumbs into the waist band of her pants, he eased them down over rounded hips, pushing lower, dropping to his knees as he did so, his lips trailing down her deliciously silken skin.

As his hands skimmed down her legs, taking the pants with them, it was an easy matter to slip her boots off at the same time. He straightened on his knees, rising up, hands gripping her hips as he dipped his tongue into her bellybutton before licking a hot path up to the beginnings of the curve of her breasts. He nuzzled the undersides of the firm globes, breathing deeply of her scent, and he felt her hands brace on his shoulders at the same time he heard the hitch in her breath.

Titling his head back, he looked up at her, his own breath catching at the naked prurience in her eyes, the hunger she didn't try to hide, her *kyrat* pulsing with deep gold. Her lips were swollen and red from his kisses.

Rapacity hit him hard, scraping low in his belly with a harsh craving. Pure carnal desire to take her, possess her, mark her as his, surged up inside him, unleashing a side of him he'd never felt before when with a wench.

Because this wasn't just any wench.

Pushing upward, the strength in his thighs making it an easy movement, Heddam kept their gazes locked as he rose up until he towered above her once more, the action forcing her to tilt her head back to keep eye contact. Towering over her the way he did, dwarfing her smaller frame, brought out the protective side of his nature, but the passion in her eyes, the skin so silky smooth beneath his touch, and the tempting curve of her full lips, also brought out possessiveness.

Nay, this wasn't just any wench. This was Tasi. This was *his* wench.

Heddam's gaze drifted down over her shoulders, down to the soft curves of her full breasts tipped with small, rosy nipples, lower to the gentle swell of her belly, the light dusting of white curls at the apex of her thighs, lower still to the slim legs before he slowly drew his gaze back up her body.

Every little glimpse of her curves, every flex of feminine muscle, had his blood heating, and by the time his gaze drifted back to meet her eyes, the fire of pure carnal desire was searing through him, making his manhood harden and push demandingly against the confinement of his pants.

There was a blush in her cheeks, but her eyes met his without falter. Most intriguing though was the faint touch of shyness barely discernable, but definitely there in the way her lashes dipped slightly.

That shyness simply fired his heat even more.

Silently he reached out and lightly touched her wrists, slowly moving his fingertips up her arms in the faintest of touches.

"Heddam..."

"You're mine."

Her eyes widened.

"Aye." His hands brushed up her shoulders and up higher, spanning her neck until his palms cradled those soft cheeks, the paleness of her skin a soft contrast to the suntanned brown of his own skin. His gaze locked onto hers. "You're mine, Tasi. 'Twill be no other wench for me. And right now, I'm staking my claim on you."

For a second she stared at him, and then her *kyrat* sparked a deep gold, a reflection of the dawning outrage in her eyes, but he didn't give her a chance to bring the anger to full life before he kissed her.

She started to resist, her hands pressing against his chest, but he didn't let her up for air, his lips coaxing hers to open, and he felt her surrender within seconds. She sank into him, her hands flat on his chest, palms moulding to the swell of his massive pectorals.

Tasi took his breath away at the same time she fired off every carnal instinct inside him. Almost immediately his manhood throbbed painfully in response to her silken skin against him, the little nipples pressing against his upper abdomen as she strained upwards to meet him, rising on tiptoes to get closer.

Hunger, hot and hard, slammed into him, searing through his veins in a hot swell of pure lust. The need to possess her, to take her *now*, fought with his saner side that reminded him that she was smaller, that he needed to be careful not to hurt her.

Then she raked her nails down his chest and nipped his lower lip.

His resolve got shaky and he fought to rein in his baser instincts.

Tasi's hand slid down the front of him, scraping across his ribbed stomach to press against the bulge in the front of his pants. It took only a few rubs of her hand and a sudden deep kiss from her to bring his control almost to breaking point.

Grabbing her hands, he brought her wrists behind her back, holding them in one big hand while he bent her back, supporting her with one arm as he took advantage of her bowed back to fasten his lips to one breast, sucking the little nipple in deep, sucking strongly, rewarded by the feel of her writhing against him while a small cry escaped her mouth.

He licked his way across her skin to her other breast, nipping the bud lightly, making her buck in his arms. The little bud begged for attention, small and rosy and hard, and when he took it deep into his mouth, tonguing it hard, Tasi wound one leg around his and pressed her hips against him.

The feel of her intimate heat was clear even through the rough material of his pants and he could only imagine what it would be like to sink into that heat.

God above, he wanted her so *badly*. His blood felt like molten lava, thick and hot, surging through his veins down to his manhood, filling it to the point of engorgement with an almost unbearable heat.

A heat he could only slake between the thighs of this wench, his wench.

Lifting his mouth from her breast, Heddam licked down to her belly button, nipping the tender skin, while he slid one hand between her thighs, loving the soft, springy curls that sheltered the secrets of her body. It was so simple to slide his finger between the soft, slick folds to find the wet entrance to her body. Without hesitation he slid his finger in deep, entering her body, the breath hissing out between his clenched teeth at the feel of her vaginal muscles clamping down around his finger even as she clamped her thighs shut against his hand.

When she strained up against his hand, it was his complete undoing. Every last shred of control left him, his ravenous beast was set free, and Heddam devoured her.

Jerking her upright, he looked down into her face, seeing the light of Eros in her eyes, the wantonness of her full lips and the way she licked the plump flesh as though tasting him. When she smiled, it was slow and slumberous, lazily sexy, and invitingly quiescence. The *kyrat* pulsed, deep and brilliant.

Ardour roared through him, a furnace of need, the male desire to rut, to pleasure, to fill her and have himself buried deep within her, flooded over him.

Closing his hands around her waist, Heddam simply lifted her up and brought her flush against him, taking her mouth hard, licking deep, ruthlessly plundering her mouth as he strode the few steps it took to shove her against the wall, pinning her there with his body.

Arms around his neck, Tasi lifted her legs and wrapped them around his waist, and her wet heat was against him, almost driving him mad with ravenous heat.

Wasting no time, he shoved his pants down past his hips, freeing his manhood which sprang free, hot and hard and throbbing, a bead of seed already leaking from the engorged tip. He flexed his hips and unerringly the tip of him came to rest at the entrance to her body, the head nudging the opening, and he stopped only long enough to grab her wrists and slam them against the wall on each side of her head.

He held her up by the pure strength of his body and her legs wrapped around his waist.

They looked at each other for several scant seconds, the combined sound of their heavy breathing filling the cabin, the scent of their lust in the air, the shared hunger throbbing low in their bellies.

“’Tis no going back now,” Heddam said harshly. “Not now. Not ever.” And he shoved hard up into her, his staff spearing through the tight sheath, pushing past the clasp muscles to bury deep inside her until he could physically go no further and she was arched back against the wall and moaning, her hands fisted as she strained her hips against him.

God, she was tight, hot and slick, like a wet glove that gripped him almost ruthlessly. It tipped him over the edge and all he could do was press his hips against her and thrust hard, feeling the muscles seeking to hang onto him as he pulled back, then those same muscles seeking to suck him in deeper as he shoved up again, driving deep inside her once more.

Tasi writhed, trying to wrench her wrists free as he pumped into her, but he didn’t let her go. Not until he was ready.

He could feel it roiling deep down in his scrotum, heat that built and built with every thrust into her delicious body, and he caught her mouth in a harsh kiss, plundering the soft depths as ruthlessly as he plundered her body.

Her moans filled the room, pushing him onwards, higher and higher up the peak as his seed leaked from his staff to coat the walls of her vagina, making his pathway easier as it mingled with her own desire.

Her thighs tightened around him, her hips pushing at him, wanting more, her body welcoming him, demanding more, and he took what she gave with an insatiability he’d never before experienced.

His heart was thundering, pounding in his chest as his scrotum pulled tight, and he pumped harder, faster, refusing to release her wrists even she begged him. Instead, he lowered his mouth to her throat, finding the sensitive flesh, and he fastened his mouth to the fragile skin. As the climax built inside him, he felt the rising pressure in her, the tension, the way she arched against him. And he sucked strongly, marking her as he felt the inner pressure building and building, the fire searing him, rising up, seed burgeoning in his scrotum, and then the release.

It came in a hot rush, almost as though boiling through him, eager to pass into her and lodge deep.

He felt her climax start, heard her cry out, and he gave one last, strong suck before throwing his head back and pumping and pumping into her, his life seed pouring forth in a gush that coated the inside of her sheath and flooded her womb.

Opening his eyes, he saw hot gold pulsing around him, covering him, and he tipped his head forward to see the kyrat in Tasi's forehead almost burning with a deep gold/burgundy, the colour flaring out brilliantly to cover them both.

He felt the lick of molten gold on his skin, the fire of the burgundy, and it raked him to new heights of pleasure, mind-blowing, sexual eroticism that had his scrotum releasing and tightening almost painfully once more as he thrust hard.

The climax didn't ease him, not when the gold/burgundy light seemed to scour across his skin and go deep, dancing along his nerve endings and bringing the pure carnal enjoyment of sex to bright life once again.

God, Heddham felt like he could make love to Tasi forever, his strength almost seeming to double as he released her wrists to brace one hand against the wall, his other hand coming directly under her bottom to press her higher and harder against him, titling her hips until she screamed and writhed.

She gripped one of his shoulders. But the other she placed flat against the wall beside her hip as though trying to give herself extra leverage to push against him.

"Tasi." Her name was a harsh rasp on his lips, but she opened her eyes, and the pure hot lust he saw there fired his own lust. *You're mine*. He didn't say it loudly, but the surety was there in the rumble of his voice.

She couldn't speak, could only scream his name out as he thrust hard, gripping her tightly, ruthlessly pressing her back against the wall to keep him in complete control of their pleasure externally.

Internally, her muscles were squeezing him, pulling at his staff, seeking to suck him in deeper, and then he felt her muscles clamp, milking him dry once again.

God, he didn't want it to end! He felt as though he could go on forever, be lost in her body forever, be caught up in this ravenous fever forever.

He felt the build up again, this time stronger, hotter, harder, a force that was mixed with the brilliance of the gold, the heat of the burgundy, welling inside him, filling every part of him, and he thrust harder and harder, pumping almost brutally into the slick heat of her.

He locked gazes with her, needing to see her as they climaxed, wanting to watch her fall part. But the heat of the moment, the height and immenseness of the eroticism of the moment, was too much, and all he could do was bend his arm more and lean forward, his fingers curling against the tiles as he braced his legs, muscles bulging in his thighs as he bent and thrust hard up.

He couldn't stop, pushing higher, straining against her as he buried deep, shoving her against the wall and holding her there with pumping hips, his buttocks clenched tight as wave after wave of a burning climax flared through him, rocketing him up higher, throwing him so far into brilliant gold and burgundy, feeling and emotion, lust and satisfaction that he thought he'd be lost in it forever.

Heddam didn't know how long he was lost in the intensity of it, but when he finally came back to awareness it was to find himself leaning against the wall of the ship with Tasi's body cushioning him. He was still buried deep inside her. Her arms were loose around his neck and her face was buried in the side of his neck, her hot, gasping breaths moist on his skin.

Closing his eyes, he fought to bring his erratic, deep breaths under control. Becoming conscious of the tension coiled inside his body, he slowly made himself relax, easing his stance. It caused Tasi's legs to slip down from around his waist and she murmured a protest, burrowing her face against him and tightening her arms.

He was more than glad that she wanted to stay in his arms, but Heddam had to sit down. Taking his other hand from the wall, he yanked up his pants with a little difficulty then cupped her bottom, lifted her and turned. Crossing to the chair, he sank into it gratefully, hugging her close, and finally he relaxed, his muscles loosening, and all he could do was close his eyes, breath in her scent and simply not think for several minutes.

Until he suddenly realized that rather than be exhausted, he felt vitalized. Alive. Opening his eyes, he stared at the wall. *What the...? I should be on the floor in a heap! Stars, I don't remember ever having made love like that before! It was...* He couldn't even think of the word.

However, Tasi obviously didn't feel the same. Slumped against him, her breathing was still choppy.

Sudden guilt assailed him as he remembered the roughness with which he'd taken her. Alarmed, he looked down at the curve of her back and saw a few red marks marring the paleness of her skin.

Horror struck, he placed his hands on her shoulders and gently eased her back, ignoring her protest. His gaze swept over her, taking in the imprint of his fingers on her hips. “Oh, lass. Tasi, I—”

“You even dare to stand me up and check my backside, and I’ll slap you.”

Shame swept through him. “Oh, God, Tasi, I was so rough. I—”

“Yeah, wasn’t it great?” With a dreamy sigh, she collapsed against his chest.

“What?”

“You’re the best I’ve ever had. Of course, I’m not hugely experienced, so...” Tilting her head back, she grinned up at him. “I guess now isn’t the time to bring that subject up, huh?”

He was more concerned right then about her. “How badly did I hurt you? God, Tasi, I am so sorry. Get up and let me see—”

She grabbed a handful of his hair while snuggling closer. “Push me off your lap at the risk of being half-scalped at the same time. I’m fine.”

He was still having a hard time coming to terms with his loss of control. “I shouldn’t have been so rough with you. You’re so much smaller—”

“Get over it. I liked it. In fact, I loved it.” Straightening, she kissed him lightly on the lips and grinned. “Stop looking so shocked, Heddam. I’ll survive.”

The remorse was still there, but when he saw the genuine unconcern on her face, it faded a little. “Are you sure you’re not hurt?”

“I like it rough.”

“I could have hurt you.”

“You’d have stopped if I’d asked.”

He looked steadily at her. “How can you be so sure?”

“Pshaw. You may make love like a wild thing when aroused, but you’d never hurt me.”

“’Tis never been like that before...” He took a deep breath, relaxing once more now he was sure that Tasi really was unhurt.

She grinned. “The first time was you, and it was great. The second time, that was me.”

Now Heddam was confused. “Pardon?”

“Me. You did the first part, I ended it.”

“I don’t understand.”

Resting her elbow lightly on his shoulder, she placed her chin on her hand. “Think about it.”

He did, and it was almost enough to get him excited again.

She smacked him lightly on the shoulder.

“Right.” He tried to be analytical but there was no way he could separate his feelings from the physical act. The memory was incredible, and the golden/burgundy glow had been... Heddam suddenly looked at her with dawning awareness. “’Twas you!”

“Yep.” Her eyes were dancing with mischief. “Did you like it, lover?”

“I thought I was going to explode.”

She laughed.

Heddam grinned, his thumb tracing along her jaw line and down to her throat to the red mark he’d left there. His smile faded when he saw the mark, but it wasn’t with remorse. Satisfaction filled him. She bore his mark and it would stay there for a while.

“What?” She arched one brow at him.

“Nothing.”

“Hmmm.” Bracing her hands on the armrests, she suddenly pushed upright onto her knees and her breasts came to his eye-level.

She had beautiful breasts, all round and soft and rosy-tipped. Just the sight was enough to make his mouth water and he actually started to reach up.

“Nuh-uh.” She shook her head, placing one foot on the floor and moving off him. “I like it rough, but no more, not right now.”

Immediately concern filtered through him and he pushed upright to stand over her. “I *did* hurt you! Oh, God, lass—”

“Ease up.” Tasi placed one hand on his abdomen to stop his forward motion. “Boy, you need to learn to stop stressing.”

“But—”

“You’re well-endowed, Heddham, and it’s been awhile since I’ve been with a man, so I’m going to be a little tender, but that’s all. Sheesh, will you stop looking so guilt-ridden?”

“What else should I look like? This?”

“Now that’s a carnal look. Try for being content and unworried.”

Shaking his head, Heddham moved past her and across to where he’d tossed her clothes. Picking them up, he turned to find her right behind him. Silently he handed her the lace panties and watched as she lithely stepped into them and pulled them up. Next he handed her the support garment.

“Wow, it’s like a striptease, only in reverse,” she observed.

“I prefer the reverse.”

“I’m sure you do.” She stepped into her pants and yanked them up.

Before she could reach for the shirt, Heddham held it out to her so she had to turn her back and slide her arms into the sleeves. When she turned back, he brushed her hands out of the way and buttoned her shirt up. “Least I can do, lass, seeing as how I undid them.”

“Very gentlemanly of you.”

Grabbing the collar on each side, he brought her close, bent down and kissed her. “I’ll undress and dress you anytime you want, lass.”

“Sweet.”

“And anytime I want.”

“Yeah.” She looked at him for several seconds before pulling out of his hold and bending over to grab her boots.

Heddam watched as she pulled them on one at a time. He knew exactly what she was thinking, and it was confirmed when she straightened and met his gaze. All humour was gone.

“This changes nothing,” she said.

“You’re right,” he agreed easily. *You’re mine.*

Her eyes narrowed.

He smiled.

“Heddam—”

“I staked my claim before we made love. That hasn’t changed.”

Tasi simply looked at him and walked out of the cabin.

Moving out into the corridor, Heddam watched as she got onto the platform lift and hit the descend button. As the platform lift rattled and clanked on its journey down, she looked up at him and he saw the determination in her eyes.

The wench was stubborn.

So was he.

It made for a good match. A volatile one, but an interesting one.

~ * ~

Yaltan listened with interest to the children as they chattered. He gleaned a few interesting things from what they said, but it was enough to piece together a few stories. The whole problem was, what was a true story and what wasn’t true? What was fabricated and what was fantasy and wishful thinking, and even worse, what was said to make him happy?

Even more troubling, what did the children of his soldiers share with the street children?

Watching the animated faces, he rubbed his chin thoughtfully. It wasn’t too late to change tactics. He could plant a few seeds, spread a few rumours, scare some people. He wanted to stay on the good side of the High Emperor, and that meant he had to be seen to be doing things.

~ * ~

The High Emperor looked down at the city from the safety of his chamber high in the palace tower. It was a private chamber, containing only a richly furnished bed and two heavy chairs with red cushions. A table held a tray with a flagon of wine and two glasses on it.

In the bed Miness waited, her eyes drowsy from love making, a satisfied glow about her.

The High Emperor sighed. She wanted to be his bride, he just knew it. She craved the position and all it could bring her.

He didn't know if he really wanted her for his bride. She was cunning, but that could be a good thing. She had secrets and that wasn't so good. Maybe it was time to find out what secrets she held.

Smiling, he turned from the window and moved across to the bed. Kneeling on it, he reached out and brushed back a lock of her thick hair.

"Miness," he said quietly.

"Mmmm." She snuggled deeper into the coverlets and watched him from slumberous eyes.

"Tell me your secrets," he said.

Her eyes widened and alarmed, she started upright, only to stop when his palm smacked down on her clear *kyrat* and a flash of light speared into it. White radiated out from under his hand and Miness fell back on the bed, her body convulsing.

When he lifted his hand, the convulsions stopped and she lay shuddering on the bed, sweat beading her brow, eyes wide with pain.

"Tell me," he said softly, stroking her hair back from her face. "Tell me your secrets, Miness."

"I have none from you," she whispered, her voice shaking. "Please..."

The High Emperor had a lot of patience. Miness's screams echoed long into the night.

Seven

Everyone was asleep. On her bunk, Tasi sat cross-legged. Closing her eyes, she concentrated, seeking out the mental line that linked the Guardians. She found the topaz path easily and moved along it, seeing with a pang the broken threads that waved slowly in the slipstream. The broken threads indicated the deaths of fellow Guardians, their mind links broken from the main line.

The thread she was after was at the end of the mental line. It glowed but there was a tinge to it, multi-coloured, overlaying the true gold. The overlaying seeped through the gold, filtering where it didn't quite fit.

She tried to touch it but was rebuffed abruptly.

Abruptly enough that the link was broken and she opened her eyes on a gasp. She'd been reprimanded.

Bummer. It had happened before, too. Sighing, she slid her legs off the bunk and crossed to the door. Peeking out, she saw that the corridor was only dimly lit by a light at the very end near the platform lift. From the various cabins lining the corridor sounded the odd snore from a sleeping trader.

The cotton nightgown would have been no protection against the cold, but the ducted warmth meant she didn't have to find her jacket.

Moving quietly into the corridor, she walked to the dining cabin and got a drink of water. Staring out at the space beyond, she sipped until the glass was empty then made for the stairwell, moving stealthily down it until she came out on the first floor. The corridor was empty, widening out after the engine compartment to where the control cabin lay beyond.

Once inside the control cabin, she crossed to the radar and looked at it. There were a few ships on it, but so far away as to not have set off the automatic alarm.

Sitting at the viscomm, she studied the keyboard before keying in the galaxy map. It came up and she studied it. The nearest planet was only a day away but from what Torkra had said earlier, they were heading for one further away. Four days travel. Making the map smaller, she was able to see where Aora was in comparison.

The planet the traders were heading for was further from Aora than the nearest planet they were going to pass. She had to get Simon to drop her off on that planet, except she wasn't so sure that he would do it. Somehow she just knew Heddam would have informed Simon of his half-baked idea that she and he were meant to be together, and he wasn't letting her go anywhere without him.

Still, she could do something to the ships engines, make them stall or something so that Simon would have to land on the nearest planet. But if she did it wrong, they would be sitting targets for space pirates, not something she could have happen.

But she had to get to Aora. Maybe if she appealed to Simon's common sense. He had to have more than Heddam, for stars sake, after all, he was the captain.

But he was also a Daamen.

She had to try.

Leaving the control cabin, she went back up to the second floor and to her cabin. She knew he got up early and would be in the control cabin before most of the other traders stirred.

Lying down, she closed her eyes, sleeping lightly, her ears tuned to the sound of anyone moving in the corridor. She was awake and dressed long before she heard the quiet footsteps going past her door.

Simon looked back over his shoulder as she caught him up in the corridor, his brows arched in query.

"I need to talk to you," she said softly.

"Sure." He stared to turn back towards the dining cabin, but she shook her head.

"Control cabin," she said.

"All right." Unperturbed, he stood aside and waited for her to precede him into the stairwell. Once in the control cabin, he sat in the captain's chair, stretched out

his long legs, crossed them at the ankle and linked his hands over his muscle-ribbed stomach. “So what can I do for you, lass?”

Tasi sat in the co-pilot’s chair. “If it’s not too much trouble, I want you to drop me off on the next planet.”

His gaze went to the galaxy map she’d brought up the previous night on the viscomm. “Ah.”

“Please.”

“Well, lass, ’tis a little out of our way.”

“We pass right by it.”

“Does it really matter where we drop you off? After all, you’re on the run. I’d have thought somewhere further away from Aora would be better.”

“This is where I was heading before my ship broke down.”

“Before you were nearly killed.”

“Well, that too.”

Simon’s gaze switched from the galaxy map to her. “What does Heddam say?”

“Heddam doesn’t have a say.”

“Ah.”

Irritated, Tasi frowned. “What does ‘ah’ mean?”

“It means I’m not getting involved.”

“Involved?”

Simon’s regard remained steady. “Between you and Heddam.”

“There is no ‘me and Heddam’.”

“You better tell him that.”

“I did. I told him nothing has changed.”

“Really?” Simon looked at her throat.

Involuntarily Tasi's hand came up to cover the love bite on the side of her throat. "That's nothing."

"Really? Let me tell you, lass, I have never seen Heddham mark any other wench."

"Maybe because he's marked them where you can't see." That thought didn't sit well.

"Because he's never marked a wench in his life." Simon looked her right in the eye. "Before you."

Uncomfortable, Tasi looked back at the galaxy map. "If you say so."

"I know so."

"What, you men discuss your sexual conquests?"

"Nay."

"Your intentions?"

"Well, sometimes."

"Heddham's intentions aren't going to see the light of day."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that."

"Now, about this planet—"

"Not going to happen unless you talk to Heddham."

She should have known. Tasi glared at him. "You had no intention of dropping me off anywhere unless Heddham told you it was okay, did you?"

Simon shrugged easily.

"I wish I'd never fallen in the midst of you traders."

A small smile lurked around Simon's mouth.

Pushing up out of the chair, Tasi stormed from the room. She was so angry she could feel her palms itch to sting someone, anyone. Preferably Heddham. Maybe

she should find that lunkhead and give him a little burst, show him exactly what she was capable of doing.

In fact, that sounded like a good idea. Except that she'd never deliberately hurt anyone in a fit of temper, her training prevented it. To hurt for the simple reason of anger was something frowned upon in the Guardian ranks.

Cursing softly, Tasi stalked up the stairwell, hesitated at the top, then turned and strode back down until she came out in the cargo hold.

Torkra looked up from where he and Mikal were standing by some crates. "Hello, lass," he greeted.

"Hello yourselves." She wandered up to them. "What are you doing?"

"Stock taking," he replied cheerfully. "You?"

"Trying to retain my sanity."

"Heddam?" He grinned.

"How did you guess?" Moodily she tapped a crate with the toe of her boot. "I want off this ship. Who wants to help me?"

"Did Heddam say you could leave?" Mikal queried.

"Heddam is not my keeper," she returned tartly, "and I am not his bitch hound on a leash."

"Whoa." Mikal held out his hands, palms outwards. "Easy, lass. I didn't mean—",

"I know what you meant." She glared at him. "He doesn't own me. I need to get off this ship and it's not his business."

Torkra and Mikal both looked at her neck.

"Or yours," she snapped.

They turned away but not before she caught the beginnings of a grin on their faces.

"You know, I thought you were such nice boys, too," she said.

“Of course we are,” Torkra said cheerfully. “Ask our mother. She always calls us her darling angels.”

“Dad doesn’t,” Mikal stated.

“’Tis because he says we remind him of himself at our age.” Torkra grinned hugely.

While they laughed and continued checking the cargo, Tasi wandered around and studied the crates and barrels. She vaguely remembered being brought into the ship in hiding, and it just had to be in one of these crates. If she could get in by a crate, she could get out by a crate. Of course, she’d have to ensure she got out of the crate before a merchant discovered her, but it wouldn’t be impossible. Maybe.

A glance over her shoulder showed that the brothers had their backs to her as they processed information on the handtronic. Reaching out, Tasi cautiously tested the lid of a crate. It was sealed shut. Moving to the next one, she found it, too, sealed shut. *Hell, were they all sealed? Surely not.*

Standing in front of the crates, Tasi rubbed her brow. Heddam couldn’t have been really serious about not letting her go anywhere alone. Maybe she was reading too much into it. They’d just had a hot bout of love making, that was all. He had a case of hero fantasy. Nothing more. He’d soon tire of her and let her go. Besides, she wasn’t a prisoner. He couldn’t *make* her stay on the ship.

Looking up at the long rolls fastened securely in a holding pen on the wall, Tasi shook her head. No, he couldn’t keep her prisoner. Besides, even if he tried, she could get away easily once they landed. She wasn’t helpless, she had other means at her disposal to fight someone bigger than her. It would mean hurting him...

Shit. Could she really hurt him? She might not have a choice, there were other things she had to do, and one handsome rogue couldn’t stand in her way. She had to do whatever she could to get away and she would do it, regardless of the personal cost to herself.

She had to.

“Don’t look so sad, lass,” Torkra said kindly from behind her. “I’m sure ’twill all work out.”

“Aye.” Mikal patted her shoulder kindly. “We’ve always been able to help our friends. ’Tis no different this time.”

Torkra nodded. “Heddarn just wants to help, and so do we. Mayhaps if you talk to him, tell him the problem, ‘twill make things so much clearer.”

With a sigh, she leaned back against the crate, crossing both her ankles and her arms. “I can’t tell anything.”

“You don’t know?”

“Of course I... It’s my business.”

Mikal shrugged. “All right.”

She couldn’t believe the young man wasn’t trying to cajole her.

“So...” Torkra touched a keypad with his thumb and read the info on the screen of the handtronic he held. “What’s it like on Aora?”

Tasi relaxed. “It has its deserts, forests and oceans, rivers and lakes. Much like many of the planets I’ve seen since I left.”

“You must miss it.”

“Yes.” She stared into space for a few seconds. “It was home.” Before it all blew up in their faces, it was the only home she’d known, her sanctuary, her life. Now...

Mikal checked a seal on a barrel. “You lived in the palace with the High Empress?”

“Yes. We were her personal guards.”

“The Guardians are specially trained, I suppose. Is it harder training than what the soldiers get?”

Placing her hands on the edge of the crate, Tasi boosted herself up to sit on the top of it. Idly swinging her legs, she thumped the heel of her boot against the side of it several times. “Yes.”

“What’s so different to you—I should say the Guardians—and the soldiers?” Kneeling down, Torkra ran the handtronic along the code printed in the side of a barrel.

She watched him. “Our training is a bit more intense.” No need to reveal everything.

“What did you learn?”

“The usual. Hand to hand combat, lasers.”

“But more intense.” Straightening up, Torkra thoughtfully scratched the shaggy hair that spilled over his broad shoulders. “You learned techniques the soldiers didn’t?”

“I guess you could say that.”

“What did you learn?”

Tasi smiled. “Big secret.”

“But we’re friends.” Mikal leaned against the crate and grinned charmingly at her—or tried to grin charmingly. He succeeded only in looking mischievously roguish. “You can tell us.”

“Sorry. No.”

“I’m hurt.”

“I bet.”

He laughed.

Torkra looked over at them. “Do you have family? Parents?”

“They died a long time ago.”

He immediately looked stricken. “Oh, lass, I am so sorry. I didn’t mean to bring up bad memories.”

“It’s all right.” She smiled. “I was thirteen and had just started my training. Time heals, as trite as that seems.”

“Any brothers or sisters?” Mikal queried.

“Only child.”

“Gee,” Torkra said, giving his brother a wry look. “I bet ’tis nice sometimes.”

Mikal started to send him a rude gesture only to stop when he remembered Tasi.

“Don’t mind me,” Tasi said cheerfully. “What’s a little rudeness between friends?”

They laughed.

Tasi laughed with them, enjoying the easy-going nature of the brothers, until suddenly something caught her attention, making the laughter die on her lips.

Lifting her head, she glanced around the cargo hold. Something was wrong. She could feel it, a prickling along her spine, something hunting her...

Hunting.

The sensation came from behind her eyes, from deep inside the recesses of her *kyrat*. Looking inwards, she saw the mental thread, saw the greyness of it, the flicker of orange, and she followed it, sensing the growing danger as she did so.

She caught her breath, stiffening.

“Tasi?”

Something was tracking her. It was somewhere. Someone. A flash of red, a kyrat glimmering through leaves...she couldn’t see properly, her way was blocked...

“Tasi, are you all right?”

Coming through...someone hunting. Alarm shot through her. Balfour! Balfour, run! Balfour!

It was a blur, the shared alarm, a dim shout. Danger everywhere, the murkiness closing in, the mental thread vibrating with the shared danger.

Pain tore through her suddenly, a burn that seared across her stomach and made her jack-knife forward. *A second pain, agony that burned through her, a red rod that cut deep to the bone, cleaving through flesh with the ease of a hot knife through butter.*

“Torkra! Get Heddam!”

Heat pounding, blood spurting. Desperation. Fighting, fighting, thrusting, the golden rod in his hand cutting a swathe through the soldiers. The soldiers shot their lasers, the burns cutting his back, burning through muscle and flesh, blood and bone.

“Balfour!” She screamed his name, pitching forward, feeling someone catch her.

He fought with skill and ruthlessness, ignoring the blood that poured from him, the fatal wounds that sought to take his life from him.

::Tasi!:: Her name thundered down the mental thread, vibrating it, flecks of blood and flashes of gold flying off the thread. Her kyrat flashed gold, flecks of red pin-pricking the pure light. ::Tasita! Return to me! Return to me now! Now! I command you! Now!::

“Tasi!” A hand shook her shoulder, a calloused palm cupped her cheek, and hazily she blinked up into worried grey eyes.

::Guardian!:: Balfour’s voice burst into her mind, shattering the thread. “*Return to me now!*”

The gold that sparked from her *kyrat* went dark gold, a burnt amber that seared through her with the power in the command.

The connection was broken abruptly, leaving her gasping and sweat drenched, her body raked by shudders from the power of the mental command. Urgency filled her and she knew she had to find Balfour fast.

As the sensation of pain faded, she became aware that she was leaning back against Heddam’s thigh, one of his heavily muscled arms around her shoulders, her head resting against his hard abdomen.

Simon and Shamon crouched down beside him, and behind him hovered Torkra and Mikal, their young faces pale.

Looking up into Heddam’s eyes, she whispered shakily, “I have to go.”

He started to shake his head. “Lass—”

“You don’t understand.” Reaching up, she grabbed his hand. “Aora will fall. The Guardian who... a Guardian is dying, and I have to find him. Heddam, *I have to find him before it’s too late.*”

“Easy, Tasi.” Heddam stroked her hand with his thumb soothingly. “We’ll talk about this later, after you’ve rested.”

“No.” Releasing his hand, she pushed upright into a sitting position. When she swayed he steadied her with his arm behind her back. “You don’t understand. I

have to find him, Heddham. It's vital to those left behind on Aora that I find Balfour."

He gently pushed a strand of her hair behind her ear. "How do you know 'tis this Balfour you speak of? How do you know he's in trouble? This may be simply a side effect of your injuries. A return of the fever, mayhaps." He placed his palm on her brow. "Though you feel cool enough."

He didn't know. How could he? She hadn't told him, so it was no wonder he didn't understand. He needed to understand now. There was no choice, not if she was to get the help she needed to find Balfour. Now was not the time for secrets. Too much depended on her finding Balfour before it was too late, and if that meant revealing secrets that no one else knew, she'd do it.

Some secrets, not all.

Tasi looked around at the traders watching her with a mixture of curiosity and concern. "I need your promise to never repeat what I tell you. Please."

"Of course," Simon replied instantly.

"Trust me, lass," Heddham added quietly, "These walls have heard more secrets and seen more things than you could imagine."

That was comforting, and somehow she believed it was true. The Aoras might not mix with other races and species, but they knew what was around them, their neighbours in space. Knowledge was the best defence and one never knew when defence would be needed. The Daamens were well known for their loyalty to friends and family, and their trustworthiness.

"What you saw just now," she began, "It wasn't me being hurt. The Guardians have a mental thread, a way of communicating in times of urgency and when apart. Most of us can only feel and see things through another Guardian's mental sight, through our *kyrats*. But the Head Guardian can communicate and call us directly. Balfour called me."

"It looked like you were in pain," Mikal stated bluntly.

Heddham's hand at her back rubbed comfortingly and she felt him lean just a little closer to her. His gaze was intent on her face and she had no doubt his protective movement was unconscious. It warmed her but she couldn't dwell on it. Not now.

“It wasn’t my pain,” she told Mikal. “It was Balfour’s.”

“Your Head Guardian is injured?”

“Yes. And he needs me.”

“Do you know where he is?” Heddham asked.

“I can follow the mental link. He’ll keep it open now to guide me. All I need is access to the galaxy map.” Tasi switched her gaze to Simon. “One more favour I ask. Please.”

“You want us to take you to him,” Simon replied.

“Or drop me off on the nearest planet and get me a small spaceship. That’ll do. I’ll find him myself. Please.” She looked up at Heddham, the urgency filtering through her again. “Please. I don’t have much time. Balfour needs me, and he needs me *now*.”

“Tasi—”

She pushed down her pride. There was no place for it now. “Please. I’ll do whatever you want later, Heddham, but I need to go.”

He looked long and deep into her eyes, his gaze searching. The seconds ticked past and she tensed with each precious second. But she had to make him understand that he was her only hope now.

“Please,” she repeated, and gripped his hand. “Heddham, whatever you want, I’ll do it. Just give me this. Let me return to Balfour and do my duty.”

Her words hung in the air between them.

Reaching up, she laid her hand on his cheek and pulled gently. Immediately he lowered his head towards her and she stretched up and placed her mouth next to his ear and whispered, “Heddham, this isn’t your decision to make. The time for arguing is not now. This is my life, my duty, what I do. You don’t understand what is at stake here and therefore it is not for you to decide. Don’t make me fight you. The only way you can keep me here is in chains or locked up. Your prisoner. I can’t allow that, and if I start fighting, you’ll get hurt, very hurt. You don’t know what I’m capable of. Please, Heddham, don’t make it come to that.” *Don’t make me fight you.*

The silence in the cargo hold seemed to stretch for eternity. Heddam stayed still, his hand warm at her back, the heat of his big body surrounding her, his long, thick hair spilling over his shoulders to cling to her shirt.

She kept her mouth at his ear, her hand against his rough-hewn cheek, forcing her breathing to stay steady as she waited. What she asked was out of politeness. She didn't want to fight him, and she didn't want to hurt him physically. She didn't want to hurt any of these traders who'd done nothing but help her and seek to protect her. But she especially didn't want to hurt Heddam.

Finally he pulled back enough to look down at her. His eyes were shadowed, his face grim. "You're heading into danger, and you're asking me to simply allow it."

"This isn't your decision to make," she repeated. "Heddam, please try to understand."

"All right." He nodded. "I won't fight you on this."

Relief poured through her and she caressed his cheek lightly before dropping her hand. "Thank you."

He looked over her at Simon and she saw the look they exchanged, only she couldn't think what it meant. Maybe they were commiserating with each other at the stubbornness of women in general.

That was their problem. Hers was still on-going.

Bracing her hands on the floor she made to push upright, only to have him place his arm around her waist securely and draw her up with ease as he straightened to his full height, which left her standing with her head at the same level as his massive pectorals. He adjusted his hold until his hand rested on her opposite hip, and the ease with which he stood there like that made it seem as though he'd done it to her a hundred times.

More like he'd actually done it a hundred times to a hundred different women, but there was something more about his stance, more protective, holding her with seeming nonchalance yet protectively as well, as though in a heartbeat he could bend over her and take her in his sheltering embrace.

And she knew he would. One sign of danger and he'd have bent over her and protected her with his bigger body.

He was a man any woman would be proud to acknowledge as her life partner.

He's the man I want as my life partner.

The thought hit her hard, made her blink and her breath catch.

No one seemed to notice, Simon giving instructions to Torkra and Mikal, but she felt the slight tightening of Heddam's big hand on her hip, and when Simon turned away and she glanced up at Heddam, she saw the query in his eyes and knew he'd heard her catch her breath. She didn't know what he saw in her eyes, but whatever it was it made a small smile curve his lips and a fire leap into his eyes.

For the several seconds everything else around them seemed to vanish. Nothing existed except the man keeping her in a protective hold, the heat of his body seeping into her, his gaze locking hers, her heart filling and—

::Guardian! Attend me!::

The force of the command snapped her back and she looked away from the intense grey eyes above her to focus inwards, following the mental thread to the end, and what she saw made her gut clench and fear fill her.

Balfour's thread was blood red and several minute strands were already breaking free of his main thread.

Balfour was dying.

::Tasita. Go to a galaxy map, focus on it, and I will guide you.::

She came back to find only Simon and Heddam with her in the cargo hold, their gazes scrutinizing her closely.

"I need to go to the galaxy map," she said to Simon. "I can find where he is. If you can drop me off on the nearest planet, I can find my way."

~ * ~

The sky was a searing blue, but the depths of the cave were dark, the only thing casting light the crackle of the bright fire that burned within. The smell of cooking filled the cave, but she wasn't interested in it at that moment.

Going to the entrance, she looked up at the sky. A tinge of red crossed the sun and she could feel the tautness of the thread, the unravelling and the soakage of blood.

A Guardian was dying.

~ * ~

“This is ridiculous!” The High Emperor stormed through the palace corridors. “Of all of them, the Head Guardian was the one who got away!” Wheeling around on Yaltan, he swore. “I want that Head Guardian’s bloody *kyrat*! Do you hear me? I want it mounted on that wall in pride of place!”

“The soldiers are trying,” Yaltan replied mildly.

“Not hard enough! Do I have to hunt and kill him myself?”

That’d be something to see. Yaltan smiled inwardly but outwardly maintained his serious expression.

“I’d hoped those bloody bounty hunters would have hunted the Guardians down by now.” Shoving the door to his office open, the High Emperor stalked inside furiously. “Those two packs are supposed to be among the best in that forsaken space. Useless! Bloody useless, the lot of them!”

“Putting a pack against a Guardian isn’t perhaps the wisest thing to do.” Yaltan followed him inside the room.

“Bloody fools only have to stay out of arm’s reach and shoot them. That’s it.” Crossing to the window, he snatched the heavy curtains in one hand and yanked them aside. “I still see no new skulls on those pikes, Yaltan. I want those pikes filled. I want every Guardian skull lining those walls, and I want every Guardian *kyrat* mounted on my wall! Is that too much to ask?”

Yaltan could only stare at him. *Are you for real? Getting a Guardian’s head isn’t that easy. Not at the price to be paid.* But all he said aloud was, “No, Sire. That’s not too much to ask.” *Fool.*

~ * ~

He watched through the painting, the eyes giving him access. Miness was recovering from the mental thrashing the High Emperor had given her in the process of trying to extract the secrets. The suns knew what he’d learned from Miness.

Slipping back through the corridors, he stopped at Miness’s door. All was silent behind it. Wondering what Yaltan knew, he turned and retraced his footsteps.

Evil was afoot, and evil knew no bounds.

Did Yaltan know his boundaries?

~ * ~

It waited. It could feel the unravelling of the thread. Blood soaked it, dripping down. Reaching out, it caught a drop, watched as it disappeared and it felt the loss coming upon it.

It still wasn't time, not yet, but things were happening fast. There was only one more now, one more to stand up. One more.

It looked out, saw the forests. Heard the voices. It knew the threat.

~ * ~

Standing outside the control cabin, Heddham watched Tasi sitting near the viscomm. She was biting her bottom lip, her gaze on the galaxy map as she studied it. Now and again she'd frown, angle her head and peer intently at it. Yet when she had that expression, she wasn't really seeing the screen but something beyond it. Something no one else could see.

"Weird," Shamon murmured from beside him.

"It's to do with this mental thread." Heddham frowned in turn. "Or whatever 'tis."

"So when she finally comes up with the co-ordinates, I'll key them in." Simon appeared on Heddham's other side. "We'll see exactly where this Balfour is."

Heddham gestured to him to follow. Once further down the corridor out of hearing, he said quietly, "I'm going with her."

"Never thought otherwise," Simon replied.

"'Twas quite obvious anyway," Shamon added. "No Daamen has ever let his wench walk into danger alone."

Heddham looked at them both. "Once on the planet, I'll get a spaceship and accompany Tasi to where she indicates. I'm sorry, Simon, I have to leave. I can't continue on knowing she's facing unknown dangers. I'm going with her."

Simon's calm expression didn't change. "You're not going alone, either. We'll transport her to where she needs to go in this ship."

Heddam wasn't surprised by his words, but he was worried. "Simon, the Aoras don't come under the IPC. Security isn't going to like us sticking our noses in. 'Tis why I need to go with her alone."

"Nay," Shamon said abruptly. "I'm going with you."

Simon arched one brow. "We're merely providing transport, Heddam. Why waste time trying to find a spaceship on another planet when we can simply fly straight to the problem? Besides, if you think I'm going to allow one of my friends and a member of my crew to simply leave and walk into danger alone, you have another think coming."

"Simon—"

"Nay. Besides, it might be a good opportunity to find a new trade route."

"'Tis bullshit," Heddam replied.

"But it sounded good." Simon smiled slightly. "Do we really need to go through this every time one of us falls for a wench in trouble?"

"Why not?" Shamon said. "It's all part of the ritual now. Go on, Simon, point out the obvious." He smirked at Heddam.

Heddam knew exactly what they were going to say, but before he could protest, Simon held up his hand and said, "Daamens stick together. You have a wench in trouble and go to help her, we have your back. No arguments."

Warmth swept through Heddam, but he still protested. Or tried to. "'Tis different. Tasi isn't under the IPC. We don't know what we're getting into—"

"You mean apart from the Aora rebellion?" Shamon stroked his jaw line. "'Tis different, I'll give you that, but fascinating, too."

"Besides," Simon added, "We're not on Aora, nor are we going there. We're simply taking Tasi to rescue her friend. Really, Heddam, get a grip. We're simply providing transport." He winked.

Heddam could feel a lump in his throat, and he looked away and cleared his throat. "All right. Tasi does mean a lot to me..."

Shamon rolled his eyes. “No kidding?”

“And you have the job of informing your little wench that we’re providing that transport.” Simon clapped a hand on Heddham’s shoulder. “Besides, ’tis not as if we haven’t skimmed the side of the law before for a wench. Remember Sonja? What would you call a wanted space pirate right in the middle of the Lawful Sector, stalking the Inka Empire leader? Hmmm? And Red all hot and bothered by her? And what did we do?”

“Covered his back.” Heddham grinned slightly.

“Aye, we did. ’Tis what we do for each other.” Simon looked around when Tasi called his name. “Right, looks as though the wench has figured out where we’re going. I’ll key in the co-ordinates and then leave you to explain the change of plans to her.”

“’Twill be something to see.” Shamon grinned.

“You,” Simon said sternly, “Will be coming with me when I leave. Heddham doesn’t need an audience while dealing with Tasi.”

“I never get to see all the fun,” Shamon groused.

Entering the control cabin, Heddham stood behind Tasi’s chair while Simon sat in the captain’s chair and waited.

“He’s here.” Tasi touched the screen, her finger tracing a line to a planet. “Nearer than I thought.”

“Let’s have a look, lass.” Simon studied the screen. “Ah, ’tis only a day away.” He keyed in the co-ordinates and stood up. “’Tis done. We’ll be there by tomorrow morning.”

“We?” Startled, Tasi looked up.

“Aye. Heddham will explain it to you.” Simon grinned, tousled her hair and strode from the cabin, grabbing Shamon’s arm as he did so and dragging him out the door with him.

Oh, Heddham could just see that the knowledge of the traders accompanying her wasn’t sitting well with Tasi. She stood up and faced him with narrowed eyes.

“I go alone,” she said.

“Not happening.” Reaching out, he tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear.

She jerked her head back and glared.

“Let’s not argue about this,” he continued. “I wouldn’t let you go alone. My friends wouldn’t let me go without them. Just swallow your pride, lass, and accept a little help.” Mayhaps that wasn’t the right thing to say, because her jaw tightened. Trying to cajole her, he said quietly, “We’re simply providing you with transport.”

“I can go by myself in a small ship—”

“’Tis wasting time, landing on another planet and then flying off again, not to mention mayhaps getting into problems if someone recognizes you. Our way is the best way, Tasi.”

She rubbed her brow. “Damn it, Heddham, why won’t you listen to me? This is dangerous, you don’t know what you’re getting yourself into.”

“So tell me.”

Tasi turned away. “No.”

“You might as well,” he said. “I’m coming with you whether you like it or not. Regardless of what you face, I’m facing it with you. So tell me what I’m getting myself into so I’m better prepared.”

“Damn it, Heddham, I can’t tell you everything! Things are going to happen that shouldn’t be revealed to anyone but a few, and that means you! I could die and, damn it, if you come with me, you probably will die! Isn’t that enough reason to let me go alone?”

“Your being in danger is even more reason for me to go with you.”

Sucking in a deep, exasperated breath, Tasi shook her head. “Why are you so insistent on going with me? This isn’t your business. This is no one’s business but my own.”

“Because I love you.”

She went dead still.

Well, there ’tis. Heddham looked down at her. *Out in the open. No going back now.*

Tasi turned slowly to stare at him. “Are you out of your space-pocked mind?”

“Nay.” He continued to regard her steadily. “I love you. I won’t let you go into danger alone. I’m standing beside you.”

“You can’t love me.”

“I do.”

“You don’t know me.”

“So tell me.”

“Hell.” Tiredly, she rubbed her eyes. “We’re going around in circles. I feel like we’ve had this conversation before.”

“A few times, aye, except for the part about ‘I love you’.”

He thought she was going to start yelling. Her cheeks went red and the topaz in her forehead flashed dull yellow. Placing her hands on her hips, she said, “This is a passing fancy.”

Leaning down until they were almost nose to nose, Heddham replied evenly, “Aye, you’re right. We’re going in circles. You’ve told me that before, too, only then I think you referred to it as a ‘hero fantasy’. I’m telling you right now, lass, I don’t have those kinds of fantasies. And I have never declared my love to any wench. Ever.”

“So why start now?”

Heddham sighed. “Because, lass, I love *you*. I didn’t know ’twas going to happen. Love is funny, it strikes you when you least expect it. But there you have it. I love you and my place is by your side.”

Her lips twisted cynically. “Shouldn’t that be my role? Me by your side?”

He regarded her steadily for several seconds before saying quietly, “Our role is side by side, ’tisin’t choosing sides, ’tis *our* side. You by my side, me by yours. And right now we’re both going to face whatever ’tis you have to face. No arguments.”

“When you get your fool head sliced off, it’ll be too late to argue.” She looked mutinously up at him. “I don’t love you. Now what?”

“Given time you will,” he replied confidently.

“Oh, what? So because you think you love me, you’ll stand by my side in any danger? But even though I don’t profess to love you, you’ll still stand there?”

His gaze drifted down over her face, taking in the tic in her jaw, the bright brown of her doe-eyes, and the tightening of her lush lips. He took his time, enjoying the view.

“Well?”

He smiled. “Aye, lass.”

“‘Aye’? What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“’Tis the answer to your questions. It makes no difference to me whether you don’t realize we’re meant to be together. *I* know, and for that simple reason alone I’ll stand by you.”

“You’re an idiot.”

Catching her chin between finger and thumb, Heddham angled her head back so he could look directly into her eyes. “Name calling won’t make me change my mind. You can get me into any argument you like, Tasi, but ’twill be a waste of time and breath. I’m coming with you.”

He watched the anger fade from her eyes, but the frustration was plain to see. She was going to argue again so he stopped it by the simple process of kissing her. At the lightest touch of her lips he wanted to deepen it but instinct made him straighten and simply walk from the cabin, leaving her looking after him with a troubled expression on her beautiful face.

Oh aye, he wanted to wipe that troubled expression away, but right now she was better to be left alone to come to terms with his decision.

~ * ~

Right. She was at Heddham’s mercy now because she needed transport to get to Balfour. Sitting in front of the viscomm, Tasi drummed her fingers on the armrest of the chair. She had no time to waste and it was quicker to simply fly straight to the place Balfour was hiding, than to land elsewhere and get another ship.

Swallow your pride and focus on the job at hand. Stars, girl, you are stubborn almost to stupidity sometimes.

Yes, well, that idiot Heddum will get himself killed.

It's his decision.

Not to kill himself, it's not.

Then you'll just have to ensure he doesn't get killed, won't you?

Sheesh.

Rolling her shoulders, Tasi focussed back inside herself, seeking out the mental thread with ease and travelling down the now blood-drenched line.

Almost immediately she felt the touch of Balfour's thoughts.

::Balfour?::

The pain travelled back to her. *::You're getting closer::*

::I'm coming as fast as I can. I should be by your side by morning sometime::

::Good. Tasi, you need to be careful. The soldiers are here and they're hunting::

::How many?::

::I don't know. I killed maybe ten or eleven but another squad came. The soldiers are everywhere::

::They know you still live::

::And they'll search until they find me. You have to be careful, Tasi. Soon you'll be the only Guardian left standing::

Her heart stuttered with fear. *::Don't talk like that, Balfour. I'll get you help. I have friends who can help heal you::*

::It's almost too late for me already. I'm barely hanging on. I just need you to come fast and stay safe::

::Where are you on the planet? I know it's the forest, but whereabouts?::

::When you land, I'll guide you through the forest. You'll have to come on foot.::

::Balfour....::

::You know your duty, Tasi. We've been through this many times. You need to be ready.::

::I'm ready. I will do my duty, I won't falter.::

::Tasita... Guardian....:: Affection was in the thought. ::The youngest of us all. A big job for a little bit.::

She knew she should say something rude like she normally did, but she couldn't think past the big knot of misery that formed.

::Rest, Guardian. You need rest for what is coming.::

All went silent on the thread and Tasi opened her eyes. Balfour was resting, she just knew it. She'd also seen a few more threads unravel from the mental thread. And the thread itself was now wet with blood.

Standing up, she looked out at the black space dotted with brilliant stars. Out there was danger, inside here was safety. Outside her leader and close friend was dying. Inside she had a man who professed to love her and was determined to stand by her side.

She could lose both.

Just the thought was enough to make her lips tremble. To lose Balfour was a definite, but to lose Heddham... Heddham who laughed and was so stubborn and big and full of life. If he accompanied her, he could die as well. If she gave him the slip, she had no doubt he'd follow her until he finally found her, and that alone could kill him because he didn't know what he was getting into. And she couldn't tell him everything, because it was known only to the Guardians and the few involved in the ruling of the throne.

And she'd thought her life couldn't get any more complicated.

Hands in her pockets, she stared out at the stars for a long time. She wasn't even aware of the tears that formed in her eyes or the lone one that spilled free to roll unchecked down her cheek. Leaning her shoulder against the wall, she sighed and closed her eyes.

She was tired, she could feel the weariness pulling at her, but she wanted to stay upright for just a little longer, see if she could give Balfour some strength, even if it was only of the mind.

Concentrating, she pushed a ball of topaz energy down the thread, rolling over the red blood, keeping the glow pristine through thought alone. Down the thread it went until finally she gave an extra push and it slid down Balfour's thread.

She felt the instant it jolted into him, heard the extra strength in his command. *::Sleep, Guardian. Rest. I will call you when you get closer.::* A faint chuckle followed. *::Thank you.::*

::You're welcome.::

He cut the link, determined she would rest.

Yes, she'd rest, but it wouldn't be in bed. Dropping back into the chair, she propped her elbow on the arm rest and leaned her head on her hand. Closing her eyes, she slid easily into slumber, but part of her mind was alert, the mental thread vibrating with readiness for the slightest command.

When she opened her eyes sometime later, it was to feel another presence in the cabin. Turning her head slightly, she saw that Heddam was in the captain's chair, his long legs stretched out and his booted ankles crossed up on the edge of the console. Hands linked comfortably across his muscle-ribbed stomach, he was slouched in the chair with his head leaning back against the headrest.

The giant trader was sleeping.

She wondered how long he'd been there. A quick glance at the timer on the wall revealed that she'd been sleeping for four hours. Carefully she stretched, then settled back and studied him leisurely.

His face was strong, even in sleep. His hair was back in its haphazard ponytail, long brown strands highlighted with red straggling over his brawny shoulders. The massive pectorals rose and fell easily with each deep breath he drew. The little silver ring in his earlobe lent a rakish slant to his already dangerous handsomeness.

Slowly she reached out to touch his hand, only to stop and withdraw her hand. But she continued to look at his hands, the long fingers that she knew were capable of giving both tenderness and unimaginable delight. Clean short nails, some

broken, all from heavy work. The hands of an honest trader, a hard worker... and an erotic lover.

A bloody stubborn man.

She smiled faintly. She'd never met a more determined man. Nothing she said seemed to faze him.

And I want him for a life partner. How stupid does that make me? As if I'd tell him, anyway. Better he thinks I don't love him, then he might leave if things get quiet. Save his dumb life, the big ox.

Even as she thought it, she knew it wouldn't happen. Heddam wasn't the kind of man to leave a woman he loved. And he definitely wasn't the kind of man to tell a woman he loved her if he didn't. This man didn't deal in fantasies, he dealt in reality.

It was just that her reality wasn't safe and certainly didn't have room for a lover or life partner. Not long term. Hell, not even short term, really. Once they landed and she found Balfour, life was going to get even harder and more dangerous.

He drew in one deep breath after another and she couldn't help herself. Reaching out, she gently touched his hand.

Immediately his hand turned over, long, strong fingers closing over hers, drawing them safely into his big palm, curling protectively around her smaller hand. And he continued to sleep, her hand clasped protectively in his.

With a soft sigh, she closed her eyes. *Holding hands, how sweet.* And comforting. Tired of fighting and thinking too much, she slipped back into sleep.

When she next awoke, the timer on the wall showed she'd slept for at least another three hours. It would have been unbelievable except she knew it wasn't totally her doing. Balfour was ensuring she was resting.

Tentatively she felt along the thread, reassured when she saw that his thread still remained unbroken, though the blood was still dripping from it, red spots that vanished as they fell into the netherworld.

His presence was quiet and reedy. That brought fear to her mind and she swallowed it quickly when she felt him stir. Not wanting to disturb him, she retreated, but she sent a little ball of energy sliding down the thread.

This time there was no rebuke but she felt the warm caress of affection just before she surfaced.

Opening her eyes, she turned her head once more to find that Heddham was no longer beside her. Lifting her head, she found a blanket draped over her, and a pillow under her head. Looking around, she spotted the glass of water sitting on a small tray on the console.

He was still looking after her.

Smiling, she drank the water before looking at the galaxy map. Another couple of hours and they'd be on the planet.

Standing up, she stretched stiff muscles, collected the blanket, pillow and empty glass, and headed back to the dining cabin, where she placed the glass in the dish drawer.

From the cabins on each side of the corridor came the usual soft snores and sleepy mumblings as the traders slept. She glanced at Heddham's open door further up and wondered if he slept as well as his friends.

Inside her cabin, she folded the blanket and placed it on the bunk, along with the pillow. What she needed was a shower to rejuvenate herself. The water refreshed her and by the time she'd exited the shower, she was fully awake and alert once more.

Wrapped in the towel, she crossed to the bunk and picked up her underwear.

The door opening had her looking up sharply and grabbing the towel tightly to her. When she saw it was Heddham, she shook her head. "You do know that a closed door means you should knock first?"

His face merely showed relief. "When I didn't find you in the control cabin, I got worried."

"I took a shower to refresh myself. I'm just about to get dressed, see?" She held up a clean pair of panties. Oops, probably not the right thing to do, especially considering the way his grey eyes darkened.

"Pretty." He moved across the cabin towards her like a great, stalking beast, all soft footsteps and lithe movements, his muscles shifting and flexing in the light.

“Necessary.” Holding up one hand to ward him off, she added, “And I need to get dressed.”

Catching her wrist, he pulled her arm out to the side and stepped right up to her, her breasts behind the towel pressing against his abdomen. Looking down at her, he grinned wickedly. “We have a few hours left before we get to the planet. I know a great way to pass the time.”

“I just bet you do.” Her heart fluttered and she was sure he’d feel it in her wrist pulse. “However, I have to keep my thoughts focussed right now.”

“Ah.” He looked a little disappointed. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I am.”

Dipping his head down, he kissed her quick and hard, leaving her gasping and little sparks of heat skittering across her skin as he let her wrist go and sat down on the bunk. “Very well. Get dressed.”

She arched one brow at him. “Are you leaving?”

“Cripes, lass, are you kidding? If I can’t have you naked under me—or above me or crouched before me or anywhere else my wicked intentions can take you—then watching you get dressed is the next best thing.”

“You really are desperate.” Laughing, she slipped the panties on beneath the towel and drew them up.

“You can lose the towel,” Heddham suggested with a gleam in his eyes.

“I don’t think that’s the wisest thing to do right now.” Pulling the pants on, she drew them over her hips, then grabbed the bra and turned away to put it on.

No sooner was her back turned than she felt the warmth of him at her back. His hands tugged the towel away.

“Hey!” she began, startled.

Reaching over her shoulder, he took her bra from her hands and shook the lacy garment out in an expert move. “Just helping with your support garment. Put your arms through the straps.”

Shaking her head, she obeyed. “You’re such an expert at dressing and undressing women.”

“’Tis only one wench I’m interested in dressing and undressing from now on,” he replied, deftly flicking the catch closed. He held out her shirt.

She slid her arms into the sleeves and this time Heddum leaned over her from behind, his fingers nimbly doing up the buttons while his head bent down to her, his cheek resting against hers. “Mmmm. You smell good, lass.”

“That’s what nice soap does to you,” she said a trifle breathlessly as his fingertips skimmed the valley between her breasts.

“This scent is solely yours. I swear I’ll always smell it. ’Tis forever in my senses now.” His lips brushed her cheek. “You’re not angry anymore.”

It was a statement. The man was too observant.

“I gave that up. You’re with me until I can ditch you, I accept that. I don’t waste time once I’ve come to terms with things.”

“Good philosophy.”

“Glad it meets with your approval,” she returned a trifle tartly.

He laughed softly, his hands sliding beneath her shirt, his fingertips tracing circles across her stomach, making her break out in hot chills.

“All right, that’s enough.” Pulling away from him, she finished buttoning her shirt and tucked it into her pants. Hopping on one leg at a time while pulling on her boots, she glanced at him as he resumed his lounging position on her bunk. “How come you’re not tucked up asleep?”

“I’m keeping an eye on you,” he replied without a qualm.

Tasi frowned. “You ride a dangerous road, trader.”

“When I’m on it with you, I love it.” He winked, ever the charming rogue. “Only with you, sweet lass.”

She rolled her eyes and was about to answer when a knock sounded on the door. “Come in.”

The door opened and Simon entered, his face serious as he looked from her to Heddham. “Bounty hunters approaching.”

Moving fast for such a big man, Heddham stood up. “Which pack?”

“Creed.”

“Shit. Your father-by-marriage.”

Startled, Tasi took a second look at Simon and stiffened. A bounty hunter was his father-by-marriage? That could mean his loyalties would be torn, and when it came to family anything—

“Don’t even think it,” Simon said mildly. “No one is turning you over to the bounty hunters or Aora soldiers or anyone else who is hunting you.”

“You’re related.”

It was the first time she’d seen the unflappable Daamen captain look appalled. “Nay! I’m wed to his daughter, nothing more. Related to him? Stars, nay!”

Heddham laughed briefly before turning to the problem. “Is he wanting to board?”

“Aye. Says he has something he wants me to give to Des.”

“Did you suggest he could give it to her himself?”

“Oh, aye. But he replied that he’s going to be away for a while and therefore wants me to take it back with me.”

“He suspects. Damn.” Heddham closed his eyes briefly. “That fight alerted the hunters.”

“Fight?” Tasi queried.

“Never mind.” Heddham looked at Simon. “He has to board or he’ll know for sure.”

“I know. He’ll be here in the next half hour.” Simon’s gaze switched to Tasi. “You we need to hide.”

“Where?” She glanced around.

Heddam smiled slowly. "Time to test Gabie's idea."

Tasi had no idea who this Gabie was, but she was all for anything to keep herself from being detected by the bounty hunters.

By the time the bounty hunters' ship had drawn close enough for the connecting tunnels to join, Tasi was inside a secret wall panel at the end of the corridor. There was a small viscomm up in the wall which gave her a clear view of the corridor right the way to the platform lift.

From there she was able to see the bounty hunters appear, one with a flashing gold tooth who greeted Simon with a smile. This must have been Creed. The other was a hulking, ugly, scarred brute who still didn't match the Daamens in girth and height, but would cause a normal sized man to sweat. Another bounty hunter appeared from the stairwell and sauntered down the corridor, his eyes darting quickly around.

Simon spoke easily to Creed, taking from him a well-wrapped package. Shamon and Heddam were, she knew, playing cards in the dining cabin. Etol, Aamun and Kel were lying down in their cabins with their doors open. The other traders were nearby.

Damn it, if anything went wrong, Heddam and Simon would be head-to-head with the bounty hunters. Rubbing her forehead, Tasi cursed quietly.

Every cabin had its doors wide open and the wandering bounty hunter couldn't help but see that the cabins were empty. The only thing he couldn't be sure of was the bathing cabins.

The hunters didn't stay long but when they left Heddam didn't come to release her from the hiding place. Instead, the traders spread out and started searching.

Leaning back against the wall, she watched the corridor, seeing the traders go from cabin to cabin, in and out of the dining cabin, and go on the platform lift down and up the floors. Finally they all converged to where Simon waited and handed him several things. He nodded and disappeared into the dining cabin with them, Torkra on his heels.

Finally Heddam pressed the panel and it slid open. "All right, lass?"

"What were you all looking for?"

“Creed’s a sneaky bastard. We just knew he’d have something planted to try and pick up whether or not you were onboard. We found all the little bugs and Torkra is fixing them so your voice and body pattern doesn’t register. That way Creed will think you’re not on board after all.”

“How can you be sure you got them all?”

“Trust me, we did.” Slipping his hand around her nape, he drew her forward and bent down to kiss her. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“Me? What about you and Simon and the others?” Tasi frowned. “If the hunters had picked up that I was onboard, there’d have been a huge problem. A fight. And Simon would have been caught in the middle. This isn’t going to work, Heddam—”

“How about you let us worry about things for a while and concentrate instead on your duty?” He dropped a kiss right on her *kyrat*, sending a frisson of heat through her. “You do your duty and I’ll do mine.”

“Let me guess, your duty is to protect me.”

“Such a smart little wench.” Turning around, he drew her with him. “Another hour or so and we’ll be on that planet. You need to rest.”

Another hour or so. No, she didn’t need to rest. Instantly dismissing the bounty hunters from her mind, Tasi focussed on the time and place. She had to contact Balfour.

Eight

The forest was thick and Heddham glanced around. According to the scanner, it was also empty. At least this area. He touched the laser at his thigh and looked back at the spaceship.

Knotting a bandanna securely around her forehead, Tasi strode down the ramp, an intensity in her eyes. Her movements were quick, restless, and her gaze on him but not quite seeing him, as though part of herself were tuned elsewhere. Well, hell, she was listening to some kind of weird mental thread thing from her leader.

Simon was standing by the spaceship and Heddham knew he wanted to accompany them into the forest. But he couldn't, he had to stay by the ship in case Creed or Des or someone else tried to contact him. He had to give them the illusion that the traders were still in space. There was no telling how much Creed had believed them, and there was no doubt that once Des heard that the bounty hunters and the traders had had an altercation over a Guardian, she'd be on the viscomm. Thank the stars that she was on a mission somewhere and hadn't heard yet, for if she had, Simon would have been getting a verbal stripping down, warnings and threats.

Torkra was also staying behind, ensuring that the bugs they'd returned to the places the hunters had left them continued to work the way he'd reprogrammed them to work. He was also using some gadget he'd invented to fool the hunters into thinking the trade ship was still in space. Heddham had no idea how the young trader did it, but he was grateful to him.

Aamun, Kel, Shamon and Mikal waited in the little clearing. They all had flying discs at their feet and lasers strapped to their thighs.

Tasi stopped next to Simon. "As you're Captain of this ship, Simon, I'm begging you, don't let your men come with me."

“’Tis their decision, lass,” he returned.

“Then I’m telling you right now, they could die.”

“We’ve all spoken about this and every man here can make his own decision. They’ve decided to accompany you.”

She rubbed her forehead almost wearily and Heddham saw the worry in her eyes. “Please, Simon.”

He placed his big hand on her shoulder and smiled. “We’re not fools, lass. We’ve faced danger before for our wenches and not once have we backed down. ’Tis no different now.”

“I’m not one of your wenches.”

Simon glanced at Heddham before returning his gaze to Tasi. “Aye, lass, you are, whether you accept it or not. Now go.”

She turned, her gaze sweeping across Aamun, Kel, Shamon and Etol. “Don’t come.”

“Sorry, lass, I’m having trouble with my hearing.” Shamon wiggled a finger in his ear. “Nay, can’t hear a thing. Better lead on, little wench, and our hearing might return later.”

The sadness in her eyes, the slight slump of her shoulders, bespoke more than words to them all. Heddham wanted to cuddle her close, wipe away her fears, and reassure her that the Daamens were more than capable of looking after themselves. She looked like she carried the weight of the world on her shoulders. Instead, he kept his face expressionless. ’Twas not the time to argue once again.

With a sudden intake of breath, she straightened her shoulders and looked at the disc lying at his feet. “I’ve seen those before. They fly.”

“Aye, they do. ’Twill be faster than walking.” He held out his hand. “You’ve not used one before?”

She shook her head. “Don’t worry, I’m a fast runner. But we have to hurry.” Worry shadowed her eyes. “Let’s go.”

“You can ride with me.” Stepping onto the disc, he waggled his fingers at her. “Just stand on the disc in front of me.”

Dubiously, she did as bidden. He twined one arm around her waist and held her close against his front. With a mere thought, he had the disc lifting into the air. When Tasi clutched at his arm, he said quietly, "'Tis all right, lass. I'll not let you fall. Now which way?"

Taking a deep breath, she lifted her head and closed her eyes. "Straight ahead."

Within minutes they were deep into the forest, stopping only now and again so Tasi could regain her bearings.

The deeper they got into the forest, the more tension Heddham could feel coiling inside her. They travelled for almost an hour before she suddenly said, "Stop."

Immediately the discs came to a hover as she looked around. Heddham couldn't see what she was feeling, but he knew something was wrong when she said, "We need to get off and get under cover."

Without question the traders got down off the discs and stashed them under the bushes. Crouched down behind the bushes, they waited and it wasn't long before they heard the boots tramping through the undergrowth.

Within minutes a squad of soldiers appeared, their red *kyrats* flashing in the dappled sunlight.

"He's here somewhere," one of the soldiers said. "Fan out. Shoot on sight. Don't let him get a chance to use his sensor swords."

Tasi barely breathed, she was so still beside Heddham. The bandanna covering her *kyrat* prevented any light alerting the soldiers of her presence. As the soldiers passed, she didn't watch them but simply closed her eyes and breathed silently. None of the traders moved until Tasi finally opened her eyes and crawled quietly from the undergrowth.

She was moving fast now, keeping low, slipping from tree to bush and further into the forest, moving with purpose and caution combined.

Heddham kept on her heels, ready at a seconds notice to leap to her defence, his friends fanning out behind them.

When Tasi stopped near a tree and held one finger to her lips, he saw a bead of sweat trickle down her cheek. Her eyes were overbright, and even through the bandanna he could see the dull red/gold glow of her *kyrat*. Her cheeks were tinged red, her breathing faster as though keeping in time to someone else's breathing.

“Tasi?” he whispered. “Are you all right?”

“We’re near. Very near. I—” She stopped suddenly, her breath catching, and she turned away. “We have to hurry.”

Within minutes she led them across a small stream where the forest grew thicker, making it harder for the traders. Giants all, manoeuvring through the bushes and trees wasn’t so easy now.

Suddenly Tasi broke away from them, diving through some bushes.

“Tasi!” Heddam hissed. “Nay! Wait!”

Tasi swung around and he saw the unbelievable happen. She held her arms out, hands outstretched and touched her middle finger to her palms. The *kyrat* crackled in her forehead, a flash behind the bandanna and he could actually see two lines of topaz shoot down her arms beneath her skin and come out of her palms. Her fingers closed around some kind of rods and there was a sound of pure energy vibrating through the air. Holding the blazing rods in her hands, she turned, ducked under a bush and disappeared from sight.

Cursing silently, Heddam followed, forced to a slower pace as he pushed through the bushes. Already he could hear cursing, someone yelling, orders snapping into the air. The sound of laser fire, a scream, and then he burst into the clearing to see Tasi moving fast, her rods a blur of snapping energy in the air.

Her topaz rods clashed with the red rods of a soldier, and another came at her from the side. She ducked, weaved and bobbed, her rods moving with deadly dexterity, slicing through blood and bone, cutting through a red rod with ease. The lights flashed brilliantly as red and topaz hit, but it was the red that gave way, falling apart in a blaze of red energy before disappearing back into the bodies of the soldiers.

They fell but more came. By the time Heddam and his friends broke into the clearing, Tasi had killed ten soldiers.

She fought like no one else he’d ever seen. Soldiers nearby were pulling their lasers free from their holsters, and at the sound of the traders crashing through into the clearing, their eyes widened and they swung their weapons towards the new threats.

Aamun, Kel, Etol and Shamon wasted no time, crashing into those nearest them and bringing them down, massive fists swinging and striking the soldiers unconscious.

Heddam shot one soldier who was aiming at Tasi, killing him instantly. A second soldier got the same treatment, then Heddam had to step back as another soldier reared up in front of Tasi and swung his red rod.

One soldier left and he was determined to kill Tasi.

The fight was savage and the traders shifted back, unable to interfere. The Aoras moved fast, their steps flying across the ground, leaves and twigs flying up in their wake as they came together in a clash of red and topaz energy. Soldier against Guardian, they fought to the death.

Heddam couldn't get an aim on the soldier. The traders could only curse and try to grab him, but the Aoras moved too fast and so the traders simply stood and watched, Heddam with his heart in his mouth.

Suddenly Tasi ducked, her topaz rod swinging up, catching the soldier between the legs and raking upward so easily, cutting him in half from crotch to the top of his head.

The soldier stilled, his rods splintering red in his hold. Then slowly he fell apart, one half to each side. The two halves of him hit the ground and rods sputtered out and vanished.

On one knee, Tasi took a deep breath before standing slowly.

Unable to look at the fallen soldier, the gruesome body spilling blood and bodily organs and intestines on the ground, Heddam looked at her. He'd known she warned him that he didn't know what he was dealing with, and now he knew. Or partially knew. There was more, he could feel it. Instinctively he knew there was so much more to this lass. To the Aoras. To the Guardians.

Fanned out either side of him, Aamun, Shamon, Etol and Kel watched in silence. Shamon was a little white and Kel didn't look too well, either, but none of them fainted.

Amazingly.

Tasi met Heddam's eyes without expression, the glowing rods pulling back into her palm, flowing up beneath her skin until they vanished into the topaz behind the

bandanna. There wasn't a mark on her. Turning, she moved forward and he immediately fell in beside her.

"Tasi, are you all right?" he queried.

She didn't answer, and he reached out to touch her carefully but before he made contact she said, "We're here."

Immediately lifting his laser, he readied himself for more trouble but Tasi simply pushed aside a bush and moved forward. Without hesitation she dropped down onto her knees before a body lying prone on the ground. "Balfour."

Kel, Etol, Aamun and Shamon immediately took up guard around the fallen man. The traders focussed on their surroundings, leaving Tasi and the fallen man on the ground.

Heddham stood on the other side of the man and studied him. Balfour was a well-built man in his fifties, with a craggy face and a broken nose. The Head Guardian looked tough.

He was also dying. His shirt was soaked in old and new blood, and dried blood flecked his jaw where it had seeped from his mouth. His every breath bubbled in his throat. His *kyrat* was a weak, dull yellow.

Heddham saw the sorrow in Tasi's eyes, the genuine caring she had for the older man.

"Balfour." Lifting the man's head, she laid it gently upon her thighs. "I am here."

Balfour drew an unsteady breath, his eyes opening slowly. "Are you ready, Guardian?" His voice was hushed in the clearing, but it held a mixture of strength and exhaustion.

"Yes." There was a crack in her voice and she cleared her throat. "Balfour—"

"There's no... time, Tasita." Balfour glanced around at the giants. "They... shouldn't be... here. Forbidden."

"I know. They insisted. I couldn't get away without killing them."

Her words caught all the traders' attentions, and they glanced back over their shoulders at her. Heddam looked sharply at her. *Aye, 'twas so much more to this lass than he first thought.*

"These are your... friends?" Fresh blood spilled from his mouth.

"Yes." She wiped the blood away gently with her hand. "They can be trusted, Balfour. They have twice saved my life."

"They... will see..."

"They won't talk."

Balfour looked from one to another of them before his gaze settled on Heddam. Heddam could swear he felt the probing of his gaze right into his very brain, seeking out his thoughts and intentions, seeking further, reading him as no one else had ever done.

A deep, ragged, wet breath and Balfour looked back at Tasi. "Guardian, it... is time."

She lifted her chin, a sheen of tears in her eyes. "Yes, Guardian."

"The mantle will... now shift to you. The youngest of the... Guardians, the only... survivor, your duty is to carry... the responsibility of... restoring to Aora what is Aora's. Take this... and guard it with your... life."

"Yes, Guardian." Her voice was low but sure. "I take this responsibility and I will guard it with my life."

Reaching up with a shaking hand, he ordered weakly, "Remove... the bandanna."

A quick flick of her hand and the bandana lay discarded on the ground. Her *kyrat* shone true topaz.

Balfour's *kyrat* brightened, flaring with a light not entirely his own. Tasi looked down at Balfour, her hand cradling his head tenderly.

"Now," he said.

Something came from around them, something that burned with unseen energy. Heddam felt it, a hot touch that burned with energy. It was around them, centred on

the couple on the ground, and then Balfour's *kyrat* gave a burst of brilliant light that had all the traders shielding their eyes.

A loud crackle rent the air, sending day flyers bursting from the treetops with startled shrieks.

Squinting, Heddham saw the arc of dazzling light flare from Balfour's *kyrat* and touch Tasi's *kyrat*. The energy poured forth, pouring into Tasi, filling the *kyrat* until it shone so brightly that the last thing Heddham saw before he covered his eyes was Tasi arching back, her face a mixture of agony and determination as the energy flooded her.

He wanted to grab her, drag her away, protect her, but he didn't know what he was dealing with, as she'd told him over and over. Well, he kind of understood that now.

So all he could do was shield his eyes and listen for any cry for help from Tasi, but apart from the crackle of energy, there was nothing but silence.

As suddenly as it began, it ended. Quiet fell on the clearing and he was able to finally take his hands from his face. He looked directly at Tasi and his heart jumped when he saw that her head was bowed. She was breathing hard and he didn't know whether to offer her psychical support or not. He just didn't know what the hell to do, expect keep guard for any soldiers suddenly appearing to hurt her.

He glanced at Aamun to find his friend looking warily at Tasi and Balfour. Shamon was stunned, Etol and Kel clearly not knowing what to think and looking at him for guidance.

Heddham shook his head and said quietly, "We wait."

In her lap Balfour stirred, his eyes opening weakly. "Tasita. Guardian."

Tasi lifted her head, and Heddham was shocked to see the darkness beneath her eyes. "Balfour."

"Thank... you."

"It's my duty."

His smile was sad, his voice faint and wet. "I... wish you didn't have to... do this, Tasi. I wish... you didn't have... to do this... alone."

Tasi's smile was tight. "Ah, well, it's our duty, is it not?"

Balfour reached up and touched her cheek. "The last Guardian." And his hand dropped.

Balfour died.

Silence filled the clearing for several minutes and no one spoke as Tasi gazed down into the lifeless face of her leader and friend. Her face was expressionless.

Finally she moved, pressing down lightly upon the topaz in Balfour's forehead. Light flared, spilling out into the air, flaring brighter as she closed her eyes, tilting her head back, and light swept up her arm and outward as Balfour's body suddenly changed to topaz ashes, filtering over her legs and onto the ground. A wind from nowhere sprang up and his ashes swirled upward until they disappeared into the sky.

Without a word Tasi stood and strode over to a dead soldier. Kneeling down, she pressed down lightly on his *kyrat* and the same thing happened, only his light and ashes were red. From soldier to soldier she went, whether they were dead or simply unconscious, repeating the process until finally she stood alone amongst the blood-stained grass.

Slowly she lifted her head and the traders looked at her.

The last Guardian standing.

~ * ~

Sitting on his throne in the Ruling Room, the High Emperor was caught off-guard by the flare from the *kyrats* in the glass case. Pure gold light lit the room, and the multi-faceted *kyrat* above the topaz ones shimmered with multi-colours, sending out a sparkle of colour amidst the gold.

Quickly he covered his eyes, his soldiers turning away to shield themselves from the brilliance. Several of them cursed, but most showed fear.

The light stopped suddenly, the *kyrats* returning to their dullness.

Slowly the High Emperor stood and crossed to the glass case. Staring up at them, he fisted his hands and swore.

The power was shifting.

He wanted that power.

He needed the surviving Guardians.

Whirling, he snarled to the Major of the New Guard, “Find those bloody Guardians *now*! Defeat this time will be met with death!”

~ * ~

The trip back to the trading ship was done in silence. There were no soldiers to stop them and the traders made good time.

Tasi’s head throbbed. She could feel the heaviness, the energy of the power source sitting in her *kyrat*, and she was grateful for Heddam’s supporting arm around her waist, his hold secure as they raced through the forest.

She sensed the mutant before they’d even cleared the forest and she knew it awaited her. As they came out into the clearing, she saw a blonde-haired man talking to Simon, but it was the pretty, brown-haired woman watching her approach that took her attention.

The discs landed and the traders and Tasi stepped off them.

The brown-haired woman waited, her brown eyes rimmed with red. The mutant was lurking below the surface, attracted by the energy.

Tasi inclined her head.

Heddam was right behind Tasi. “Elyse? Shaque? What are you two doing here?”

“I’m here to see the Guardian.” Beneath the husky tones of Elyse’s voice growled the mutant.

Almost immediately Tasi felt a stiffening behind her, and thinking he was afraid of the mutant she could see lurking behind the brown eyes of the woman, Tasi looked over her shoulder to reassure him, only to find him still regarding Elyse with friendly eyes, though wariness was also evident.

A swift glance showed that none of the traders feared Elyse, but they were wary.

The only one not wary was the blonde-haired man with the classically handsome face, his winter eyes assessing Tasi coldly. Instinctively Tasi knew this deadly male was Elyse’s partner. They were well matched.

Both were dangerous.

“I need to talk to you,” Elyse stated.

Tasi nodded.

Elyse gestured towards the smaller ship. “Come.”

Heddham caught Tasi’s arm, his gaze worried as they switched from Tasi to Elyse. “I don’t think ’tis wise, lass.”

Elyse merely waited.

The blonde-haired man looked coldly at Heddham, but remained silent.

“I’ll be back.” Tasi gave his hand a small squeeze.

Following Elyse into the ship, she was more than aware of the curious gazes of the traders. She wondered who the blonde man was but she didn’t ponder for long, not when she could feel the intensity of Elyse’s mutant simmering below the surface. Not when her head was pounding.

Coming out into a small corridor, Elyse turned to face Tasi, her face calm even as the mutant lurked beneath. “You shouldn’t have dragged the Daamens into this.”

“I didn’t exactly get a choice,” Tasi replied.

The red rims around Elyse’s eyes widened, her voice deepening. “You could get them killed.”

“I’m well aware of that. I’ve told them.” Tasi balanced her weight evenly on her widened stance. “I tried to make them leave. I tried to make them let me go alone. I tried.”

“You could have gotten away.”

“Only by hurting them.”

The mutant almost came roaring to the surface, her eyes bleeding red, but Elyse didn’t move. The threat was in the very air around them. “You hurt just one of those traders, Guardian, and I will kill you myself.”

The energy in her *kyrat* crackled. Keeping a cool head was imperative. “It’s not my intention to hurt them, Elyse. Before I couldn’t get away without hurting them, but now I can escape with no harm to them.”

Elyse scrutinized her, the stillness around her almost otherworldly. “They saw something.”

“They did.”

“What do they know?”

“Only as much as you sense.” Tasi looked her directly in the eyes. “I know the power calls to your mutant, but I also know you control your mutant.”

“The Daamens are my friends, Guardian, and you’re leading them into danger.”

“I will be getting away from them.”

Elyse stared into her eyes, the mutant crawling below the surface. “They know where you come from.”

“By the time they find out what happened, I’ll be long gone.”

“I’ve seen that look in Heddham’s eyes. He will follow you to the ends of the universe now.”

“It’ll be too late.” *Because I am going to hurt Heddham and break my own heart in the process.*

A quietness settled in the corridor as the two women took the measure of each other. The *kyrat* glowed softly, reflecting the redness of Elyse’s eyes. Slowly the full red faded until it was once again only a thin rim around Elyse’s irises.

“You have chosen,” she said quietly.

“The choice was made a long time ago.” And it hurt.

Elyse gazed at the *kyrat* for several seconds before dropping her gaze to look Tasi in the eyes with new knowledge. “I’m sorry.”

Tasi shrugged. There wasn’t anything to say. Turning, she started back down the corridor.

“Guardian.”

She stopped but didn't look back. "Yes?"

"You know your duty, yet you veered from your path. Why?"

"How would you know what my duty is?"

"Nothing stands between a Guardian and his or her duty. You let the trader stand between you."

Tasi took a deep breath. The energy in her *kyrat* throbbed. "Maybe I just used him."

"No." The denial was calm.

No. Rolling her head on her shoulders, Tasi took a deep breath. "Some things are not for you to know." She started forward once more.

"Love," Elyse said, her quiet voice seeming to echo in the ship. "Love gets between a lot of things."

Not anymore.

~ * ~

Yaltan watched Miness. Since her time in the High Emperor's bedroom, she hadn't been the same. Pale, ill-looking, she sat at the end of the table. When she looked up at him, her eyes were shadowed. Her *kyrat* was dull.

The High Emperor, on the other hand, looked almost red with fury. *And fear?* Yaltan sipped from the goblet and debated what to tell him. At this stage it could be met with an anger that didn't bode well for the bearer of bad news.

"Yaltan." The High Emperor slammed his goblet down.

Too late now. "Yes?"

"What news do the children carry?"

"There are rumours of rebellion—"

"Tell me something new, damn it!"

"The Third Way—"

“Third Way? Third Way? There’s only one way and that’s my way! The New Way!” Slamming his fist onto the table, the High Emperor leaned forward and stabbed a finger in Yaltan’s direction. “Get me names, Yaltan, not rumours! I’ll clean Aora of all Ways except the New Way! No one is going to thwart me now!” Throwing his goblet across the room, he didn’t wait for it to smash against the wall before he was up on his feet. “Get me names, Yaltan, or your head will join those on the pikes lining the wall!”

Yaltan watched him leave with pursed lips. When the door slammed shut behind him, he looked at Miness. “Well, that went as well as I expected—bloody awful.”

She picked listlessly at her plate of food. “Be careful of him, Yaltan.”

“My dear, I’m always careful of those in power.” He picked up a piece of apple and took a bite from it. “Now whatever is the matter with you?”

Pushing the plate away, she picked up her goblet with hands that trembled. “Be careful, Yaltan, that’s all I’m saying.”

“Come, we’ve known each other forever, since we were children. What bothers you?”

She looked up at him. “You don’t want to know.” Getting up from the table, she left the room, walking like a woman much older.

Yaltan took another bite of apple. “Pooh,” he said to the empty room. “I actually *did* want to know.”

~ * ~

It was almost time. It could feel it. One died and one lived. The last one standing was all that stood between it and its destiny. The last one standing was the only one who stood between it and Aora.

~ * ~

Standing in the solitude cabin, Tasi gazed out at the settlement. The external lights were on to stem the darkness beyond. It was a small settlement and she’d chosen it deliberately.

It was almost time. She only had to do this last thing and then it would be ended for the traders.

For Heddam.

Swallowing the lump in her throat, she straightened her shoulders and allowed some peace to slip through her from the *kyrat*.

A shadow appeared in the reflection of the space shield and she watched as Heddam walked inside. Without hesitation he strode across to her, his handsome face cast in shadows as she hadn't turned on the light.

"You stand in the darkness," he said softly as he came to a stop just behind her, his gaze finding hers in the reflection from the space shield.

"The darkness can be kind," she replied.

His big hands settled on her shoulders and he bent down so his mouth brushed her ear. "Are you all right?"

"Fine." *No*.

Heddam dropped a light kiss on her neck just below her ear before he wrapped his arms around the front of her shoulders and drew her back against him, resting his chin on top of her head as he kept his gaze on her face in the reflection of the space shield. "You didn't eat tonight."

"I'm not hungry."

"Worried about tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow I'll know a bit more of what is happening." Keeping a tight hold on her emotions she focussed on her duty. "Are you sure you won't reconsider—"

"Lass, you are going nowhere without me, so 'tis no use talking about it anymore."

"I thought so."

"So," he said quietly. "What happened out in the forest?"

"You saw. And that much you shouldn't have seen anyway."

"You're not going to tell me."

Tasi sighed. "Heddam, what you all saw was forbidden. The only reason you saw it was because..."

“Because you wouldn’t hurt us to stop us coming with you.”

“I’d have had to fight you physically and I couldn’t do it.”

“You don’t sound very happy about it.”

“I’m not. I’m a Guardian and along with that comes certain responsibilities. One of them was stopping you from seeing even the little that you saw. I failed.”

“Because you wouldn’t hurt us.”

“We’re going around in circles again.”

He nuzzled the top of her head before dropping a kiss in her hair. “Lass, ’tis glad I am that you wouldn’t hurt us. And I’m telling you now, only hurting me and rendering me unable to walk would have stopped me going with you anyway.”

Tasi looked at his reflection, seeing the warmth in his eyes.

“So how much will us accompanying you damage your standing as a Guardian?”

“Would it stop you coming?”

“You’re facing certain death, so nay, it won’t stop me. Your being alive is worth more to me than your reputation.”

“Even though it’s important to me.”

“Tasi...” Heddam sighed and released her, his arms slipping from her. Turning, he sat down on the ledge and reached out to take her hand, his thumb caressing the back of her hand tenderly. “If you can’t tell me what is happening, I can’t make decisions based on guess work.”

“I can’t tell you.”

“And I won’t let you walk into danger without me. So where does that leave us?”

She smiled, ignoring the tug on her heart. “It leaves you lucky that I have a plan that will keep us all safe.”

“Really? ’Tis what?”

“I’ll tell you when I’ve got it sorted out in my mind.” She touched her forehead. “It’s just taking me a little longer than normal.”

Reaching out, Heddham slid his finger under her eyes. “You’re tired.”

“It’s a little tiring. I think I’ll go to sleep, rest up for tomorrow.”

Heddham gazed at her searchingly. “I don’t know what really happened out there, but lass, you’re not suffering, are you? You’re not in pain?”

Not the kind you’re thinking of. “No. Just tired. A good sleep and I’ll be ready to face anything.”

Straightening, Heddham slid his arm around her waist. “Let’s get you to bed then.”

She allowed him to lead her back down to the sleeping cabins. Almost everyone was already asleep, the only light that from the dining cabin where Shamon and Aamun’s voices sounded quietly.

At her cabin, he hesitated and then shook his head. “I was going to take you to my bunk, but lass, if you were in my arms, I’d not be able to stop myself making love to you. And you’re too tired for that.” Leaning down, he brushed a kiss on her lips.

It deepened quickly, his arms enfolding her, lifting her up to lay against his chest as he ravished her mouth.

By the time he lifted his mouth from hers, Tasi was breathing raggedly.

Placing her on her feet, Heddham turned her around and gave her a little push. “Goodnight, sweet lass. Call me if you need me.” Another kiss, this time a quick one on her head, and Heddham was striding away to his own cabin.

Hand to her mouth, Tasi crossed to her bunk and sat down. For several seconds she stared down at the floor and fought the burn in her eyes.

Now was not the time for tears. Now was not the time to forget who she was. She had a job to do. A duty she was born and trained for and one she was going to see through to the end.

Her *kyrat* pulsed a warm trickle through her senses and she relaxed. Turning out the light, she lay back down on the bunk and waited.

By the time two hours had passed, all the traders were sleeping in their cabins. Now was the time.

Getting up, she walked silently to Heddam's cabin. He was the one who was the most danger to her. If he changed his mind and came to check on her, he might give the alarm. Heddam was the one she would deal with first.

Entering his cabin, she moved silently across to his bunk and bent over him.

In slumber he still retained that roguish handsomeness, only relaxed, a little boyish almost.

His eyes opened sleepily. "Tasi?"

"It's all right, my love." Leaning down, she pressed her lips to his.

His mouth was soft, his wits still slightly addled with sleep, his arms reaching for her even as he started to wake. "Lass, what—"

"I'm sorry, Heddam." She laid her hand on his brow.

His eyes widened, but before he could even open his mouth she felt the energy flow through her and into his conscious.

"I do love you," she whispered shakily as he fell back against the pillow. "This is the only way to keep you safe. Forgive me."

He fought the sleep pulling him down deeper and deeper, but she felt the resistance give beneath the power that sapped his energy. Within seconds he was still on the bunk, his big chest rising and falling in deep, even breaths.

Straightening up, she drew a ragged breath. The path was set a long time ago and now she was the only one left to walk it.

Quietly going from cabin to cabin, she sent the unaware Daamens into deeper sleep. When she finished, she walked into the control cabin and looked at the console. She could burn the electronics right out, but that would simply cost them financially. No, what she wanted was to ensure that their security system was up and running.

"You traders will be sleeping for the next twenty-four hours," she murmured as she checked the security shield. "I'm going to ensure no one enters and hurts you all while you sleep. Twenty-four hours extra is all I need."

Leaving the trade ship, she watched only long enough for the ramp to lock back into place behind her, sealing the ship securely, and then she walked to the little space ship on the other side of the docking bay. It was a two person planet cruiser only, nothing more, but it was all she needed.

Placing her hand against the hull, she watched as a sliver of energy entered the metal and disappeared. The space shield on top slid open and she stepped up on the wing and swung into the front seat. The shield snapped closed above her.

After strapping herself into the seat, she looked at the controls and laid her hand on the console, watching as the control lights sprang to life immediately. The engine gave a whooshing noise, unaccustomed to the speed with which it was started. Strapping herself in, Tasi focussed on the black sky above her while the planet cruiser lifted and took off at lightning speed, leaving the planet behind in seconds, speeding through space at such a rate the stars were nothing but a blur.

Her *kyrat* glowed brilliantly as she leaned back in the seat and allowed the energy source to guide the cruiser.

Soon, she would be home

The Guardian was returning... and leaving her heart behind.

Closing her eyes, she felt the warmth from her *kyrat* seep through her, the steady pulse of the power embracing her, and felt the same compulsion she'd given to the traders push her gently down into sleep.

Gladly, she gave herself up to it.

~ * ~

The AMC looked down at the radar and frowned. Something had been approaching but it had vanished off the screen. Flicking switches, he tried to get a link but there was nothing.

“Replay the radar recording,” the AMS ordered.

The recording showed a light, and sure enough it disappeared miles from Aora. Frowning, she studied the radar. It was odd. There was no indication on any of the scanners of a meteor explosion or anything else.

“Lock into the central computer at the palace military, see if you can get any readings,” she finally said.

The AMC tapped the screen, typing in the military code along with his personal code. The readings came back clear.

“Nothing recorded, AMS” he said.

Could it be? Arms folded, she stared at the radar. Maybe it was just a coincidence, maybe...

The AMC awaited her next orders.

Finally she said, “Did you get a general idea of the direction this light was heading for?”

He nodded and showed her.

“Well, well, well.” She chewed her bottom lip thoughtfully for several seconds, before saying, “Head in the same direction it appeared to be heading and put a block on our presence. I don’t want anyone finding out about us. I want to catch whoever it is by surprise.” Watching the ACM start keying in co-ordinates, she shook her head mentally. *I don’t like surprises.*

And she certainly didn’t want to get on the bad side of the High Emperor.

~ * ~

Tasi watched the desert skim along under the planet cruiser. No dust arose to give away her presence. The energy source sped the cruiser along, heading in the direction it wanted her to take.

Rock and sand as far as the eye could see. The desert had never been her favourite place, especially during training sessions when the sand got into her hair and ears and eyes and clothes, and just made her itch. Of course, they had been fighting and rolling in the sand, but still, it didn’t leave her with fond memories.

Sad memories, though, yes. The men and women she’d trained with were now dead.

Taking a deep breath, Tasi refocussed on the task at hand.

The cruiser swept up a rocky embankment and she straightened. Recognition niggled at the back of her mind. She’d been here before, obviously during training. It seemed this was her destination.

The cruiser dropped to hover directly before a cave. From seemingly nowhere soldiers appeared, their red *kyrats* glowing, their lasers trained on the planet cruiser. Around the upper arms of their khaki jackets each wore a multi-coloured band.

The sign of soldiers still loyal to the old High Empress. This was the pocket of soldiers hiding in the desert.

“Not that I expected you to dump me in the middle of the New Ways followers,” Tasi murmured as the shield slid back. “That’d kind of defeat the purpose right now.”

Swinging herself up, she nevertheless remained alert as she came out onto the wing of the planet cruiser. Her gaze searched the faces and no alarm bells rang inside her. These were the loyal soldiers. She recognized some of them from fighting beside the Guardians as the New Way soldiers stormed the palace.

“Guardian.” Relief and worry combined filled the features of a craggy-faced man who stepped forward, his rank of Aora Military Lieutenant on his collar.

“AML,” she greeted him as she jumped down from the wing of the planet cruiser.

“Should you be here?” He added quickly, “We’re so glad to see you, but it’s incredibly dangerous for you.”

The grim gazes of the soldiers were on her, but she saw the same relief and worry reflected in their eyes. She was glad to be among them, suddenly feeling at home even if it was in a desert with a fight looming.

Tasi grinned at them all. “Come now, anyone would think you were all upset that I’d returned. I know I’m happy to be back.”

The soldiers grinned back at her, their grimness relaxing a little.

“We’re happier than you could imagine.” The AML smiled slightly at her. “Plus we knew the Guardians would return one day soon.”

“Hoped, more like,” she replied dryly.

“No, Guardian, we knew,” a new voice said, and a tall, dark-skinned woman with silver hair stepped forward, the soldiers making way for her. Her *kyrat* shone white.

Tasi stared for a few seconds then with a shout of “Melan!” she ran forward and embraced the old High Empress’s handmaiden. “I thought you’d died back in the palace!”

Melan hugged her in powerful arms. “No, child. I slipped away when I saw the High Empress escape with her Guardians. I knew I needed to be free for this day.”

“We wanted to come back and look for you, but—”

“You had a duty,” Melan said calmly. Holding Tasi’s upper arms, she pushed her back and scrutinized her. “And you are the last Guardian.”

The soldiers fell silent, waiting for confirmation.

“Balfour was the last to die,” Tasi said quietly, some of her happiness at seeing the soldiers and Melan fading. “Yes, I am the last one left.”

“I am so sorry.” Melan looked up at Tasi’s *kyrat* knowingly.

“And I am ready,” Tasi added.

The AML stepped forward. “It is time?”

“Oh, yes.” Turning to face him, Tasi said, “First, I need to know what is happening.”

The AML nodded and turned to his soldiers. “Back to your positions. AMS, hide this cruiser with the others.”

The Aora Military Sergeant nodded and swung up easily onto the wing of the planet cruiser.

“You have transport and weapons?” Tasi queried.

“We do. Slowly but surely we’ve been amassing war equipment.”

“Enough to attack?”

“Enough to create a diversion for a short time. The new High Emperor has a powerful following.”

Walking beside him, Tasi followed Melan into the cave. “What of those loyal to the Old Way? How many survived?”

“Many of the citizens survived. Some were killed in the fight, but most of the attack was concentrated on the palace and military barracks. The new High Emperor knew the threat was from the inside and it was us he tried to wipe out. He knew he needed citizens to continue his reign.” The AML spoke without expression. “He seeks to convert the citizens.”

“How many have been converted already?”

“There’s no way to be sure. They listen to him and go about their business. Some citizens speak openly of their approval of the New Way, others remain silent.” He glanced sideways at her. “Survival often depends on keeping a closed mouth on the subject at hand.”

“Of course.”

Tasi glanced around as they came out of the tunnel into a huge cavern. The sides of the cave had stone ledges that had been helped by Aora soldiers’ hands to become useful for holding plates, cooking pots and other assorted goods. Dried food was stored in huge containers. Water trickled down from a hole in the wall, gathered in a small pool and disappeared into the bottom of the wall. The cavern had a good, natural water supply.

Tunnels led off the main cavern.

The AML saw her glance around. “Several of the tunnels lead to smaller caverns where we have weapons stored. Other caverns are where we sleep. All tunnels leading outside are hidden with brush and rocks, and guarded night and day.”

“You have a good set-up here. Lucky you found it.”

“One of the Guardians told me of this place the day of the attack in case we needed it. It took a bit of work to find those soldiers from surrounding towns loyal to the Old Way who were in hiding after the attack, but we managed it.” He sighed. “Many good soldiers were killed, Guardian. Only a trickle from different places survived, but once amassed here, we have a good size troop.”

“Many good people died.” She looked around. “No civilians came with you?”

“Only the immediate families of the soldiers. It was too dangerous for them to stay behind. The other civilians are safe enough as long as they don’t speak out against the New Way.” The AML poured two mugs of hot beer from the pot simmering over the fire, and handed one to Tasi. Gesturing to two stumps that sat

nearby, he continued as they sat down, “We thought about going under cover and trying to get out those we could, but it was deemed too dangerous. We don’t really know who is loyal and who isn’t. There have been mutterings when the new High Emperor speaks, but no outright abuse. He needs to win the people over, so he’s treading carefully with them. We don’t have the resources to look after everyone out here,” he added grimly. “And not knowing who of the civilians may be traitors would jeopardise everyone here already.”

“Good point.” Tasi sipped the hot, sweet brew and sighed blissfully. “Ahhh. I’ve missed this. No one has this beas outside of this planet.”

“Torturous,” the AML said straight-faced, a twinkle appearing briefly in his hard eyes.

“Very.” She sipped again.

His gaze scrutinized her once more. “You are tired.”

“No. I slept all the way here.” *But my head is aching, not that anyone needs to know that. All part of the whole process.*

“Ah.” His gaze went to her *kyrat*. “Of course.”

Tasi looked up as Melan stepped into the cavern from a side tunnel. The handmaiden met her gaze expectantly.

“Is he here?” Tasi asked quietly.

“Yes. But he is not ready, not yet.” Melan poured a mug of beas and sat down on another stump facing Tasi. “It will be you who will see this carried through. He is not ready to bear the power.”

“Right.” She stared into the flames. For a brief second doubts clouded her mind. *Can I really do this? What if I fail my people? What if this all goes to hell in a hand basket?* Catching sight of the AML and Melan watching her, Tasi brutally shoved her thoughts aside. “Then we need to start planning. AML, do we have inside contacts?”

He smiled slowly, his eyes taking on an eager light for the first time since she’d seen him. “Oh yes, we surely do. That’s how we have inside information.”

“How do you get that information?”

“A couple of our younger soldiers go into the city and meet with their sweethearts.”

Tasi looked at him. “I thought the families came with you?”

“These sweethearts aren’t exactly family.” He swirled the beer in his mug. “They live in the city with their own families.”

“Are you sure they’re loyal to the Old Way?”

“Yes. Through watching and spying for a couple of months without the soldiers’ sweethearts knowing, we were able to ensure that they and their families were loyal to the Old Way. The information we get from them isn’t a lot, but it’s enough to let us know how things are going on in the city. And some military information we’re getting from a few soldiers working with the New Guard, but who remain loyal to the Old Way. These soldiers haven’t been able to tell us a lot, they have to be careful, but through them we’ve been able to get some weapons and transport. And don’t worry, we’ve spied on them for several months as well. They don’t know where we’re hiding, that’s remained a security secret.”

“Good. If we launch an attack we still have to keep this silent from the contacts.” Tasi thoughtfully rubbed her chin. “Though inside contacts can get us into the palace without the New Guard knowing.”

“The tunnels have been destroyed,” the AML informed her. “New ones might have been made, but I’ve not heard anything about them if they do exist.”

Feeling a warmth in her palm, Tasi turned her hand over and saw the multi glow beneath her skin in the middle of her palm. “So tunnels are out, but that’s okay. We’ll figure out something else. Now tell me how many soldiers we have, show me the weapons and transport, and then we need to get a small group together to scout out the palace and city.”

Two hours later, the AML left Tasi to inform his men of the plans. Returning to the main cavern, she found Melan waiting for her.

“You have yet to meet him,” Melan stated quietly.

“He is awake?”

“No, he sleeps still. As I said, he’s not ready yet.”

Nodding, Tasi moved forward. “Take me to him. It has been remiss of me.”

“You’ve been busy.” Linking her arm through Tasi’s, Melan led her through a side tunnel that wove deep into the mountain. “He would understand that you do this for us all.”

The tunnel ended in a small cave. Two cots were in the room, one for Melan, Tasi knew, and one for him.

The chosen one.

Crossing to the cot where he lay sleeping, Tasi gazed down upon him. Hair as golden as sunshine, skin as smooth and pale as milk. Beneath the thick covers she could still see that he was thin, but his arms showed the corded muscle already there, the promise of breadth to come.

Innocent now, his strength building. But not ready yet.

“Do not fear,” she said softly. “I will do my duty as your Guardian.”

The warmth in her *kyrat* flooded through her, almost a heat that didn’t burn but sought something with intensity.

It caught her by surprise, bringing her to her knees beside the cot. Without conscious thought she reached out and touched his forehead, and the flicker of heat swept down her arm, her *kyrat* glowing brilliantly in the cave.

A splintering of multi-colours sparkled before her eyes, dimming her vision for several seconds, and she felt something tear from inside her, a harsh ripping that had her gasping in pain. She couldn’t move, the splintering of multi-colours now tearing through her vision, through her head, deep into her, swirling into her *kyrat*.

She didn’t fight it. This was part of her duty, this was what the Guardians were trained to do.

The multi-colours circled wildly inside her, the topaz of her *kyrat* sending a mixed rainbow of light throughout the cave.

In a ball of hot colour, the multi-coloured light was forced from her *kyrat* to slam into the forehead of the sleeping male. He arched up in the bed, his body twisting under the onslaught as the multi-colours burned into his forehead.

Suddenly his hands came out and clamped either side of her face, his eyes opened and an intense green gaze bored into her, seeming to see her right down to her very soul.

She saw them then, scattered over the country, but there, each one hidden, each so young. The future Guardians of the chosen one, but too young and vulnerable, untrained. They had to be kept safe.

He closed his eyes, his hands fell away, and he was unconscious, the vision fading with him. In the middle of his once smooth forehead was a black *kyrat*.

Slumping back on her heels, Tasi leaned one elbow on the cot and sucked in deep breaths, fighting the dizziness that made black dots dance before her eyes.

A hand came down onto her shoulder. "Are you all right, Guardian?"

"Yeah. I'm fine." She looked at the tear-drop shaped black *kyrat* now embedded in his forehead.

"It is not his time yet," Melan repeated.

"No." Getting to her feet, Tasi rolled her head and eased a kink from her shoulder. "And until then, I am his Guardian." Melan looked soberly at her and Tasi knew what she was thinking. "It's what I have to do."

"I know. I just wish..." Melan glanced away, and when she looked back tears glittered in her eyes. "I just wish there was an easier way."

"Sheesh, let's not get soppy about it." Tasi pasted a teasing smile on her face.

Taking her cue from her, Melan smiled back. "Stars forbid I get soppy over a Guardian with her duty to face and a war to wage."

"Wow." Tasi wrinkled her nose at her. "All before dinner?"

"Oh, I think we can let you eat and sleep first."

"Gosh, thanks."

The moon was high in the sky when Tasi saw the battle cruiser flying in the distance. Seated on an outcrop of rock but sheltered by the overhang of rock shelf above, she watched as it wheeled before disappearing into the black night. Long after it vanished, she stared in its direction.

The night sky was filled with stars, and the moonlight picked out shadows from the rock and sand that made the desert. All was silent, not a murmur could be heard.

She wondered what Heddham was doing. He'd be awake now, and he wouldn't be happy. Would he hate her? Yell, scream, swear? Curse? She had no doubt he would feel betrayed.

"Sorry," she whispered. "But you can't be a part of this. I don't want you to see me doing what I will do."

Thinking of what she had to do was something from which she didn't shy.

Thinking of Heddham and feeling his loss keenly was something she wasn't ready for, and she wasn't prepared for the shimmer of tears that blurred her vision. Blinking them back rapidly, she rolled her head on her neck and drew in a deep breath.

This was not the time to get teary. And it certainly wasn't the time to get side-tracked by memories of a big, handsome trader with a deep laugh, a gentle touch, and a sensual side that made her squirm at just the memory.

When she went to bed an hour later, she didn't dream.

Her *kyrat* flickered off and on during the night, alternating between bright and dull.

~ * ~

The time was almost upon it. It moved, stretched, looked out. But not yet. The Guardian slept, needing strength.

Filtering through the cavern, it slid through the shadows and entered the room where he slept.

*The black *kyrat* flared briefly, but it wasn't ready. It had no source apart from what the Guardian had given it.*

It looked briefly at the dark-skinned woman sleeping in the other cot, guarding the slumbering male in her own way, the way she'd done for so many months now.

*Whirling away, it swirled through the tunnels, flowing over the sleeping soldiers and their families. The *kyrats* of the sleeping soldiers flared redly before dimming once more to the normal glow.*

Then it returned home, curling up in safety.

Waiting.

It had things to do first.

Waiting.

It had energy to burn.

Soon.

It could feel the emotions in the night.

Soon.

Everything had to be brought together.

Soon.

So very soon.

Nine

When Heddam awoke it had been almost instantaneous. One second asleep, the next sitting bolt upright in the bunk and looking directly into Elyse's calm eyes.

He remembered immediately what had happened. *A hand on his forehead. "I do love you." A shaky whisper. "This is the only way to keep you safe. Forgive me." Then a darkness that had sucked him under.* He'd slept without dreaming.

"Tasi! He threw back the covers, uncaring that he was naked.

Elyse didn't even blink. Instead, she threw his pants at him. "She's gone."

Hurriedly yanking on his pants, he left the cabin. *Tasi was gone. She couldn't be! She wouldn't have tricked him, she wouldn't have!* But even as he ran from the cabin, he knew it was true. There was a silence in the ship that didn't bode well.

Shaque stood in the doorway of the dining cabin, a mug of steaming una in one hand, his winter gaze steady. "She's gone."

"Have you checked everywhere? Have you—"

"Of course." Elyse strode down the corridor. "She's been gone for twenty-four hours."

"Twenty-four hours?" Shocked, Heddam swung around to face her. "She can't have been gone that long! She—"

"She did something to send you all to sleep," Elyse returned calmly. "I checked the control panel and she set the security shield twelve hours before Shaque and I arrived. A recording from your cameras show her leaving and getting into a planet cruiser. The Guardian is long gone, trader."

For Elyse it was a long sentence but Heddham didn't marvel. Right now he was worried about Tasi's safety.

Worried and getting angry.

Hearing his friends stir in their cabins, he looked down at Elyse. "She sent all of us to sleep?"

"Yes."

"And she left."

"It's all on the recording."

Heddham swung around and hurried to the end of the corridor. Ignoring the platform lift, he pounded down the stairwell, taking the steps three at a time. Once in the control cabin he keyed in the camera recordings and sure enough, there was Tasi leaving the ship and crossing the docking bay in the dark to get into a planet cruiser. It took off faster than he'd ever see a cruiser fly.

The time on the bottom of the viscomm pronounced it true. She'd left just over twenty-four hours ago.

Heart in mouth, he keyed in to reports, but there was nothing to say she'd been caught.

"What the hell happened?" Simon came into the cabin, rubbing his eyes. "Why are Elyse and Shaque on board, and why do they say we've been sleeping for twenty-four hours?"

"Because we have been." Straightening, Heddham looked at Simon. "Tasi did something to us, made us sleep, and while we slept she took off." *And left me.*

He felt so betrayed, so hurt. He wanted to yell, break something, hit someone... Find Tasi and shake her, hold her tight and never let her go. So many emotions spiralled through him, his thoughts scattering in different directions.

Simon squinted down at the console. "The security shield is up. Why would Elyse have bothered to have them put up now?"

"Because they were up when we arrived," she drawled from behind him.

They looked over to where she was leaning against the doorframe.

“When Tasi took off, she made sure you were all safe until you woke up.”

“She raised the security shield?” Simon queried.

Elyse nodded but her gaze was on Heddam.

She’d left. Tasi had gone out on her own. *Hell, after what I’ve seen her do, it would take a lot to bring that lass down. But she can still be killed. I can’t allow it. I won’t.*

He blinked, bringing Elyse’s face back into focus.

“Don’t,” she said.

“I’m going after her.”

“You don’t know where she’s gone.”

“Aora.” Turning back to the viscomm, Heddam brought up the galaxy map and brought the planet into view. “And I’m going after her.”

“You’ll get yourself killed.”

“She’s going to get herself killed.”

“Risking her life is her job.”

Angrily, Heddam swung back to face her. She regarded him without fear and he noted the rim of red around her irises. The mutant was lurking beneath the surface. It didn’t faze him. “I love her.”

“You don’t know what you’re getting into.”

“I’m sick of hearing that, Elyse!” He glared at her. “Damn it, if you know something, tell me! Then I’ll know what I’m bloody getting into!”

She looked at him for the longest time. Heddam could count the seconds ticking past.

“Please, Elyse,” he said. “Whether you tell me or not, I’m going after her. Nothing is going to stop me.”

The red rimming her irises spread.

Shaque appeared behind her in his usual, silent way, his hand coming to rest upon her shoulder while his winter eyes gazed coldly at Heddham. Bending his head, he whispered something in her ear. The red rims bled further into her eyes until almost a full red eclipsed her irises. Shaque continued to whisper, his hand smoothing over her shoulder.

The mutant and the ex-bounty hunter. Seeing them together still gave Heddham the jeebies. It wasn't that long ago that their destiny was to kill each other, and now... now the spooky pair loved each other, and only Shaque seemed to be able to control Elyse's mutant when she chose not to, or when something pushed her over the edge.

Shaque was bringing her under control now, whatever he was whispering making the red bleed back until only the thin rim appeared around her brown irises again. When he stopped speaking she looked sideways at his hand on her shoulder.

Not one expression of tenderness crossed Shaque's classically handsome features, but the way he stood behind her bespoke of his utter commitment to her.

Under normal circumstances, Heddham would have enjoyed seeing the unusual sight, but right now he was only interested in Tasi.

Tasi who was going to get her bloody self killed if no one was there to watch her back. He needed to be there to watch her back. If he only knew exactly where she was and what she was planning.

Elyse knew something. A muscle jumped in his tightly clenched jaw. "Tell me what you know."

Her pretty face was blank. "What do *you* know?"

She was going to tell him something. Relief almost made him sag into the chair, but he maintained his stance. "She's a Guardian and she is obviously a threat to the throne. She has a duty of some kind. She means to return to Aora."

Elyse's gaze was steady. "She's the last remaining Guardian with any chance to get the throne of Aora back to the rightful ruler. She will fight to victory or death, depending which comes first, to deliver that which she carries."

Heddham suspected as much. But there was more, there had to be more. "What else?"

"Heddham, she doesn't want you following her."

“She doesn’t get a choice in this. My place is by her side, through hell and high water. You and Shaque would do the same for each other. Allow me the same right with the wench I love.”

She looked at him for several seconds, before saying, “All right.” Leaving Shaque standing in the doorway, she crossed to the viscomm and started keying in commands, her fingers moving so fast that Heddham didn’t get a chance to see exactly what she was programming.

A face appeared on the viscomm. Hard, almost petulant. A man with a cloak of multi-colours against a black background around his shoulders.

“This is the new High Emperor,” Elyse said. “He took the throne from the rightful High Empress through blood and war. He wanted what he calls a New Way, and through several years of planning he finally staged a rebellion with those who served under him.”

“He was a soldier?” Simon queried.

“He wanted to be, but no. Notice his *kyrat* is white. All Aoras are born with a white *kyrat*, except for soldiers and Guardians. They’re born with the red *kyrat* for a soldier and a topaz *kyrat* for a Guardian. It marks them from birth as chosen for protecting others, and they serve proudly. Only the chosen is born without a *kyrat*.” Elyse’s fingers flew over the viscomm, and the pictures came and went as she spoke. “This traitor was in charge of organizing the soldiers into appropriate squads, ensuring the temperaments of the soldiers meshed well. In this way he was able to find out which of the soldiers would be able to be converted to his way of thinking.”

“But if they were proud to be soldiers, why convert?” Heddham asked.

“Because no one is infallible. If they can be convinced that the New Way was a better way, those weak enough will convert. He found those soldiers and he used them to stage a rebellion.”

“But the Guardians are strong. How come they folded under just a squad? And what of the other soldiers loyal to the throne?”

“There were ten squads of soldiers from different parts of Aora. Aora is comprised of many different cities scattered throughout the country. Five squads of twenty to a squad broke through into the palace through the hidden tunnels that some of the traitors knew of. The Guardians fought, but their main duty is to

protect the High Empress. There were twenty-one Guardians, and fifteen of them died that day protecting her and fighting side by side with the soldiers loyal to her. Many loyal soldiers also died, as did the traitorous soldiers. The fight was vicious. Many of the usual soldiers normally at the palace were off on patrols and training. You must understand, the attack was unexpected. No one knew anything.”

Heddam shook his head. “From what I saw—”

Elyse looked at him over her shoulder. “The power source is in the High Empress or High Emperor who rules. When their time comes to pass on, they grow weaker and so does the power source. There was no warning of anything because the power source was weak. Normally the power source would transfer to the next chosen one, but the attack was timed so well that there was no time for it. The chosen one wasn’t ready. The attack on the High Empress was well timed. The traitor knew the best time to strike.”

Shaue looked at Heddam coldly. “It wasn’t lack of duty, trader. It was simply that Aora has never had a rebellion in eight hundred years.”

“Stars,” Simon said.

That was a shock but it also explained something. “The Guardians and soldiers were trained to look for trouble from other planets, interlopers, not from inside.”

“That’s correct. It happened, though, and somehow, through everything thrown at them, the Guardians got the High Empress away long enough for the power source to be transferred somewhere safe. That’s what the Guardians were guarding—the power source—from all danger. It’s their duty.”

“Tis why the new High Emperor wants the surviving Guardians so badly.” Heddam looked at Simon. “He wants the power source they guard.”

“The power source that’s the heart and soul of every leader,” Elyse said. “The power source that keeps the peace, that seeks nothing more than the prosperity of the people. That keeps the Aora nation the success it’s always been. That’s how it’s survived without outside interference, kept pure. Because of the power source.” She flicked the viscomm blank with one press of a finger to the control and turned to face Heddam. “Tasi is the only Guardian left, and she guards the power source that will pass to the next rightful leader.”

Shock rocketed through Heddam. The memory of the golden flash that seared into Tasi from the *kyrat* on Balfour’s forehead.

“Oh, God,” he whispered. “She *carries* the power source.”

Elyse nodded. “And she’s going into battle. She’s going to lead the surviving soldiers loyal to the Old Way against the new High Emperor, and she’s going to reclaim the throne.”

“But if she has the power source, then surely she should be hiding until the time is right for the new leader to take it on?”

“This power source is everything to the Aoras. It’s been with them from the beginning of their time. It won’t take this betrayal well and it will seek its revenge. The new leader will not be ready to take on a battle for a while yet, but the power source needs to reclaim that which has been taken from it, and it needs someone strong enough to carry it.”

“So why didn’t it seek that revenge when carried by another Guardian? Why now?”

“Because it wasn’t strong enough then. It gained energy the longer it had time to heal. The deaths of the High Empress before time, the deaths of loyal soldiers and Guardians, sapped the energy. Now is the time, now it has the energy, and now it’s ready to reclaim its own. Then it will be safe for it to go to the rightful leader.”

Heddam shook his head. “It still doesn’t totally make sense, Elyse. I’m sorry if I’m stupid—”

“If you are, that makes two of us,” Simon interrupted. “I understand it’s a power source that has been depleted by betrayal and deaths of loyal subjects. I understand it wants revenge, but I still don’t see why it can’t wait for revenge, why it can’t wait for the rightful leader to take it on and deal with the battle. Why Tasi?”

Placing her hands on the console behind her, Elyse leaned back and crossed her ankles. Her eyes were grave. “Because now the power source burns with energy and the new leader cannot hope to control it or take it into himself or herself without being destroyed. The power source needs to spend the energy of so many deaths now, and without a strong enough leader only through the mental strength of a Guardian can it do so now. The power source is full and it will burn through a lesser person’s *kyrat*. Heddam, Tasi could die at any moment from that power consuming her own powers. Guardians are born with an inherent strength, a mind set to duty, and it’s this unwavering loyalty that attracts the power source. It’s why Guardians are what they are.”

Heddam blew out a deep breath, trying to understand the overwhelming information. “So the power source is now strong enough to destroy those that betrayed it. The new leader is not yet strong enough to contain it. A Guardian is born from birth with some kind of mental inner strength, and Tasi is the last Guardian, hence she now carries the power source. Through her, it will attack the traitors and seek revenge.” He swallowed. “And the power source could kill her.”

“It can burn out of control if she doesn’t contain it. She has to be able to direct the power.”

“Right. Right.” He rubbed his face tiredly. “God, why didn’t she tell me this herself?”

“It’s Guardian business, Aora business.” Elyse shrugged. “The battle won’t be pretty, Heddam.”

“War never is. People get hurt and die.” *Tasi could get hurt and die.*

“Tasi is going to do things she won’t want you to see.” The red rim in her eyes bled wide. “She’s going in as a destroyer.”

The silence grew in the cabin and the traders absorbed the information. Heddam’s heart was beating a hard rhythm as he tried to accept what he was hearing. *Tasi is going to do things she won’t want you to see. She’s going in as a destroyer.*

Heddam asked Elyse almost desperately, “How do you know all this? No one knows anything of the Aoras. No one, not even the IPC.”

“No?” Elyse replied. “Do you really know what Security does, where they go? What they do? How many covert operations are carried out that none in the Lawful Sector know about? What catastrophes are dealt with behind the scenes that enable the citizens of the Lawful Sector to go about their days without fear? Do you really think Sabra and Des don’t know what’s going out there, the threats, the horrors?” Her gaze slid to Simon. “Does your wife tell you everything?”

“Nay,” Simon replied calmly. “And I don’t ask.”

“And that’s why you and Cam can maintain such a balance of your lives with two Security officers.”

“So how do you know?” Heddam asked. “I can’t see Security sharing things with you and Shaque.”

A smile flirted around her mouth, and her eyes held a sudden glint of amusement. "Ask me no questions, trader, and I'll tell you no lies."

Nay, Elyse wouldn't reveal her sources. Heddham had a fair idea that her sources were people from sections he didn't want to know about. She herself, half mutant, with sources deep in the Outlaw Sector and suns knew where else. She could know things that would blow the minds of the unwary citizens of the Lawful Sector. And Shaque... he looked over at the cold, ex-bounty hunter. Shaque was loyal to his wife, he'd betray no confidence of hers and follow her into Hell without a qualm. He'd probably know things no one else would be privy to, and he probably didn't know a lot of things that Elyse knew, and knowing Shaque, it wouldn't worry him in the least. Though who really knew the spooky pair that well?

And now he and Simon knew what no one else did...apparently.

Almost as though she read his mind, Elyse said, "What you heard in this cabin stays between the four of us. I have wiped everything I showed you off your viscomm. Now wipe what I told you from your minds when you see your friends, when you leave this cabin. If word ever got out about the Aoras and their power source, their way of life, you leave them open to invaders. Say nothing." The last word came out as a low growl, and again her eyes nearly bled pure red. The mutant was closer to the surface.

Shaque stepped forward. "We need to be alone for a while."

"Wait." Heddham looked at Elyse. "Why is your mutant so volatile right now?"

"It is attracted to the power source." The words were low and grating. She moved across to stand beside Shaque. "It's under my control, don't fear." Those red eyes locked with his. "Before you make one move, you talk to me."

They left.

Simon turned to Heddham, a concerned look on his face. "Heddham, are you all right?"

"I don't know. Aye, I think so." Heddham ran a hand over his face. "I need a drink while I think about this. Hell, can you believe it?"

Simon looked at him seriously. "Mayhaps I should be asking if you believe it."

Heddham met his gaze and several seconds passed before he answered quietly, "Elyse wouldn't lie. Aye, 'tis true."

Aye, 'twas true. 'Twas why his sweet, laughing, happy little wench hadn't wanted him to go with her. She faced death in a war that was going to be vicious. And she was going to be the hand that dealt out the punishment.

His wench was the last Guardian standing.

His wench was the destroyer.

~ * ~

Miness moved down the alley, her movements almost painful. Her head still hurt from the mental ripping the High Emperor had subjected her to. He was a fool. Did he really think a commoner like him could tear the secrets from her? He might be able to do some mental probing, but she could hold her own against him when it came to mental shields.

It had cost her dearly though, her energy drained, her psych still hurting. To invade another's *kyrat* space was an invasion that was forbidden.

The bastard.

The only one who could truly invade another's *kyrat* space was the true High Emperor or Empress. He wasn't a true leader, and that he would even *dare* to think of doing it was abominable.

He had overstepped his mark.

His day was coming sooner than he thought.

~ * ~

The dawn was just on the horizon when the soldiers came back. Tasi was waiting for them.

"Report," the AML ordered as they entered the shelter of the cave.

"The imposter is screaming for the blood of the last of the Guardians." The AMC hesitated.

"What's wrong?"

He looked at Tasi. "I don't doubt you, Guardian, but word is that there are still two Guardians on the run, not one."

Tasi shook her head. “Acantha died and I was able to free her spirit and ash her body before the soldiers came. They don’t know she died.”

“It’s bad news for us, but good that they think there are still two Guardians living.” The AML turned back to the AMC. “Are they still searching off planet for the Guardians?”

“Yes.”

“So the soldiers are split.” The AML rubbed his hands briskly. “Good, good.”

“Nice to see someone so pleased,” Tasi said wryly.

“Nothing puts me in a better mood than knowing that the ranks have been thinned out.”

“You don’t think a little thing like rank numbers is going to stop us now, do you?”

“Every bit helps.” Resuming his serious demeanour, he gestured to the soldiers. “Get rested up, everyone, and then we’ll do the last of the plans.” Remembering himself, he blinked at her. “With your permission, of course.”

“Hey.” She held up both hands, palms forward. “Don’t let me dampen your enthusiasm. You’ve done a great job so far of holding everyone together. I’m just along for the ride.”

The soldiers, the AML and the AMC were all looking oddly at her hands. Turning them back around, she studied the throbbing black/gold pin points in the middle of her palms. They held heat, but it wasn’t burning.

Raising her gaze, she said, “Go rest. Tonight we talk.”

Melan came up behind her as the soldiers walked further inside for food and rest. Placing her hand on Tasi’s arm, she asked softly, “Are you all right?”

“Fine. I’m fine.” She smiled reassuringly at her.

Melan left and Tasi was alone.

She wasn’t all right. Her palms had heat and she could feel the restless energy in her *kyrat*, the splintering of power waiting to break free. It writhed, turning, sending multi-coloured sparks out in a sudden shower.

It burned and she stumbled. Almost immediately she slammed shut the mental shields she'd been trained to use. Trained but had never thought she'd have to use.

“Easy.” She took a deep breath, searching for a calming feeling, sending it along the mental thread until she hit the end of it where the black fire shot through with colours sparked. The thread was flickering with little flames. “Rest easy.”

The fire flared then simmered down when she gave a gasp of pain.

Shit, she'd have to do better than that with her mental shields. Tasi built them stronger, holding the fire back, and even as she felt a fissure of heat, she felt a comfortable touch on her thread, a little vein of warmth that didn't burn.

Moving to the opening of the cave, she saw the same battle cruiser she'd seen earlier fly over and she tracked it with her eyes. Friend or foe? Loyal or traitor?

Soon it wouldn't matter. The power source was building and it wanted out.

“Easy,” she murmured, more to herself than anything else.

Turning away from the opening, she caught a glimpse of grey eyes and brown hair, and started. A second look and she realised one of the soldiers was looking at her quizzically. Maybe because she was staring at him.

“Sorry.” She smiled. “You just reminded me of someone.”

Vaguely, but nevertheless it was enough. The soldier had brown hair and grey eyes, but the red glints in the hair were missing, the humour lurking in the grey eyes wasn't there, and he in no way matched the height and breadth of a certain Daamen trader.

Moving further into the tunnels until she came to the cave that acted as kitchen to the survivors of the rebellion, she poured a mug of beer and sat down to gaze into the flames of the fire.

Heddam. She could just about see him now—heck, she'd glimpsed him in that neat soldier who was nothing like the giant trader. A reminder, that was all. And that was all it took.

Her chest hurt and this time she knew where the pain came from. She rubbed the place where her heart beat. So this was what it felt like to love and leave someone.

Shit, it hurt. It wasn't good. Most times she managed to keep him from her thoughts, but now she let herself have free rein. No one was in the cave, so she indulged herself just a little.

She wondered what he was doing. Had he given up and continued trading? No, she doubted it. The big lug would be trying to track her down, but he was going to be too late anyway. The attack was planned for the next night. The battle was going to be short, bloody and vicious.

Heat shivered down her palm and the beads in the mug started to boil.

Oops. She whispered soothingly, sending little balls of gentle light along the mental thread, where it was enveloped by the black fire. Almost immediately it died down to a steadily burning, thin flame.

The power source contained once more, Tasi blew on the beads to cool it down. She wondered if Heddum would like beads. Maybe one day she'd find out.

As soon as the thought popped into her head, she sighed. Pondering on anything other than what was looming in her near future was pointless. She had to focus on the here and now. She'd left Heddum safe with his friends and that was for the best. The Daamens weren't killers, they didn't fight viciously. This was no place for Heddum and his friends.

Taking a cautious sip of the beads, Tasi thought what it would be like to have a partner at her side. To have Heddum at her side forever.

"Ah crap." Disgusted with herself, she threw the rest of the beads into the fire and watched the flames sputter. "Get a grip, Tasi. You've a job to do."

~ * ~

Interesting. It peered down the thread to where the topaz glow was strong and true. The Guardian was loyal, but she was troubled by something else, and it didn't have to do with the coming fight. It mused on the meaning of it all, but it was merely minutes before it felt a surge of power and the fire leaped higher, raging through it.

Soon.

"Easy" came the whispered word along the thread, the comforting, fuzzy ball of golden light that engulfed it, cradling it, sending calming waves through it. "Easy."

Soon.

It settled into the soothing light, allowing itself to be calmed.

Soon.

~ * ~

Shamon couldn't believe it. He burst into Simon's cabin. "Simon! Shit! *Simon!*"

"What?" Simon was out of the bunk before he'd even woken properly. "What? What?"

"That *idiot!* Goddamn it, Simon!"

Blinking the sleep from his eyes, Simon looked from Shamon to the handtronic he held. Shamon's hand was shaking slightly, his knuckles white. Alarm shot through Simon.

Shamon thrust it at Simon. "Listen."

Foreboding filled Simon. There would be only one reason why Shamon was so agitated, so upset. For one split second he didn't want to touch the handtronic, didn't want to listen. Didn't want to know what his friend had done.

Because he could already guess what was on that handtronic.

Shamon shoved it at him again, and he took it and turned it on.

"I'm sorry, my friends," Heddam's recorded voice came through clearly. "By the time you find this, I'll be well away. Firstly, you can guess where I'm going. I have to do this alone. I can't risk any of your lives, I can't risk dragging the IPC into a war 'tis not theirs nor ours. If I drag you all with me, mayhaps 'twill cause a universal incident that could have devastating effects. Simon... you know. Shamon, don't lose it on me. You're my best friend..." There was a pause, then Heddam resumed. "Ah hell, 'tis no easy way to put it. One trader lost can be dealt with, a whole shipload is a disaster. If you decide to follow, 'twill all be over anyway, so be sure to check before trying to land anywhere. Though you already know that. Friends, I love Tasi. I'm coming back with her. Wait for me on Daamen, I'll be back. We both will." The message ended.

"Shit." Simon closed his eyes. "*Shit!*"

“We have to go after him.” Shamon grabbed his shoulder. “We can’t let him face this alone.”

Simon looked grimly at him. “He’s not alone.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it, Shamon. We’re in space. How could he get off this ship? Who else is missing?”

Shamon paled. “Elyse and Shaque’s ship, the *Predator*, is gone. I thought they’d just left on their own business.” His face brightened. “But we can catch them up. We’ve got the boosters.”

“Elyse will have something more on her ship, you can just bet on that.” Rubbing his forehead, Simon let out a harsh breath.

Shamon stared at him. “We can’t just do nothing! We can’t just let him go without us!”

“He’s done that already.” Simon held up one hand when Shamon’s face started to go red. “And we’re not leaving him. We’re heading for Aora as fast as we can, and we’re going to try and get an idea of what ’tis happening on that planet.”

“How? No one really knows. And he’ll get there before us.”

“Aye, he will.” Simon’s face was grim. “But we can get there as soon as possible. We have to be careful, Shamon. Heddam’s right. A universal incident could blow right up in our faces if we’re caught getting involved in the fight.”

Frustrated, furious, Shamon swung away then swung back. Hurt was in his eyes. “I’m his best friend. He could have told *me*. I would have gone with him without hesitation.”

Simon laid a comforting hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Aye, you would have, and ’tis precisely why Heddam didn’t mention it to you. You have Gabie now, ’tis more than just yourself to think about. Most of us have our own lasses, and those who don’t are young—Torkra, Mikal... Heddam did what he thought was right. He acted as a true friend.”

Shamon didn’t bother to hide the sheen in his eyes. “Bastard.”

“Aye, he is.” Simon gave a small, strained smile. “And when he finally gets back to us, you have my permission to beat the living daylights out of him.”

Shamon shoved a hand through his hair and took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. He paced over to the door and back again. “Now what?”

“Now we inform the crew of what has happened, we set course for Aora, and I see what I can find out. And you try to contact Elyse’s ship.”

Neither trader was surprised when there was no answer from the *Predator*. Nor were they surprised when there was no sign of the spaceship on the radar.

Simon waited until Shamon had gone to wake up and inform the rest of the crew of what had happened before he keyed in the personal code for Security and asked for his wife.

Knowing Des, she was going to start yelling. But it was all he could think to do. He wasn’t going to leave his friend now, but he couldn’t hope to catch up to them in time either. He had no idea what Security knew, if anything.

He couldn’t raise Des or Sabra. The Security communications officer informed him they were on a mission somewhere and he didn’t know when they would be contactable, but he promised to send out a message and when one or the other heard it, they’d get back to Simon as soon as they could.

Thanking the officer, Simon cut communication and sat back in the chair. Looking out at the space beyond the shield, he murmured, “Heddam, you fool. You’ll get yourself killed.”

And it was exactly what he would have done in his place. And exactly what Shamon would have done. What they all would have done.

Sometimes loyalty sucked when you were the one left sitting on the sidelines while your friend hurtled full head into danger. He just hoped there’d be something left of his friend to pick up at the end. Meanwhile, he had to discuss things with the crew, try to come up with some plans, and try to find out what they could about the happenings on Aora.

It was time the crew knew what was really happening on Aora with Tasi. The Daamens would keep it to themselves, Simon knew not one word would leave the trade ship. But they had to know they faced uncertainties if they landed on Aora.

Hell, he needed to talk to Des or Sabra.

In the control cabin of the *Predator*, Heddam read through the information that Elyse had coming through from he had no idea where. The first bit was basic—two Guardians were still being hunted. What wasn't basic was the fact that unrest filled the cities. The palace wasn't stable.

“Where did you get this from?” he asked.

Shaque just looked at him before returning his attention to the book he was reading.

Shaking his head, Heddam looked back at the screen. Nothing else came on and he glanced again at Shaque.

The man was creepy. Cold, quiet, he hardly spoke a word. Elyse was just as bad. He'd never known two people who could spend hours just reading. The only conversation he got was when he initiated it, but seeing as Elyse and Shaque weren't really into full-on conversations, it made for very one-sided conversations.

He was grateful to them, though. Determined to go to Aora, he'd done as promised and gone to speak to Elyse, thinking she could get him a ship somewhere. Instead, she'd calmly informed him to get what he needed when everyone was asleep and come aboard the *Predator*. They were going with him.

He argued but was met with blank faces. He cajoled and got the same blank faces. When he demanded an explanation, Elyse said simply, “Are you coming or not?”

So he'd said ‘Aye’, waited until everyone was asleep, packed some clothes and his lasers, recorded his message on the handtronic and left it on the dining cabin table, and gone through the transport tunnel and onto the *Predator*.

He'd made the right choice. Whatever the hell Elyse and Shaque had on their engines, he'd never seen anything like it. The stars blurred and the ship shot through space faster than even the Argons' fleet crafts. Torkra would have given his right arm to study the engines.

He felt a pang at the thought, knowing how hurt Shamon was going to be when he got the message which he would have by now. It couldn't be helped. He wasn't pulling his friends into this mess.

He wasn't going to start a universal situation, or a disturbance between Daamen, the IPC and Aora. Nay, he was slipping in alone. Well, with a pair of bloody spooky friends, anyway. If anyone could get him close to wherever Tasi was, this weird pair could do it.

Leaning back in the chair, he rested his linked hands on his stomach and closed his eyes, drifting into a light doze.

The next thing he knew, Elyse was shaking him awake.

"Huh?" He rubbed his eyes and sat up. "What's happening?"

"We're going to arrive tomorrow night."

Now he was awake. "What?"

Elyse pointed to the galaxy map. "We're nearly there."

Straightening, he stared at the map. "We can't be. How?"

She just looked at him.

"Right. Ask no questions." He looked up at the timer. "'Tis late. I didn't realize."

"And you need to get some rest, which is why I woke you. We don't know what we're going to be facing, but we need you in top form." Elyse nudged him from the chair. "Go to bed and sleep."

Sitting in the chair he'd just been vacated from, she switched off the galaxy map and started typing on the keyboard. He wondered what she was up to until he saw the space pirates' big, buxom, blonde cartoon figure come onto the screen. She was contacting her sister, Donika, and her band of merry space pirates, an all-female crew that was among the most wanted of space pirates. Bold, brash and now the dubious friends of the Daamens.

Heddam didn't want them to see him onboard the Predator, they'd know something was up. He left the cabin, glancing over his shoulder when he heard movement. He was in time to see Shaque give a grunt of disgust and stand up. Elyse smiled up at him. It was a full, loving smile that lit up her whole face. Shaque's eyes gentled and he dropped a kiss on top of her head.

It was an intimate moment he didn't want to intrude upon, especially when Shaque's head dipped down further and his mouth covered Elyse's.

If he hadn't seen it with his own eyes, he wouldn't have believed the cold bastard had a soft spot in his body, but 'twould seem that Elyse knew where it was.

Shaking his head, Heddham went to his cabin, showered and dropped into the bunk, pulling the thick, soft cover over him. It took a long time to go to sleep, however. Tomorrow they'd be at Aora, and he didn't know what to expect. But he knew Tasi was there somewhere and that was the main thing.

~ * ~

Approaching the city wasn't easy and they had to go a fair way on foot to avoid detection. Coming out through the forests to lie amongst the thick brushes on the mountain that rose above the back of the city, Tasi placed the viewers to her eyes and studied the area.

The New Way soldiers were easy to spot with their black uniforms. Even though it was night, the lights lit up the city streets brightly. Several squads patrolled the streets but Tasi could see the less patrolled areas.

Moving slowly, she swept the area until she came to the palace. The skulls lining the walls made her hands clench on the viewers, and she lowered them to curse.

"All Guardians," the AML informed her grimly. "Those who died during the rebellion, and those who have been hunted and killed. He keeps their *kyrats* mounted in a glass case in the Ruling Room."

"He didn't set their energy free?"

"No."

"That bastard." In the unguarded moment, fire seared along the mental thread and she could feel the power building inside her.

Mentally cursing herself this time, she took several deep, calming breaths, forcing the fire back, where it lingered, the black flames streaked with orange and red. The power source was getting fiercer and hotter. She could almost see the glow in the back of her eyes.

"You all right?" The AML looked at her grimly.

She saw why when smoke trickled from her grip on the viewer. Lifting her hands, she grimaced at the scorch marks on the viewer. "Sorry about that. Yes, I'm fine."

He went back to studying the palace through his own viewers. "The palace is quite heavily guarded but if we launch a full, sudden attack on the palace, we could catch them by surprise."

Lifting the viewer to her eyes, she turned her attention to the gardens beyond the palace. "So all the tunnels were found and sealed."

"The tunnels we know of, yes." He shrugged. "I don't know if the Guardians had other tunnels."

"There is one. I wonder..." Slipping the viewers into the little pouch on her belt, she edged carefully back into the bushes. "Stay here. I'm going on a scouting mission."

Before the AML or any of the soldiers could say anything, she'd slipped away into the trees.

In the dark it was easy to stay hidden, but as she came into the lit areas, Tasi slid first to her knees, then onto her hands and knees as she crept forward. Moving slowly, she was almost on her belly by the time she came around the ornate statues and to the front of the palace, using the low wall and shadows for cover.

Several soldiers marched past and she waited until their foot falls had faded before cautiously lifting her head to glance around. No more soldiers were in sight or hearing, and the area was deserted.

In front of her rose a huge statue of a long dead Aora High Emperor. Reaching out, she carefully touched the heel of the stone sandal and heard the click as a trapdoor opened...or tried to open. Nothing happened and she realized that the mechanism had been broken. Concentrating, she sent a little burst of energy through the base and felt only solidness. The tunnel had been filled in. Silently she slid back behind the wall and into the shadows, moving cautiously, keeping low as she moved around the palace. More soldiers approached and she stayed low, blending in with the tubs of bushes that lined the pathway. Once they passed and went around the corner of the palace, she entered the gardens and finally back into the forest.

The AML looked at her as she came up beside him. "What did you find?"

“The only other hidden trapdoor.” Disgusted, Tasi pulled the viewers from the pouch. “I thought no one knew about it, but obviously they found it. It’s been disabled.”

Silence fell upon the three soldiers and Tasi as they continued to study the comings and goings of the New Way soldiers.

“Traitorous bastards,” the soldier on Tasi’s other side muttered.

“But don’t they look snazzy in their black uniforms?” She grinned.

“I don’t think black would suit me,” murmured the female soldier next to the AML’s. “It’d make me look too sallow.”

“You think so?” Tasi moved the viewer so she could see the top of the palace. “Maybe we could do a pink uniform or something instead.”

“Have to be pastel,” the soldier replied.

“Pink isn’t my colour,” the male soldier beside Tasi stated.

“I’ve seen your underwear,” the female soldier whispered. “It has pink hearts on it.”

The soldier went quiet.

The AML lowered his viewers and peered through the darkness at the soldier. “What happened to your regulation underwear?”

“Uh... I didn’t get a lot of time to pack and had to take what I could from the stores,” he replied.

Tasi held back her laugh but turned her head and winked at the soldier when the AML grunted and returned to studying the city.

Not embarrassed in the slightest, the soldier grinned at her before returning his attention to the city as well.

Growing serious once more, Tasi watched as several battle cruisers flew low over the palace. “A new tunnel is only a rumour, isn’t it?”

“So our sources have told us.”

Watching the battle cruiser land on the roof of the palace, Tasi smiled. “That’s the way in.”

The AML looked where her viewers were trained. “Ah. Through the entrances in the roof. That’d work.”

“But we need to get to the roof without anyone fingering us.” Lowering the viewer, Tasi looked at the AML. “I noticed a battle cruiser in the transport cavern. We can use that, but it only carries probably a quarter of the soldiers we have. It’s not enough.”

“We need to split them up into squads.” The AML slid his viewer into the pouch and stared out at the palace. “Some on the battle cruiser, some will fly the single seater fighters. We’ll need them for any air attacks, and to assist in keeping more New Way soldiers from getting near the palace while we attack it.”

“Some need to come up from ground level.” Tasi frowned. “If we had a couple more battle cruisers, we could transport all the soldiers close to the city in one hit. I don’t want them having to walk most of the way. They need to conserve energy for the fight.”

“Unless...” The AML drew a breath. “We might be able to get a battle cruiser from one of the palace contacts.”

“Risky.” Tasi shook her head. “We don’t want to chance word of the attack leaking out. I’m sorry, Lieutenant, I know you have good contacts, but we don’t really know them enough to trust them with information about the attack.”

“We could just ask and not mention the attack,” the female soldier suggested.

“But if there’s a leak, it might put the palace on alert. We can’t afford to wait much longer. That attack has to go ahead asap. This is the scouting trip. The next one we come in fully armed and fighting.”

After another hour of observing the palace, the soldiers and transport flying through the night, they melted back into the forest and headed back to the desert and their waiting craft.

~ * ~

Tasi had thought time would pass slowly. She was eager now for the fight, and it wasn’t just the power source inside her which was growing stronger and more volatile. She, too, wanted revenge on those who’d turned traitor and murdered her

friends and the High Empress. Five months of being hunted and running, protecting the power source until it was strong enough to attack, watching it being passed from Guardian to Guardian until she was the only one left to take it.

So many lives destroyed because of greed for power.

But there was so much to do before the night attack. Small squads of soldiers had left early to amass in a closer vicinity to the city. Weapons were re-checked. Transport was re-checked. Everything was re-checked.

Civilians were left with strict instructions, along with a small group of soldiers. The four chosen by means of drawing of straws were not happy, but someone had to stay with the civilians in case of anything happening, though if something did go wrong, Tasi thought, they were all dead anyway.

But not before she found the imposter and the power source got what it wanted.

She worked tirelessly side by side with the soldiers and flight crews, ensuring everything was ready. She spent time reassuring civilians and making sure they knew what to do in case of evacuation before joining a big group of soldiers and civilians around the fire eating a hearty meal.

She had finished and was sipping on a mug of beer when she became aware of two little boys standing behind her with big eyes. "Hello."

"You're the Guardian," the little blonde boy blurted.

"That's right." She eyed them in amusement. In her experience, anything could come out of the mouths of children.

"Your *kyrat* burns," he said.

She'd been more than aware of that for the last two hours. It didn't burn enough to hurt her, but she felt the unnatural warmth. "It does." No point denying it.

"I see the fire reflected in it."

"Maybe I'm sitting too close."

"No, the fire is *in* it." His friend pointed at her *kyrat*.

Well, that wouldn't surprise her. She could feel the fire eating away at the mental thread.

“Mitek, Natan.” A woman with a tired face looked up from the big cauldron of stew from which she was still dishing meals. “Leave the Guardian alone.”

“It’s all right,” Tasi assured her. “Keeps them out of your hair.”

The woman smiled.

“You have power,” Mitek said.

“On loan, yes.”

Mitek and Natan looked at each other then back at her. “Don’t you have the power to fight the imposter alone?”

“I need good soldiers to help me get inside the palace.”

“But you could destroy everything, couldn’t you?”

The chatter nearby faded away. *Great.*

Taking a deep breath, Tasi swirled the peas around in her mug while contemplating the answer. When the woman at the fire opened her mouth to admonish the boys, Tasi shook her head at her. The children were Aoras, they had a right to know about the power source.

“The power source is inside me,” she slowly said, looking intently at Mitek and Natan. “You know it gives strength and knowledge to the High Emperor or High Empress. It is part of Aora, part of us all.”

The boys nodded solemnly.

“When someone turns traitor and destroys that which the Aora has given our leaders to guide us with wisdom, the power source seeks to take back that which is wrongfully taken.”

The boys looked blankly at her.

Great. This was why she usually avoided children. They never understood her.

“See, if your mother gave you something to help you help others, Nat, and say Mitek took it, your mother would want to get it back for you. I’m doing the same thing. I’m getting back what the imposter took from our High Empress.”

“But you could get it back by simply throwing all that energy at the palace,” Mitek insisted. “Why don’t you do that?”

“Because the power source wants to face the imposter. The imposter has other things that belong to it, too. It needs to face the imposter.”

“Oh.” They looked at each other.

“Do you understand?”

“Guess so,” Natan muttered.

They walked away.

Tasi turned to Melan, who sat on her left. “This is why I don’t hang around kids. They’re from another dimension, I’m sure.”

“I agree,” a harassed father said, trying to feed his wriggling toddler.

A smattering of chuckles went around the group and everyone returned to their food.

~*~

Nightfall found the last of the soldiers boarding the battle cruiser. Several patrol crafts had gone on ahead, and the battle cruiser was on its third flight transporting soldiers to the meeting zone.

Tasi flew the planet cruiser, needing the quiet. Her cheeks felt hot and one look in the mirror earlier had confirmed the children’s observation. Her kyrat had fire flickering in its depth.

The power source wanted out.

The tips of her fingers were starting to glow and she’d ended up putting gloves on to hide the light in case it was spotted when they landed. Her blood tingled, her mental thread was burning. She sent ball after ball of calmness down to the fire but it was getting harder to keep the energy from roaring up.

Even her sight seemed hot. Little specks of flame appeared just at the corners of her vision.

She landed the planet cruiser at the rendezvous point. Apart from the transport half hidden in the beginnings of the forest, it was quiet. But she sensed no danger,

and as she swung out onto the wing of the planet cruiser the soldiers came from the darkness, emerging into figures as they drew close.

Jumping down, she straightened only to find several of the soldiers gaping at her.

“What?”

“Uh—nothing,” one replied.

“Can’t be nothing,” she replied, rocking restlessly back and forth on her heels. She could just about feel the pinpricks of heat on her skin, the *need* to move. *To burn*. Immediately she blocked the thought, but it licked with fiery fingers in her subconscious.

“Your eyes are glowing,” the AML stated bluntly, and held out dark eye shields. “You’ll need this to stop anyone from seeing the glow.”

Her eyes were glowing? Hell, everyone had their *kyrats* covered with a bandanna to stop the tell-tale glow from giving away their advancing, but no one’s eyes were glowing.

Except hers, apparently.

Striding over to the battle cruiser, she looked into the black space shield and sucked in her breath. Her eyes were glowing. The brown had flecks of orange in them, and if she looked closely—oh yeah, there were actually little flames dancing in her irises and pupils. No wonder her eyes felt hot—she was on fire. The flames made her eyes glow.

The power source was getting stronger, impatient. It was near the end of her mental thread.

Walking back to the AML, she grabbed the dark eye shields and slid them on. “Better?”

“Yes. Are you all right?” he added quietly.

“Ask me tomorrow morning.” She looked around. “Are the foot soldiers in position?”

“They’re awaiting our arrival to start the attack.”

“Let’s move. We try to go quietly, but if we’re spotted we hit hard and fast and keep the element of surprise.”

~ * ~

The flight to the city went unchallenged, and Tasi got into position to land her planet cruiser on top of the palace roof. It was empty, just as it should be. The battle cruiser that landed there periodically had just left and wouldn’t be back for another hour.

Or it shouldn’t have, but for some reason it suddenly turned mid-flight and started back towards the palace just as the AML and his squad came in with their battle cruiser.

The palace battle cruiser hovered for a few seconds, and then it started firing. An alarm wailed into the air and the night was suddenly lit with lights and laser fire.

“Okay,” Tasi said. “Hard and fast it is, then.” She almost dropped the planet cruiser the last few feet to the palace roof, and she bailed out, looking up to see the palace battle cruiser almost on top of the AML’s battle cruiser.

And then another ship came in, a third battle cruiser with a yellow daisy painted on the side. It came up behind the palace battle cruiser, took aim and fired, sending it plunging to the earth where it exploded in the beautiful gardens. Turning, the unknown battle cruiser took aim at the palace spacecrafts that came screaming out of the sky.

“I don’t know who this pilot is,” the AML shouted over the communicator in Tasi’s ear. “But they’ve got our backs!”

“Let the others know not to target them,” Tasi ordered. “We need all the help we can get, but don’t let them put their guard down, either!”

The battle cruiser landed just as Tasi reached the roof door. Soldiers spilled from the battle cruiser and came up behind her.

The door was locked and the system changed, no surprise there, and Tasi tried a different code. While she was trying it, energy burned down her arm and the system exploded in a burst of fire. They all jumped back and the door swung open.

Tasi looked from the smoke curling from the damaged system to the holes in her gloves. Her fingers had shards of black and red light flickering from them. The

power source surged hard against her, filling her with urgency, and she sprang down the stairs with laser drawn.

The soldiers followed on her heels.

The first floor was empty but then she heard the explosions from below. Her eyes grew hotter, and she flung the dark space shields aside. Now she saw through a gold/red/black haze and realized it was her *kyrat* sparking. Heat shot down her arms, smoke curled from her fingertips and the *need* to *burn* filled her as the power source sought to get free.

It took all her strength to hold it back. It wasn't the time, not yet. It hurt. Running and trying to hold it back, forcing the mental shields up, fighting the power that roiled painfully up inside her, pushing at her *kyrat*.

Laser fire sounded nearer and then the New Way soldiers were before them, more spilling out of a passage to the side to hem them in.

Good. So good. It meant laser fire wasn't an option, for the laser would burn through everyone and the New Way soldiers would kill their own on the other side.

No thought was involved. Instinct had Tasi and every soldier, both New Way and Old Way, bringing forth their sensor swords.

Tasi's flared out, bigger and brighter than ever before, fire roaring along the length though it didn't burn her. Multi-colours danced along it, the hunger for the enemy energy pouring through her.

The soldiers clashed, Tasi in the front. Fire blurred her vision, the New Way soldiers showing as hot blue figures in her flame-ridden sight. She cut, burned, ripped through them with the force of pure power. The wall beside her rippled, rocks breaking free. A curtain went up in flames. The New Way soldiers died horribly, quickly. Without thought she slammed her hand on every dead soldier's forehead, the body's ashes spiralling up into the night, the energy being sucked deep inside herself to join with the power source.

Filling her, burning at her.

She hung on grimly.

The AML touched her arm. "Can I help?"

"No. Let's move."

Now it was a battle almost between herself and the power source. It tasted the first defeat of some of the enemy and now it hungered for more. It wanted back that which had been taken from it.

It wanted the imposter.

She could feel him, the new High Emperor, see him in her mind's eye in the Ruling Room, holed up there with his soldiers. He didn't suspect who it was, he was furious. Screaming orders, throwing things, shaking his white sensor sword. White because he didn't have the true High Emperor *kyrat*. White because he was a civilian and had no right to the throne.

Traitor.

The word was a hiss of energy inside her, firing the thread.

The sound of battle cruises, planet cruises and planet craft firing outside was loud, the explosions shaking the foundations as something heavy crashed against a wall.

From below came the shouts, curses and screams, the firing of lasers, the hiss of sensor swords as they clashed and cut.

They met another squad of soldiers, who paled at the sight of her.

"It's a Guardian!" someone shouted, the call carrying down the hallway.

Fear was mixed in now, making the soldiers desperate, and they drew their lasers and fired.

The AML went down, another soldier beside him falling. Tasi roared, the fire unleashing from her, the brilliant glow from her *kyrat* filling the hall. Flesh burned, the screams filling the air as red, black and gold fire tore through flesh fast and hard.

Ashes spilled onto the floor, *kyrats* exploded, and the enemy vanished in a swirl of wind.

Tasi moved forward, her gaze sweeping the hallway. The fire rushed ahead and she tried to call it back. Unleashed, it pulled against her, trying to tug free.

"No!" she commanded it, standing tall. "*Return!*"

The backlash was fast and furious, the power source expanding to fill the hallway, driving her to her knees. It seared up in brilliant white light, flickers of black and orange flaring through it.

It burned her, making her eyes water, her teeth clench. “*Return!*”

It almost took her. She felt herself pitch forward, felt it drag agonizingly at her *kyrat*, but someone grabbed her, steadied her, and she roared, “*Return! Now is not your time! Return!*”

In a single, straight spear it arrowed back into her *kyrat*, throwing her back into someone’s arms. Pure black heat filled her *kyrat*, seared the topaz, smothered her own energy, and all she could do was gasp and fight to contain the power source.

~ * ~

It was furious, wanting to be released. So close. So near! Even though it knew it wasn’t time, it fought the constraints of the Guardian. It fought the one who guarded it, who kept it safe, who kept its people safe. It sought the Guardian’s soul, sought to overpower that which kept it restrained.

Even though it knew the Guardian was right.

Even though it knew to destroy the Guardian was to destroy all the Aoras.

Even though it was the reason the Guardians were born.

It sought to destroy, to be free, to reclaim.

It didn’t have emotion normally, but this was the time when emotion ruled, and that emotion was meshed with a goal, that of revenge, of getting back what was its at any cost.

Ten

Standing in the shadows of the trees, Heddham looked at the palace. “Seems peaceful enough.”

“The Guardian is coming.” Elyse stood beside him, her voice deep but still her own.

Heddham glanced down but she didn’t look up, her attention fixed on the palace. He didn’t have to see to know that her eyes were red rimmed again. During the flight he’d seen the red rim almost constantly.

Shaque didn’t seem concerned but then again, who knew what the hell either of them were thinking? The ex-hunter was his usual cold, silent self.

They worked well together, Shaque and Elyse, moving without speaking, seeming to read each other’s minds. The silent, spooky pair.

He was glad they were with him. On his own, he had no chance of getting into the palace without being shot, but no doubt Elyse had something up her sleeve, a plan.

A crack of a twig sounded and they swung around, lasers raised.

A wench stepped from the darkness, a wry smile on her face. “Talk about stealth, I don’t have it.”

Elyse nodded to her. “Seena.”

“How are you, pirate? Though wait, you’ve changed profession now, haven’t you?” Seena’s eyes switched to Shaque. “And gotten married to a bounty hunter, no less. You’re a dark horse, Elyse.”

How in the stars did Elyse know an Aora soldier, especially enough for this wench to know about her latest movements? Heddham did a mental head scratch. He thought no one mixed with the Aoras? Though... wait a minute, Elyse had a contact, knew things no one else did. So did that mean this wench was a contact for Elyse?

Elyse did a quick introduction. “Shaque, Heddham, this is Seena, an Aora Military Sergeant. Shaque’s my husband. Heddham is the one who is following the Guardian.”

“The Daamen trader.” Seena nodded to Shaque but her gaze was intent when she looked at Heddham. “So you’re the one chasing the last Guardian around, professing his love.”

Heddham glanced sharply at Elyse but she was back to studying the palace.

“Aye,” he finally answered, because he couldn’t deny it and didn’t want to anyway.

“I bet Tasita gave you a hard time. Let me guess. You wanted to go with her, she refused, she lulled you into a false sense of security, sent you to sleep and ran.”

How the hell had the lass known that? Heddham gaped at her.

Seena continued, “Elyse and Shaque brought you here and now you’re waiting to find her.”

Because Elyse didn’t seem bothered by what the AMS was revealing, Heddham nodded.

Seena looked at Elyse. “Can he handle what he’s going to see?”

“He will.” Elyse continued to study the palace.

Heddham frowned. “Seena, ’tis no question about it. ’Tis nothing Tasi could do ’twould turn me from her.”

“You haven’t seen a Guardian in action.” Seena shook her head. “It isn’t pretty. It’s savage and gut-wrenching.”

“Have you seen this before?”

“I’ve heard the stories. No one in this time has ever seen what is about to happen. The last time was about eight hundred years ago. All we have are stories to go by but they have been well documented. What we’re going to see is history repeating itself.” Her grin was wry. “Should be interesting.”

Heddam studied her. Dressed in black, her red *kyrat* hidden under a black bandanna, she knew a lot. Mayhaps she’d already seen Tasi. His heart leaped. “How is she?”

“The Guardian? I don’t know, but I’ve noticed a couple of unusual things in the desert. Nothing I could pinpoint, but enough to know something was going on. That’s why I maintained the patrols out there myself and sent no one else. When Elyse contacted me, I just knew something was happening.” Seena’s eyes glinted wickedly. “About time, too. I’ve been waiting to see the imposter brought down.”

“Obviously you’re not one of his loyal followers.”

“Hell, no. But it was easiest to stay under his command. Nothing like the enemy in the camp.” Her smile was easy but her eyes were hard. “My flight squad and I are the Old Way. We’re at the call of the Guardian.”

“She hasn’t contacted you?”

“No. I understand why. Knowing who is friend and who is foe in these volatile times is hard. But we’re here when the time comes. Nothing like being right near the palace.” Seena looked at Elyse, noticing the red rims of her eyes. “Soon, mutant, you can start ripping and tearing, eh?”

“The time is sooner than you think.” Elyse’s voice was rasping. “It’s tonight, and it’s very soon.”

How did she know? Who else was she in contact with?

Seena caught Heddam’s frown. “Her mutant is attracted by the power source. It brings it to the surface.”

“Right.” Of course. ’Twas why she could sense how close the power source was, and that meant that Tasi was close, too. “Can you pick where she is?”

Elyse shook her head.

“So what’s the plan?” Seena asked quietly.

“When Tasi goes into the palace, I’m going with her,” Heddham replied.

“*We’re* going with her,” Elyse growled.

Seena nodded. “Then I suggest we go up in my battle cruiser and wherever you spot her is where we’ll put you down.” Turning on her heel, she said quietly, “Come on.”

Heddham was still unsure of everything, but if Elyse trusted this wench, she had to be honourable. Elyse didn’t trust many people.

Shaque didn’t look at anyone, his gaze constantly flickering around the surroundings as they followed, his laser in one hand, his dagger in the other. Heddham followed, his senses attuned to anything unusual, though who knew what was on this planet that might be considered normal by the standard of the Aoras?

One thing he was certain of, though, regardless of what was out there and what they might face, he was going to be by Tasi’s side when she faced the imposter. In times of danger, his place was by his lass’s side.

Impatience thrummed through him, especially now he knew Tasi was near, and he followed unhesitatingly when Seena led them onto a big battle cruiser that was standing in a clearing nearby. The yellow daisy painted on the side was unexpected. The three soldiers waiting watched intently, but merely nodded when Seena introduced them. The one she introduced as the Aora Military Corporal couldn’t quite hide the light in his eyes when Seena informed him of the plan.

The battle cruiser was plain inside. The control cabin was in the front, a laser cannon below and above, and a caged area at the rear. In the middle was a hollow section lined with a bench each side for sitting on. At the back of the control cabin was a viscomm.

Seena and the ACM disappeared into the control cabin, two of the soldiers went into the laser pits and the third soldier kept watch on the viscomm, flicking it on and training it on the palace.

The battle cruiser lifted into the air and within seconds was swooping low over the city, veering around at the edge to fly over the forests.

Nothing showed on the viscomm and Heddham started to get edgy. Anxiety gnawed at his insides. *Where is she? Is she all right? I wish I was with her, I wish I*

knew what she was thinking, what she was going through. If I was with her, I could help in some way, even just be a silent support. Watch her back.

Watching the viscomm, he couldn't see anything but empty skies above the forest. The battle cruiser veered and turned, heading back for the city.

Seena's voice came over the intercom. "Hold tight, everyone, I see something odd."

"That planet cruiser," the ACM said. "It shouldn't be turning back towards the palace now. It's not scheduled to return yet."

Heddham looked up at the viscomm and saw the battle cruiser heading back towards the palace. He also noted the planet cruiser slowing above the palace roof.

And he just knew.

"It's her!" His hand tightened on the butt of the laser holstered at his thigh.

"The Guardian?" Seena was calm. "Could be. She'll enter through the roof. Makes sense."

"And there's another battle cruiser closing in to the palace," the AMC said. "Looks like it could be an attack starting."

"Fly closer."

The palace battle cruiser started firing, and Heddham clenched his teeth when he saw the planet cruiser land hard on the roof of the palace. The figure that came out of the cockpit and swung onto the wing had a long, white braid. That much he could make out on the screen.

"Close in!" Seena ordered sharply. "We need to cover her—and them!" she added as the palace battle cruiser started firing on the unknown battle cruiser.

Lights flared into the sky, lighting up the area. An alarm siren sounded clearly over the intercom and laser fire flared from military posts near the palace.

"We're getting behind the palace battle cruiser," Seena told her soldiers sharply. "Take it down!"

Several dead-on shots from the lasers and the battle cruiser went hurtling down into the gardens below in a fiery ball.

More palace spacecrafts came swooping out of the sky. Seena veered the battle cruiser around and again the lasers from the pits flared.

The battle cruiser shook as it took a hit, and Heddham, Elyse and Shaque grabbed onto the iron bars along the wall, clinging to them to avoid being thrown to the floor.

Adrenaline started to pump through Heddham and he looked up at the viscomm. He saw the unknown battle cruiser land and soldiers in khaki spill from it and run to where Tasi was standing near something. There was a shuffling of soldiers and bodies, and suddenly a flare came from nowhere, glowing around something, and they all stumbled back before running inside.

Tasi was in the palace.

“Seena!” he shouted. “We need to get to the roof! Tasi has gone inside!”

“Hold on,” she said.

The battle cruiser swooped down, the unexpected movement making Heddham’s stomach rise sickeningly in his throat.

“I can’t stay idle or we’ll be blown from the sky. We have support coming but can’t wait. The door is going to slide open when we’re above the palace—you’ll all have to jump!”

Heddham would jump into the darkest depths of Hell just to be by Tasi’s side.

He glanced at Elyse and saw that her eyes were completely red. Quiet and controlled normally, she was a predator now, a low growl issuing from her lips.

Shaque nodded to him, quick and sharp.

The battle cruiser levelled out and the door slid open.

“Now!” Seena ordered. “Out!”

Heddham didn’t hesitate. One powerful push of his legs and he was out, hitting the roof and rolling, coming up quickly onto his knees to see Elyse and Shaque landing and rolling nearby. Palming his laser, he pushed to his feet and ran for the door which was swinging open.

The stairwell was empty, but he could smell the burning flesh. Damage was done to the walls.

Elyse pushed ahead of him, snarling warningly, her eyes glowing like the pits of Hell. Even though worried sick and filled with urgency to find Tasi, Heddam gave way to her. He didn't know what she sensed, but he'd go along with whatever she wanted if it meant finding Tasi.

From outside he could hear explosions and the sounds of battle drifted up from below.

They went down the stairs at a run and he noted curtains burning, falling to the floor, bits of rock crumbling from the walls.

They came down another staircase and into a hall. There was a curve in the corridor ahead and he heard a shout that filled him with hope and fear.

"It's a Guardian!" Fear was more than evident in the shout.

The sound of laser fire sizzled in the air and Heddam pounded ahead, his long legs eating up the distance. He heard Elyse let loose a howl of anger as he passed her, but ignored her. He had to get to Tasi.

There was a roar and then a brilliant glow flared from the corridor beyond the curve. A mix of red, black and gold fire licked hungrily around the edges of the stone, and the stench of burning flesh and the screams as if from the damned filled the air, sending a shudder down his spine.

He rounded the corner, skidding to a halt behind the soldiers, and above his head he saw those facing them, the New Age soldiers, engulfed in red-hot energy. Ashes spilled onto the floor, *kyrats* exploded, and they vanished in a swirl of wind.

He saw her then, moving forward, and from before her he could see the greedy flames rushing ahead. He couldn't see her face, but he could see the direction from which the fire came. It funnelled back and it was from her *kyrat*, and it was pulsing angrily.

"No!" she commanded. "*Return!*"

He had to hide his eyes, throwing his arm across them as a shield, as brilliant white light and flickers of orange and black seared through the hallway. He could feel it, the energy filling the hallway, hear the rocks cracking in the walls. Stumbling, he placed a hand against the wall and felt it ripple under his palm.

“Return!”

He peered through a tiny gap in his fingers to see every soldier behind her on their knees, their hands covering their faces. Horror swept through him when he saw her pitch forward, saw the thinning of the energy funnel as it tried to pull from her *kyrat*. She was fighting it, trying to contain it, and it was dragging her on her hands and knees while she tried to find something to hold onto.

Eyes squinted almost shut, he sprang forward, leaping over the crouching soldiers, bending over her to grab her shoulders, steadying her and holding her still, his strength enabling her to stop moving.

She roared, *“Return! Now is not your time! Return!”*

The power source narrowed and in one swift movement it back-lashed into her, spearing almost, vanishing into her *kyrat* and throwing her back into his arms.

He closed his arms around her, dropping to his knees to hold her against his chest, feeling the force of the power source as it slammed into her.

He gasped at the heat of her body, and he could see enough now to look down at her *kyrat*. It was black, like curling smoke covering the topaz. Even worse was the way she twisted in his arms, eyes tight shut, teeth clenched as she fought the power.

“She’s trying to contain it,” Elyse growled in his ear. “It’s fighting her.”

“You can do it, Tasi,” he said desperately. “You can *do it!*”

Her breathing eased but she was still gasping. One hand went up and she unconsciously grabbed his arm, fingers gripping tighter and tighter as though she was trying to claw her way back.

He had to give her an anchor. “Tasi! Lass, come back! Tasi!”

Shaque stood beside him and Elyse was crouched down at Shaque’s feet, her eyes glowing hotly, growls issuing forth from between her lips. They were facing the soldiers behind them and he could only be glad that the soldiers hadn’t shot them already.

Tasi’s body was so hot, almost as if the fire was starting to burn inside her.

“Tasi!” He patted her red cheeks. “Open your eyes, lass. Open your eyes!”

A shudder shook her and she opened her eyes. He should have been shocked at the brilliant glow of them, the fire that flickered in their depths, but he was beyond anything like that now. Whatever happened on this planet he had not a clue, all he could do was let her know he was with her every step of the way and accept whatever he was going to face.

At the sight of him above her, her eyes first reflected complete joy, which touched him to his very soul, but then her eyes widened and she rasped, “You shouldn’t be here!”

“I told you my place was by your side.” Relief swamped him. “Now tell your soldiers that we’re friends before they decide to slice us up.”

“They wouldn’t want to try,” Elyse snarled.

Tasi turned to look at Elyse.

“Fun, huh?” Elyse laugh was grating.

Tasi’s *kyrat* shimmered with black and orange. Heddham could only watch anxiously as she flinched and concentrated, sweat slicking her skin as she must have fought some kind of surge or something. Shit, he didn’t know what was going on inside her, but it was taking its toll. Dark circles were beneath her eyes and her cheeks were apple red with heat.

The soldiers shifted behind them, and he looked over his shoulder to see the lasers aimed at them, and the distinctly unfriendly look in the eyes of the soldiers. “We’re not here to hurt anyone,” Heddham told them. “We’re friends, damn it!”

It was enough to make Tasi lift her head and glance back. “They’re friends,” she rasped. Her gaze went to the AML who had a rough bandage wrapped around his upper arm. “Friends.” Then she looked up at Heddham and whispered, “I didn’t want you to see.”

“Too late,” he said simply, and dropped a brief kiss on her *kyrat*. “I’m with you all the way.”

The flames in her eyes died a little, some of the red left her cheeks and Tasi drew a deep breath. Topaz overtook most of her *kyrat*.

Pushing lithely to her feet, she watched as Heddham straightened until he was towering over her. Every instinct he had screamed to take her away from the battle,

take her somewhere safe, but he couldn't do it. To do so would be to break his word to her, to be by her side, to accept her and her duty.

"You shouldn't have come," she repeated.

"Too bad," he replied, reaching out to tuck a stray strand of hair behind her ear, his fingers lingering before sweeping down her cheek and falling again to his side. "I'm here. For better or worse, I'm here."

"I don't want you seeing what you'll see."

"For better or worse," he repeated and smiled, seeking to soothe her. "I do know now that you have a real temper when riled." He gestured at the burnt curtains high on the wall. "A *real* temper." Leaning forward, he tapped her on the nose. "But I can live with it."

It was the only touch he dared. She was leading soldiers in a war and this wasn't the time or place to show too much tenderness.

She looked from him to Elyse and Shaque, over to her soldiers, then back to Heddam. "You could get killed."

He shrugged. Aye, but he'd be with her. "I'm here, lass, whether you like it or not, I'm here with you. All the way."

"I guess we'll see what you can handle," she said softly, and before he could ask what she meant by that, she gestured to the soldiers. "Let's move out." She gave him one last, lingering look, a slight softening of her expression, then the flame flickered inside her eyes once more and she turned away.

~*~

He couldn't believe it! The High Emperor stormed around the Ruling Room. The fighting outside was drawing nearer, the air filled with the sounds of battle cruises and patrol crafts whining overhead, the sizzle of their lasers in the air, the shouts and cries from soldiers outside. Inside the palace, the fighting was both from below floors and above floors.

His white *kyrat* was starting to hurt, and he saw several of his soldiers flinch and touch their *kyrats* nervously. To make matters worse, Yaltan wasn't here. Where the hell was he?

~ * ~

Miness watched the battle above and her lips twisted. The Old Way and the New Way were clashing and she didn't care. Only one Way was going to rule, and that was the Third Way.

Hurrying down the steps, she entered the dwelling where her people were waiting. There weren't many, just a few, but it was enough. She knew there were more hidden in their homes.

It was a shock to find Yaltan sitting at the table. No one else was around, but there was blood on the walls and floor. She came to a halt, her wide eyes flicking around the room.

Clucking his tongue, Yaltan leaned back in the chair. "Miness, Miness, Miness."

Straightening, she started to slide her hand into her cloak, only to find herself gazing down at a laser pointed straight at her. Time for bluffing. "Yaltan, what's wrong?"

"I never thought you would be with the Third Way, not when you're sharing a bed with the High Emperor of the New Way."

"You suspected." She narrowed her eyes.

He shrugged. "Maybe. Oh, all right. Of course I suspected. Now I know."

"How could you know?"

"Miness, the High Emperor knows. The night he placed his hand on your *kyrat*, remember? He got the truth from you."

"Not all of it." She let her arms swing loose, ready to grab beneath her cloak if she got the chance. "I only told him what didn't directly affect me."

"He's no fool."

"If that's so, why didn't he have me killed then?" She arched one brow arrogantly. "He let me live because I only told him some of it. I can scream quite loudly, you know. He had no idea he hadn't touched my bigger secrets. Only the *real chosen one* can see into the minds of its people."

"He didn't need to go all the way." Yaltan smiled. "There is no Third Way, Miness."

“What? Don’t be ridiculous.”

“You give yourself more credit than you’re due, Miness. The High Emperor got more from you than you thought. You’re not that good at guarding your secrets, screams or not. He knew this was the emergency gathering place, and this qualifies as an emergency.”

Alarm beat inside her. “You’re being silly. I’d have thought the return of the Guardian was an emergency, not a handful of people, which, by the way, is only a small number... that you know of, anyway.”

He laughed softly, his eyes amused. “Miness, you are a fool.”

She eyed him narrowly.

“There is no Third Way. That rumour was planted by me to find out who was loyal to the High Emperor, and who wasn’t.”

“You’re lying.”

“Do you see anyone coming to your rescue? How many of the Third Way did you meet? Just a handful, my dear. A handful because there aren’t any more, and one of those worked for me, they helped plan and plot, they gave little pushes, and they flushed out those with an agenda different to the High Emperor’s. Today a few high standing officials were executed, and that was thanks to the innocent chatter of children. Those officials were held in high esteem by the High Emperor and he was *so* saddened to discover that they plotted against him, and not even for the Old Way, but a Third Way that would have him off the throne in seconds. No, Miness, a man in the High Emperor’s standing cannot afford to have traitors close to his bosom. The officials went, even though one was his brother. Now it’s your turn.”

“How does he feel about you having started the rumours? I bet he didn’t know you started it.” Miness tried to slide unobtrusively towards the door.

“My dear, he doesn’t know it’s a fake! He’ll be so delighted with me when I reveal who the ringleaders were of the Way that was traitorous to him and the New Way. I’ll be in his confidence.”

It all came clear with crashing reality. Her eyes widened. “You orchestrated all this to become his closest confident? You planned everything?”

“Indeed I did, and even those who helped me are dead.” Yaltan tapped the side of his nose. “One must work quickly and not leave loose ends. I now need to find the children to whom I fed false rumours and take care of them, too.” Raising his arm, he aimed the laser. “But first I need to take care of you.”

He shot before she could move, the laser beam tearing through her chest to burn into the wall behind her. Miness hit the wall and slid down it, leaving a smear of blood, the air smelling of charred flesh. She looked up at Yaltan, her mouth working soundlessly.

Yaltan crouched down beside her. “Dear Miness, in the battle for power it’s always the ones behind the throne who hold the reins. I’m going to be that someone, because if the High Emperor falls, guess who is going to come forward to fight with the last of the Old Way soldiers? I’ll be seen to fight with them and I’ll be perceived as having been loyal to the Old Way all the time. I’ll be such a help to the new High Emperor or Empress.” Resting the barrel against her temple, he added, “Never underestimate the power of power.” He pressed the trigger.

~ * ~

The hot surge of power was intense, her fingers leaving burn marks and smoke wherever she touched. Tasi had long since given her laser to Heddam, who followed close on her heels.

She was so glad to see him, wanted to hug him tight and hold on forever, but that wasn’t to be.

Now was the time for fighting, for waging the war and taking back what belonged to it. To them all. To every decent man, woman and child of Aora. To those loyal to the power source and the Old Way.

She led the way down the ornate staircase into the midst of battling soldiers. Those who saw her glowing eyes and felt the burn of her sensor swords, the flame of retribution that licked out at them, died.

She was really struggling now to hold back the power source. The closer they got to ground level, the more it burned and threw against her mental shields. The mental thread was almost gone, fiery flames burning through the threads. Her vision was so hot, her skin felt like it was on fire.

Then she felt him. *The imposter*. Below her, the energy crying out to the source inside her. The cries of the trapped, the cries for help.

Moving unerringly to the centre of the big room they'd entered, she looked down. "We're here." She pointed. "Below is where I'm going."

"Where we're going." Heddham stepped up behind her, his hand touching her shoulder. "'Tis going to be full of soldiers."

"And some of us will die tonight." Tasi looked around at her soldiers, who waited quietly. Elyse simply snarled, Shaque remained impassive, and Heddham... dear, sweet Heddham. She'd never seen anyone less suited to war. Big, gentle, he'd fought and killed tonight to protect her, but his life was meant to be trading and laughter. Not war. It wrung her heart. "Heddham—"

"Together," he said firmly. "'Tis no other way for us, lass."

The silence was filled with emotion, but that simply made the power source throw itself at her shields.

~ * ~

It wanted out now. It could sense the one below, see him, feel him. The atrocities to its children, the blasphemy created by him. It was time to destroy.

~ * ~

Heddham was prepared to run through the room and head for the staircase, but Tasi simply held her hand out above the floor and a flare of white hot energy seared from her fingertips, growing bigger, searing directly through the floor. Stone ashed and drifted away and she jumped through the hole.

He didn't hesitate to follow, and Elyse, Shaque and the soldiers were right behind him.

~ * ~

The High Emperor was watching the doors, his soldiers' lasers trained for any intruders who attempted to come through them.

He wasn't prepared for intruders to simply fall through the ceiling above him, ash raining down. He swung around to stare open-mouthed as four figures hit the floor in a crouch, followed by khaki-clad soldiers.

For a split second he could only stare. A huge, hulking man, rough and dangerous, who towered behind the three people in front of him. One of the three

had death in his winter eyes, his face impassive. The woman who was on one knee in front of him had eyes that shone blood red, and a growl rumbling from her chest to strike fear into the hearts of anyone.

But it was the fourth person who made his heart stutter. If the pale brown pants topped by a pale brown jacket didn't give away that fact she was a Guardian, the glowing topaz *kyrat* would have done so. The grimness on her face was enough to make any Aora quake when she looked at them, but it was what burned *inside* her eyes that scared him, and her *kyrat* was suddenly a multitude of colours. Black and gold and orange, the colours swirled, and behind them... behind them was white hot energy.

The power source.

And it was coming for him.

He took it all in, in a split second. The soldiers shouting out behind him and swinging around with their lasers whining brought him aware again, and he scrambled back, his sensor rods flickering along his veins and out of his palms in white rods.

The Guardian stepped down off the small dais they'd landed on, her voice a white wash of heat. "It's come for you."

And then everything happened at once.

His soldiers started firing their lasers, the soldiers behind the Guardian started firing theirs. Everyone was scrambling for cover, the room was filled with shouts and screams and the stench of laser burned flesh. The giant was behind her, his laser blazing death. The mutant had thrown herself into the midst of the enemy soldiers and her companion just shot with calm determination

The Guardian strode directly towards him, her gaze focussed on his face, and her eyes glowing like hot topazes.

Raising her arm, she pointed at him and said, "*You.*"

Her *kyrat* exploded outwards, straight bands of pure energy spearing out into the room. White energy poured from her fingertips as she swung her hand around in a half arc, and the soldiers behind him started to scream.

Terror clawed at his mind as he heard the shattering of the soldiers' *kyrats*, saw the released red energies shooting upward. Bodies ashed behind him as the soldiers burned, the energy falling upon them, devouring them.

The fighting stopped as confusion reigned within his soldiers. Many turned, fleeing and screaming, trying to make it to the closed doors.

The Guardian made an arced gesture with her other hand, and more hot energy fell upon those fleeing, burning the bodies, ashing the remains, shattering the *kyrats* and setting the energies free to be engulfed by black flames.

The Guardian was coming for him. Her eyes glowed with an unnatural light and he pressed against the wall before her, whimpering, screaming, and pleading for his life.

She stopped several feet in front of him, and her words echoed in the room, coming from the rafters in invisible sheets of pure power.

"You have turned on what was entrusted to you. You have a part of me in you all, and you betrayed that trust. How soon you forget what I have done for you all. I claim you, imposter. I claim all that is you and yours."

"No!" He babbled, falling to his knees, nose running, hands clasped before him. "I beg of you! Spare me!"

She raised her arms and the surge of crackling fire took him, melting his flesh from his bones, stripping the blood from his veins, and he screamed and screamed. The room was simply one big illumination of white hot energy. Flames danced at the edges and beyond he saw the Old Way soldiers, and the giant bent protectively over the impassive man and the mutant. They were all crouched on the floor, safe. Safe because they hadn't betrayed the power source.

Agony coursed through him. He felt every strip of flesh burn, every drop of blood sizzle and dry, evaporating with the intense heat.

And then his *kyrat* cracked, shattered, his energy swooping up, and he saw a black flame reach out, take his energy and suck it down into a black maw.

His soul screamed as it was banished.

The High Emperor of the New Way fell.

The Guardian tipped her head back, her hands lifting, fingers outspread, and the doors burst open. The power source surged through the palace, no wall a barrier, no begging for mercy a consideration. It ashed those disloyal to it, leaving the loyal ones to shudder in fear and relief.

It reminded them all who owned the energy in their *kyrats*.

It reminded them of what they were a part.

The Guardian strode to the doors, out into the corridors, passing those who trembled and knelt in awe. She strode to the entrance to the palace and walked out onto the magnificent staircase that led to the street beyond.

It didn't notice the smoking rubble, the torn garden.

The power was free, anchored to the Guardian, but free to claim its own. Free to take back what belonged to it.

Her hands crackled with a fire that didn't burn her flesh, the white hot energy pouring through her left her body whole.

She tipped back her head and roared, and the energy poured forth.

It destroyed.

~ * ~

Finished with the traitors in the palace, it tore down the steps and spread, filling the streets, welcoming those who knelt in fear before it, ashing the traitors. Even though they swore their allegiance, it saw the lie in their eyes and they didn't deserve life.

One man saw the energy coming and turned on a New Way soldier, but it saw through the act. It knew this one, had seen it many times in the palace with the imposter.

~ * ~

It shouldn't have happened like this! It was all the time Yaltan had to think before he died in a screaming, bubbling mass of melting flesh before finally ashing and having his energy swallowed.

~ * ~

No nook or cranny escaped the power source. It seared through doors, cut through walls, shattered glass. It melted flesh, evaporated blood, swallowed the energies, both white and red, of the betrayers.

No man or woman escaped. The children were innocent, they would follow their teachings. The orphans would be taken care of and reared properly. But the adults and those old enough to know, to choose sides, they were destroyed. The betrayers paid and the loyal followers were spared.

Battle cruisers and palace cruisers high in the sky came crashing to the ground in blazes of roaring fire as the power source claimed the betrayers who flew them. The transports left flying were those flown by the loyal Old Way soldiers, those who had been fighting the New Way soldiers for supremacy.

The power reached further, following the threads of the Aoras, finding the traitorous New Way soldiers still hunting its Guardian. On far flung planets the soldiers went up in a blaze of black and orange fire, white hot heat, their kyrats shattering, their bodies ashing and their energies consumed by the black maw.

And then it was finished with those who had lived. It had devoured and destroyed them.

But one last thing remained.

It turned and speared back to the Guardian awaiting it. Her arms were outstretched, her eyes glowing with its power. Her own topaz shown true and clear in her forehead.

It didn't notice those behind her, for even though not of Aora blood and energy, they were no threat.

One last thing remained.

It raced over her head, leaving her anchoring it, feeling the reassuring tug on it. It tore through the ruins of the palace and came to the Ruling Room. In a swirl of hot light, it approached the locked glass cabinet.

The glass shattered, the topaz of the Guardians flared in topaz light, the light flowed out from them, swirling joyously, and it reached out and gathered its children to its bosom.

"Rest well, my loyal ones. Rest well."

Then one more. So important, so sweet.

The multi-coloured topaz winked in the light before flaring up, a spiral of colours that glimmered and shimmered and danced in a light of its own. It swirled up in a free dance, darting to the roof and spreading out, then it turned and homed in, diving into the power source that took it deep inside.

The kyrats grew dull, their energy gone, and a flicker of white flame touched them. They shattered, ashed, and swirled up into the night sky.

Outside on the pikes the skulls of the Guardians exploded in orange flame, ashed, and trailed up into the night.

The bodies of the fallen Guardians ashed in their graves, and the ashes rose through the soil and disappeared into the night sky the way they were supposed to.

The blasphemes had stopped.

Turning, the power source speared back through the palace and hit the Guardian's kyrat, nestling deep, holding on to that which it still had to give.

Safe in the embrace of the kyrat, it rested.

The one it wanted was coming.

~ * ~

Heddham caught Tasi when she stumbled back and collapsed. Lowering her to the ground, he cradled her close, fear spiking through him when he looked down into her pale face.

Her kyrat glowed with the power source, but her eyes were feverish. Her skin wasn't hot anymore, but the chill of it was frightening.

Elyse touched his shoulder. "She breathes."

"Tasi." He smoothed the hair back from her pale face. "Lass, are you all right?"

"It's... almost done," she whispered.

"'Tis not over?" Desperately he looked around and the bloody form of the AML appeared. "What does she mean?"

"We await the chosen one," the AML said quietly.

Tasi grew heavy as she slipped into unconsciousness.

Alarmed, Heddham gathered her into his arms. “She’s unwell. God, AML, what are we going to do?”

The AML looked at one of the soldiers. “Find a room.” He looked back at Heddham. “She will remain like this until the chosen one arrives.”

“Chosen one?” Heddham hugged her to his chest, his heart almost breaking. “Will she be all right?”

The AML looked at him before replying heavily, “I don’t know. No one knows. We can only wait and see.”

~ * ~

The days passed slowly, agonizingly. Heddham kept vigil by Tasi’s bed. He showered in the bathroom adjoining the chamber, ate in the room, and slept on the bed with her cradled in his arms.

No one tried to separate them, not when Elyse started snarling at the AML who attempted to shift Heddham to another room.

The AMS agreed with Elyse, and from then on the half mutant, along with her companion, the cold man, were often found lurking near the chamber doors. No one was fool enough not to know that they were guarding their friend.

The only thing that gave Heddham comfort was the glow that surrounded Tasi’s body. ’Twas the healing glow he’d seen before, surely, even though ’twas white rather than gold? Holding her in his arms, he felt the warmth of it, the slight fuzziness of it against his skin.

In the dark hours before dawn he awoke instantly, aware of a change happening in his lass cradled in his arms.

“Heddham?” It was just a whisper of sound, but he heard it immediately.

Coming up onto his elbow, he looked down at her, relief filling him. “Tasi?”

“You’re... really here...” Reaching up with a shaking hand, she touched his face.

“Aye. By your side.” A lump filled his throat and he wasn’t ashamed of the tears that blurred his vision.

“You never do as you’re told.” A weak smile flitted across her lips.

“I’ll never be an obedient husband, but I’ll always be by your side.” Catching her hand, he kissed her palm. “Oh, lass, you scared me so much.”

The smile faded from her lips. “I told you... I didn’t want you to see—”

“Not that, lass. This. Lying unconscious. It scared me.” Brushing his lips across her brow, he said huskily, “I just want you better.”

Tipping her head back, she brushed her lips across his and whispered, “It’s not finished yet.”

“Until ’tis, I’ll be right here.”

She looked up at him, sadness filtering through her eyes. “I love you, Heddham. Don’t ever forget that.”

“I love you, too, lass, and I’ll be reminding you of that every day of our life together.”

The sadness remained, and she closed her eyes and slipped away once more.

Cradling her close, Heddham prayed harder than he’d ever prayed in his life.

~ * ~

The arrival of a Daamen trading ship was something that had never happened on Aora. Outsiders hardly came, but it seemed as though more visitors were arriving.

The AML looked from the AMS to Elyse. “They are requesting permission to land.”

The AMS regarded Elyse thoughtfully. “We can’t just start allowing anyone to land here, Elyse. We don’t encourage outsiders. We only allowed Heddham to stay because of you and Tasi. In fact, we only let Shaque stay because of you.”

Shaque gave her that steady, impassive look from his winter eyes and said not a word, but the AMS knew without having to be told that where Elyse went, Shaque would go also unless Elyse said otherwise. The wisest thing to do was not push that particular subject any further.

“I respect what you’re saying,” Elyse said. “At least allow contact between Heddham and his friends. He needs them now.”

Heddam was surprised when a screen was brought into the chamber and set on the table.

The soldier carrying it bowed his head to him and said, "You have contact," before leaving the chamber again.

Wondering what he meant by that, Heddam crossed to the screen and looked at it. There didn't seem to be a way to turn it on, but when he touched the screen, Simon's face appeared.

"About bloody time," his friend said, worry clear on his face.

Relief flooded through Heddam. "'Tis good to see you. So very good."

"That better include me, too." Shamon's had appeared over Simon's shoulder. "I'm going to rip your head off when you get back. Bloody hell! How could you just leave like that?"

Heddam smiled slightly. "I had things to do."

Shamon instantly became contrite. "We heard of the fight. Elyse says 'tis not over yet."

"Apparently not. They're waiting for the 'chosen one' to reclaim the power source." Heddam glanced over his shoulder at the still figure lying in the bed. "Tasi still has it inside her."

"Still guarding it," Simon said softly.

"Aye."

"I wish we could be there with you, but the Aoras won't let us land." Simon looked intently at him. "But if you need us there, we're coming in regardless."

"Nay. Nay, I'm fine. They haven't done anything to me. Treating me well, which I think 'tis more to do with Elyse and Tasi." Heddam grinned lopsidedly. "Shaque is only tolerated for the same reason."

"That Elyse does get around." Shamon shook his head, but his gaze remained concerned. "You look tired."

"Tasi has only spoken once since she collapsed." Heddam sighed. "I wish 'twas over. I just want to take her home."

Simon exchanged a glance with Shamon.

“What?” Heddam queried.

“Have you thought the lass might want to stay on Aora?” Simon asked quietly. “She’s a Guardian, Heddam, the last one. The new leader is going to want to keep her.”

Heddam ran one hand through his hair. The same thought had crossed his mind, and he didn’t like it. But ’twas something he’d have to face when ’twas all over. “I know. I’ll talk to Tasi.”

“Be prepared, Heddam,” Simon said. “You’ve seen things no one else has. You know her, but she was born to this. You may have to figure out an alternative.”

Turning his head, Heddam looked at Tasi lying on the bed. The covers rose and fell with each slow, deep breath, and the white light around her shimmered. He’d do anything to keep her safe.

To keep her by his side.

Returning his gaze to the screen, he met the compassionate eyes of his friends. “We’ll work something out.”

“’Tis your business.” Simon nodded. “But if you need to talk, we’re here.”

“I can’t ask you to stop the trading trip—”

“Don’t be an arse, Heddam. We’re not leaving you.” For the first time, a flash of anger showed in Simon’s eyes. “We Daamens back each other up. As your captain, I’m not finished with you for going AWOL, but as your friend...” A small smile softened his features. “I understand and I’m here for you.”

“We all are,” Shamon stated. “And we’re all waiting to take a piece out of your hide when you get back.”

“I can’t wait,” Heddam said, poker-faced, because if he dared to say anything else he’d start crying.

Friends were the topping on life’s dessert.

“We can’t stay on here much longer,” Simon informed him. “The Aoras have given us limited time. But you’re not alone, friend. We’re parked in space waiting for you, for however long this stuff takes. All right?”

Heddam couldn’t even answer, he was so choked up.

“Oh stars, he’s going to cry,” Shamon said. “We better go before he embarrasses himself.” His face brightened. “Wait. We could get a photo image of this, something we can use to blackmail him with later.”

Heddam sent him a rude gesture.

His friends laughed and the screen went blank.

Heddam felt a lot better. Most of the crew were childhood friends, and even though they were forced to wait in space, he felt like they were almost at his shoulder. And on Aora he wasn’t alone, either, not with Elyse and Shaque accompanying him everywhere and staying close to the chamber.

His spooky friends were a great comfort and he was grateful to Elyse, knowing if it wasn’t for her friendship with the AMS, he wouldn’t be there.

Returning to the bed, he lay down, gathered Tasi’s unconscious body into his arms and rested his cheek on the top of her head. For however long it took, he’d wait for her.

~ * ~

Heddam awoke abruptly. Tasi wasn’t in the bed beside him. Alarmed, he swung up off the bed and snapped the light on.

She was by the door, one hand reaching out for the knob.

“Tasi?” Joy at seeing her up and walking without any sign of weakness poured through him and he scrambled off the bed and ran to her, coming to her side in the dimly lit corridor.

She didn’t answer, just started walking.

Concerned now, Heddam stepped in front of her. She stopped and looked up at him. Shocked, he could only stare back at her.

In the long, white, wispy nightgown that swirled around her ankles and was held up by thin straps on her shoulders, with her white hair shot through with gold falling down her back in a heavy swath, she cut an ethereal figure. The brilliance of her *kyrat*, topaz shot through with white, shone from her forehead. Her eyes glowed with an inner energy.

“Tasi?” he whispered, reaching out to touch her upper arm. “Lass?”

“It is time.” Her voice was low.

He looked down at her for several seconds, and then at a loss as to what to do, wondering if he should call someone, Heddam stepped aside.

Tasi walked down the corridor, her steps smooth and even, her gait unchanging.

Heddam followed close behind, ready to grab her if she fell, not knowing what was happening but refusing to leave her.

She went down the staircase and across the newly repaired floor.

The palace had been worked on in the two weeks since the battle. New furnishings, walls repaired, floors intact once more.

She was heading for the Ruling Room and as the doors swung open he saw that every light was on inside and people waited silently.

It could only mean that the chosen one had arrived.

Relief and fear both shivered through Heddam. This was the time he’d dreaded. It would seem it was the time for the power source to be given to the chosen one, to crown the new High Emperor or Empress. But from the little he’d gleaned from Elyse and the AMS, it was dangerous, too.

When the ruler’s time was over, they transferred the power source to the new ruler and died. This was going to be a transfer of the power source from a living person to the chosen, neither at the stage of their dying. How this would end was anyone’s guess. The history stated that the last Guardian had died after the transfer.

He followed her inside the Ruling Room and had his elbow snagged. Looking down, he met Elyse’s red-rimmed gaze. “Elyse—”

“She has to do this alone. Stay with me or you’ll be kicked out.”

He'd like to see anyone try. No force in the universe would drag him away from her at this time. But he wasn't about to cause a problem either, this was too important. At least he was in the same room.

Shaque sent him an unreadable look as usual and Heddam returned it grimly. He was surprised when Shaque gave a short, sharp nod.

Sweeping his gaze around the room, Heddam was also surprised to see that not many people were in the room. Two squads of soldiers stood to attention behind the AML and AMS at the front, a dark-skinned wench with silver hair beside them. On the other side of the room stood a group of children, both boys and lasses of different ages and colours. Solemnly they watched the proceedings.

Behind the children stood men and women bearing the insignias that Elyse had informed him earlier was the signs of the leaders of the different settlements.

Standing against the wall, Heddam watched as Tasi approached the throne in the middle of the room. Raised up on a small dais, it was plainer than he'd thought it would be.

The figure sitting upon the throne was a shock. *'Twas just a youth, an older teenager about the same age as Torkra! This was the new High Emperor?* He'd been expecting a man or wench, not a youth.

Golden hair was swept neatly back from an unlined brow, and the plain shirt and pants he wore were a direct contrast to the multi-coloured cloak that spilled over the armrests of the throne. His face was calm, his gaze intent on Tasi as she approached the throne.

"High Emperor." Tasi bowed low.

Holding out his hand, the youth said quietly, "Come forward, Guardian. The time is now to unshoulder the burden you have guarded for the lives of all Aora."

Straightening, Tasi climbed the five steps to the top of the dais and placed her hand in the youth's. She moved as if floating, and her hair stirred as a crackle of pure white energy arced out of her *kyrat*.

"It is time," the youth said simply, and he stood.

On eye level with Tasi, he placed his hands on her cheeks, looked her in the eyes and said simply, "Come."

The power source exploded from Tasi's *kyrat*, making her arch back as it flared through the room, but the chosen one didn't release his hold on her.

Heddam had to fight his instincts to leap forward and drag her back into his sheltering embrace. Elyse's fingers biting into his arm steadied him, forcing him to stay in place. Knowing he couldn't interfere was so hard.

'Twas a part of Tasi, this ceremony.

'Twas a part of her life.

'Twas her duty, what she had lived and fought for.

He had to accept it and not interfere.

Stars, it was so hard it made his teeth grind.

Tendrils of power reached down to strike the foreheads of the children, lighting up the topaz in their *kyrats*, marking them as Guardians of the new High Emperor. As one they fell to one knee and bowed their heads in acknowledgement and pride.

A crackle rent the air, the power still joined by a fragile thread to Tasi's *kyrat*, and it started to gather in the air above Tasi and the youth in a ball, then in one straight spear it dived down and poured into the youth's *kyrat*.

He arched his head back, his hands still on Tasi's cheeks. A rainbow of colours exploded from his *kyrat*, filling the room, and Heddam felt the power skim across his skin, heard Elyse growl low and harsh, saw Shaque lay his hand on her shoulder to anchor her.

But Heddam could only stare at Tasi, his heart pounding, palms sweating, his gut clenching in fear.

The colours expanded above them, engulfed them, and white fire seared.

Oh God, she's going to burn alive! No sooner had the thought surfaced in a panicked horror than the fire was sucked back, retreating more and more until it was a thin thread that trailed out of Tasi's *kyrat* completely, breaking free with a small topaz spark as it funnelled into the High Emperor's *kyrat*.

The glow vanished abruptly from the room and silence descended as the High Emperor tilted his head forward and looked into Tasi's eyes. His *kyrat* was black with multi-colours sparkling inside it.

The mark of the High Emperor of the Old Way.

Everyone knelt, Heddham forced to do the same as Elyse's fingers dug once more into his arm in warning. But he couldn't take his eyes from Tasi, could only watch in fear.

Was she all right? She was so still.

"Good and faithful Guardian," the High Emperor said, his voice smooth and young but filled now with something more. Something old and deep. Otherworldly. "The burden is no longer yours. You have done your duty." He took his hands from her cheeks, catching her as she fell, lowering her to the floor of the dais where she lay unmoving. Standing, he looked down at her and then around the room. "Behold," he said, "the Guardian."

Heddham looked around, saw the flicker of distress on the AMS's face, the tightness of the black-skinned wench's lips, and the fear exploded in him.

He stared at Tasi, willing her to get up, to move, to do *something* to show she was all right.

Nothing happened, the room was silent, every man and wench and child kneeling. And Tasi lay unmoving.

He couldn't do it, couldn't take it. He had to know.

Standing up, he was surprised when no one stopped him. He started to walk slowly, expecting to be challenged, expecting to feel the burn of laser fire.

Nothing happened. No one spoke, no one challenged.

The High Emperor watched him with Tasi unconscious at his feet.

Heddham moved faster, the last few steps a full on run as he threw himself onto the dais and slid his hands under Tasi's shoulders, cradling her upper body to him, brushing the hair back from her forehead.

A chill froze him. Her face was white, the only colour that of her *kyrat* which was now a glittering black. Pure black with no colour. Her chest barely rose and fell.

Oh God! "Tasi! Tasi, open your eyes!" Panicked, he looked up at the High Emperor. "Don't let her die. *You can't let her die!*"

Green eyes, old with wisdom, gazed down at him. “The Guardian has done her duty.”

“Aye, but is she all right? *Is she all right?*” Heart pounding in his chest, he rocked Tasi, looking wildly down at her and then back up at the High Emperor. “Is she all right?”

“Daamen, a Guardian’s duty is to guard that which is most precious. She has fulfilled that which she was born to. Would you deny her rest now?”

He couldn’t believe it. “Rest? Deny her *rest*?” Hugging her closer, trying to will his strength into her body, he almost snarled. “She fought for you, guarded your source, saw her friends die, and left me because of *you*. She gave up *everything* for *you*! Tasi, *your* Guardian, deserves to *live*!”

The High Emperor regarded him steadily. “With you? You would seek to take her from me?”

“I would take her anywhere she wanted to go. I would defy the highest power for her. Tasi is *my life*.” Trembling, Heddham glared up at him, fury and sorrow and fear making him shake even more. “’Tis nothing I wouldn’t do for her, give for her. She is *my lass*.”

Reaching out, the High Emperor placed a pale hand on Heddham’s head, then he knelt with a fluid elegance and looked deeply into Heddham’s eyes, having to look up to do so, but without a qualm. Time ticked past as they looked at each other.

The room was silent.

Everyone waited.

Heddham refused to look away. Refused to back down from the spark of colours that arced out of the High Emperor’s *kyrat*. Refused to hide the tears that spilled free and ran down his cheeks.

“Would you give your life for hers?” The High Emperor’s words drifted through the room.

“Aye.” Heddham’s one word was hard on the heels of the question.

“You didn’t have to think about it.”

“’Tis nothing to think about. She is my life, my love. She is everything to me.” Heddam tightened his hold on Tasi, his big hand cradling her head gently even as he continued to gaze steadily, angrily, pleadingly into the High Emperor’s green eyes. “Take me if you must, but let Tasi live and enjoy life. She deserves to live, High Emperor. Please.”

The High Emperor looked down at Tasi, reaching out to touch her pale cheek, his finger tip brushing across the black *kyrat*. Straightening, he looked down at Heddam.

“Please,” Heddam begged. “*Please.*”

And as he spoke, the last breath left Tasi’s body and she went limp.

“Nay.” He whispered, and his heart broke. “Don’t leave me, Tasi, *don’t leave me!*”

There was a movement, a flash of brilliant white light, and he knew nothing more.

Eleven

He awoke slowly but before he could open his eyes, memory came rushing back and it bit deep into his heart with a choking hold. “Oh God, Tasi! Tasi, nay!”

He wanted to cry, wanted to scream, wanted to—

“What?”

He froze.

“Heddam? What do you want?”

It couldn't be! Opening his eyes, he looked straight up into big, brown doe-eyes. Long white hair streaked with gold slithered over slim shoulders.

Hope warred with disbelief and sorrow. Reaching out, he touched that glorious hair. “Are you... are you a ghost?”

“You wish,” she retorted, and grinned.

She was alive!

He catapulted up in the bed, grabbing her and yanking her down into his arms, hugging her fiercely, scattering kisses across her face, hugging her again, burying his face in her hair and breathing deeply of her scent.

“You’re alive,” he said hoarsely. “Oh, God, *you’re alive!*”

He didn’t know how long he held her, silent tears streaming down his face, his whole big body shaking as she whispered soothing words and rubbed his back. Heddam didn’t want to let her go in case she disappeared in a sear of white energy.

Some time had passed after he'd stopped crying and simply held her. She sat across his lap, her bottom snuggled into the apex of his thighs, one of her arms around his neck, the other under his arm as she continued to rub her hand soothingly across his back. Her free hand played in his hair.

And finally he could believe it.

She was really alive.

Easing back enough to allow their eyes to meet, he gazed at her searchingly. "'Tis a miracle."

Her own eyes were damp but she smiled. "Thanks to you."

"I couldn't let you go. I couldn't." Reaching up, he cupped her cheek in one big palm and ran his thumb back and forth across her high cheekbone. "Oh, God, Tasi. I love you so much. I'd have faced anyone and anything to keep you."

"You did," she replied soberly. "I heard later that you'd offered your life for mine. You ever do that again and I'll personally see that you give it!" Catching his hand, she squeezed his fingers lovingly. "You are such a beautiful person, Heddam."

He gave a shaky laugh. "I think 'tis my line for you, lass."

"No. You are beautiful. You love, you care, and you are selfless."

"Not when it comes to you. I'll keep you any way I can."

"I love you."

He kissed her tenderly. "And I love you. I won't ever let you go. I'm beside you all the way, Tasi." He kissed her again. "I don't know what the High Emperor did to bring you back, but 'tis a miracle."

She looked at him. "It was your selflessness that made him bring me back. That and..." She shrugged uncomfortably and looked away.

"What?"

"Nothing, you need your rest and—"

Slipping a finger beneath her chin, he turned her face to his and saw the troubled expression on her face. "What 'tis wrong?"

She sighed. "I'm the last Guardian. He brought me back for our love, your selflessness, your willingness to sacrifice yourself for me. But he has a purpose for me, too."

Heddam stilled. *Oh stars, now what?*

"It's not that bad," she chided him.

"Just tell me. I can't handle the suspense."

"I need to train and guide the young Guardians. There's no other Guardian alive, and they're too young at this stage to guard him fully."

"You're going to guard him alone?" Heddam was appalled.

"Don't mistake the High Emperor, Heddam. He's young, strong, and the power source is at full strength. The High Emperor will wield it wisely, and Aora is safe."

Heddam studied her face, seeing the wariness. "But his young Guardians don't have that same power and control yet."

"No."

"But you do."

She nodded.

"You have to stay here and train them."

"Yes."

He nodded. "I understand."

With a sigh of relief, she pressed a light kiss to his lips, which grew deeper and hotter.

When she lifted her mouth from his, he managed to say, "I'll let Simon know I'm staying here." When he went to kiss her again, he found his mouth blocked by her hand.

Her eyes were stern. "No."

"Nay?"

“No, you’re not staying here.”

Heddam stared at her for a few seconds before frowning. “You needn’t think ’tis ended between us, Tasi. My place is by your side and—”

“Exactly. I totally agree.” She tapped his nose. “But not glued to it.”

“I don’t understand—”

“I have a plan.”

“The last time you said that I didn’t wake up for twenty-four hours.”

Tasi grinned.

“’Tis not funny, lass. Now your plan better agree with me or ’tis going to be some yelling. And ’twill be you yelling, because I know what I want, and I’m going to have it. You.” He nipped the tip of her finger.

Grinning, Tasi shook her hand. “Trust me, I think you’ll like my plan.”

“Let’s have it, then.”

“You’ve got your arms folded and a mutinous look on your face. Are you sure you want to hear it?”

“If it involves keeping you with me and happy, I’m all ears.”

Her gaze grew serious. “I’m needed here to train the Guardians. We have a loyal military system now. The Old Way is back in charge and the High Emperor is at peak power.”

Heddam nodded while idly playing with her hair.

“I’m going to stay and train the Guardians.”

“Aye.”

“And you’re going to return to your trade ship and trade as usual with your friends.”

Heddam’s face darkened.

“Now keep listening. We both have a job to do. But I’m not required here all the time, I can slip away and spend time on your planet, getting to know your family. If you still want me to.”

“Well, hell, aye, of course I do, but—”

“There are going to be times when I can’t be with you, when the training is a little... secretive.”

“Aye, but—”

“So, I propose this. I work here, you work on your trade ship, I spend time when I can with you and your family on Daamen, and you spend time here with me.”

“Lass, I don’t know—”

She regarded him steadily. “’Tis what Simon and Cam do.”

He started. “When did you talk to them?”

“I contacted them and let them know what happened. They’re waiting to hear from you.”

Heddam digested this in silence, then sighed. “Lass, Simon and Cam have different relationships.”

“What is so different? Their wives are often away and can be gone for a month or more at a time in unknown territories and planets doing stars know what. Many of the Daamens travel away from their homes for a month or more while trading, and return home at the end of trips to spend time with their loved ones. What is so different about us both working and spending our time together between our jobs, like your fellow Daamens are doing and have been doing for hundreds of years?”

Put like that it made a lot of sense. But... “They all return home to Daamen, and Simon and Cam know roughly when they can spend time with their wives. With your duties here, how do I know our times will match?” He twirled a lock of her hair around his finger. “Lass, I couldn’t stand to be away from you for months at a time.”

“You won’t have to.” She grinned and leaned into him. “My High Emperor’s little gift to us both is a ship power sourced by him. I can get to Daamen within days, and the same for you. Or if your ship is heading home, you can notify me and I’ll come and get you and we can either go to your home or back here.”

It sounded tempting. It was do-able. Heddham looked at her. If it meant keeping her and Tasi being happy...

“And an extra little bonus.” She kissed him lightly. “I’m allowed to have my time off at the same time as you, so all we need to do is work out our times and we can be together then.”

“It sounds good...”

“It’s as good as your people do now,” she pointed out. “It’s just that I’m on a different planet. And I’m safer than Des or Sabra,” she added slyly.

“All right, lass, you’ve convinced me.” Heddham laughed. “’Tis not that much different from what my people do now. All right, you come to my planet when able, and I’ll come here.” A thought occurred to him. “Will I be welcome here?”

“Of course. You are free to come and go.”

“What of my family?”

She sighed. “I’m afraid not. I can visit them, but their time here, well, the High Emperor won’t agree. I’ve asked him. Aora remains a closed planet.” A blush filled her cheeks. “I am sorry, Heddham, but I promise to spend as much time with you and them as I can.” She added in a rush, “And if we have children, they, too, will spend every moment they can get to know your family and culture.”

Children? Heddham blinked and grinned. “So we’re having children?”

Her lashes dropped demurely. “Only if you want.”

“So let me get this straight. We both work at the jobs we love, our off time is coordinated and spent on either of our planets, and our children will be brought up to know both sides of their heritage.”

“And when they’re old enough, they will choose where they live and go,” she said. “If you want them to spend time on your planet with your family when we’re both working, they will, just as they can spend time here. The children are ours, and our lives will be a combination.” She held her breath. “What do you think?”

Heddham smiled slowly. “I like it. I like it a lot. Will you marry me?”

She fluttered her lashes. “Of course.”

“I suppose my parents can’t come here for the wedding?”

Tasi immediately looked stricken. “No. Oh God, Heddam, I am so sorry. The best I can do is have the ceremony broadcasted to them. I was hoping, you know... a wedding here with my people, and then we could go to Daamen and have a second wedding there—or do it there first, I don’t know—and then we could go somewhere quiet—anywhere you want, on Daamen or wherever—and we could—”

He laughed and placed a finger on her lips. “Easy, lass. Easy.”

Tasi bit her lip. “Heddam, I—”

“Nay.” He sobered. “Tasi, I love you. I would give my life for you and I’ll do anything to make you happy. I was even prepared to give up my trading life to stay with you. Instead, you came up with a solution for us both to do what we love and still have a life together.” Drawing her down to him, he kissed her tenderly. “You are the best thing that ever fell into my life.”

“And you’re the best thing that ever caught me.” She grinned back up at him.

Their kiss grew deep, hot, hungry, and he felt the heat invade his body. The warmth from her *kyrat* played along his skin, and he saw the soft glow pulsating from the corner of his eyes.

Wanting her, needing to be closer, he started to flick the buttons on her shirt open.

“What do you think you’re doing, trader?” she murmured, her hand sliding over his stomach under the cover, dipping lower and creating delicious havoc with his senses.

“Just getting a head start on our new life.” Lifting his head he grinned down at her wickedly. “Staking my claim all over again.”

“Ooohh. Stake me, stake me.” She winked. “As long as I get to stake my claim as well.”

“Little Guardian, you staked your claim on me from the moment we met.”

“You say the sweetest things,” she breathed into his mouth, right before he took her breath away.

Heddam staked his claim on her once more.

And staked it for the rest of their lives.

Meet

Angela Verdenius

Born in Victoria, Australia, my childhood was spent in a variety of places, both in towns and the outback. Now settled in Western Australia, I work as a nurse. A love of animals has me involved in animal welfare, and certainly explains why the cats hog my bed and hot water bottle!

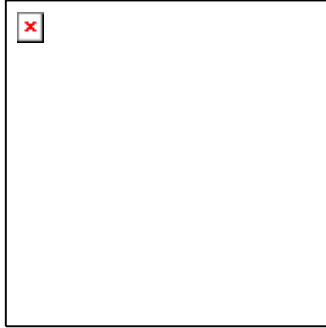
Reading has always been my escape, writing my dream. Horror, myths, legends, fantasy and history – there are no limits to the wonders to be found. And romance? Well, that adds the spice, hope and happiness ever after.

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