



Viola Grace

Sector Guard 5

STAR
BREAKER

With an asteroid heading to Morganti, Kale volunteers to retrieve the Star Breaker, a weapon that has the ability to shatter anything in its way. When he takes possession, he feels a familiar presence, a star's Avatar is trapped within the sphere.

Carella has been waiting for her freedom and when her sphere collides with the asteroid, she is naked, free, and in the mood to blow something up.

Kale is struck by her beauty and power and she wants nothing more than a comforting touch after her violent venting. Upon returning to Morganti, they find out who she is, but not why her memory has been wiped. Together, they may find a few answers to questions they had never even imagined asking, including *How could a Terran who disappeared two years earlier have spent the last four hundred years as the Star Breaker?*

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Star Breaker
Copyright © 2009 Viola Grace
ISBN: 978-1-55487-432-3
Cover art by Martine Jardin

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Published by Devine Destinies
An imprint of eXtasy Books
Look for us online at:
www.devinedestinies.com

**STAR BREAKER
SECTOR GUARD BOOK 5**

BY

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CHAPTER ONE

“So, to recap. We have an unstoppable asteroid heading for Morganti and no way to save the planet. We have five days to find a way to stop it, and only a rumour of something called a Star Breaker that we can’t track down.” Kale looked around at the members of the Guard who had stayed on to help with the evacuation. Their faces were solemn and serious.

As the living mind of Morganti, his very life was in danger, but Kale took the stand that the people of his world must come first. He could not evacuate regardless, he died when the planet did.

“I think Mala has received more information on the Star Breaker. She was close to pinning down a location when last we communicated.” Isabi spoke for his wife, Mala. Her work on the evacuation crafts had been tireless and the Guards just let her run with it. “She is going to try and make the meeting, but her schedule is a little hectic at this point.”

“Noted. But any information she can gather on

this mechanism will be useful." Gant pushed Kale back and spoke through their shared body, leaving his host to watch. "We need to engage in action as rapidly as we can. While I have enjoyed the last few months with you, I had wanted to look forward to centuries as host to the Sector Guard."

Isabi nodded in agreement. "We are pulling out all the stops, Gant. If anything can be done, it will be."

Mala darted in through the door, screaming, "I found it!"

Her husband was on his feet in an instant. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. Confirmed it with satellite scans in the area. We just have to hit the mines and negotiate with them."

"I will do it." All the faces turned toward Kale's body and inside it, he blinked in surprise. Gant never left the surface. He could, but he chose not to. This must indeed be very important to him.

Are you sure you wish to leave the surface? You have not done so in the whole time we have been linked. Kale wanted to make sure that Gant knew what he was getting into.

Yes, Kale. I want to, I need to do what I can to save this place and maintain the hope that the Guard is giving to the planets in the area. I know that you tune out the conversations I have with other worlds, but there is a feeling of hope now that has not been there

before. I don't want my death to slow the spread of that hope. I don't want your death. We have been together for years and I have no urge to end my life at this point and time, in any manner.

Then let's get the shuttle warmed up and get to Mala's co-ordinates before you start to cry.

Shut up, Kale. The others were looking at him curiously. "I will need a shuttle. I believe my old conveyance is standing by."

"I have inserted a few upgrades to the navigation systems and have programmed in the co-ordinates that I was given."

Fixer was close and he could see the deep circles around her eyes. She was exhausting herself trying to save Morganti and the base. He could and would do the same. "Thank you, Fixer. Thank you all for your efforts on my behalf. I will endeavour to obtain the weapon with all speed so that we may put this matter behind us." Kale-Gant was sincere. Their attempts to help him were humbling. He would carry on with whatever information they could give him.

Flying in silence for two days had been enough time for Kale to start talking to Gant out loud. He didn't mind sharing his body with the soul of the planet, but it was easier to pretend that they were separate beings sometimes. With the life or death of their planet at stake, he feared it could be their last chance to act as individuals in the same body.

If Morganti was destroyed, Kale would follow, Gant could survive, but he would have to wait until the surface was habitable again before he could take on another avatar.

Kale had already outlived his Berhar lifespan by over a hundred years. His agreement to become an avatar had come after he had been thawed out by the Alliance and offered this posting. The power of a planet would keep him alive and fend off the plague that was originally due to end his life in a matter of days.

Being the last of his species was quite the burden, but with the Berhar viral plague in his system, it would never be possible to have offspring that would be healthy. Gant's energy kept the virus at bay and contained, but if Kale died, the body would be immolated the instant the asteroid hit. The disease containment was part of the deal he had struck with the Alliance. No part of his body or the virus would be allowed to survive. Fortunately, it had been designed to destroy his kind and his kind alone.

Bio weaponry of that kind was now forbidden and punishable by planetary containment, but there was no way for Berhar to defend itself against the virus released by one of its own. As a scientist, he believed that the only way to save their society was to enact a survival of the fittest. The irony was the plague was one hundred

percent fatal. Kale had been found dying by one of the Scorchers sent to the surface to burn off the infected dead. The woman had taken pity on him, a young man dying with his family, and arranged a cryogenic chamber for him. Telepathic communications had allowed him to stipulate the agreement between himself and the Alliance, including the conditions of his awakening. When all the conditions were met, they woke him up and he met Gant in a flurry of power and energy. He came to life that day and Gant kept him and everyone around them safe from the virus that surged through his blood.

While the Alliance administration were aware of his origins, none of the other Guards had come close enough to him to find out where he had come from. He just blended in with their conferences and kept to the administration of the planet.

Controlling supply shipments to the base, assuring an influx of new businesses to support the increasing staff and negotiating with the Citadel for a training base were all part and parcel of his duties as the avatar of Morganti.

It was boring work, tedious work, but it was steady and it was what kept the first complete Sector Guard base functioning. And it was his responsibility. It made him feel part of something for the first time since he learned that his planet

and all others like him were dead. Kale had been the only survivor. Gant's loneliness had called to him and he had answered.

Now they were on a mission to insure that their collaboration did not cease. Kale had never felt less like the last one of his kind. The Sector Guard were his kind and they needed his help.

CHAPTER TWO

“**T**his is it?” The scepticism in Kale-Gant’s voice was palpable. His tour guide smiled at his surprise.

“This is the Star Breaker. In use for over four hundred years by my people, it has kept us safe from damage caused by encroaching particulates and other races who would care to take over our mining operations.” Dramek’s chest puffed with pride at his race’s accomplishments.

The item that they were discussing was hanging motionless off the edge of one of the mining platforms. It was a sphere fourteen feet in diameter with one opening port on the side facing the blackness of space. The port was closed and the mineral that the sphere was made out of defied their scans. Whatever was inside was as much a mystery as how to operate it. “How does it work?”

“You merely aim the port at the object you want to destroy and the port will open.”

"What about maintenance? It has to have some repair access."

"We have one citizen trained to work on the Star Breaker, as his father was, and his father before him. You get the idea. No one except his family has seen inside this weapon for more than two hundred years. They took it over exclusively at that time."

"So what are the terms of the W'Chan? What do you want from me or Morganti for use of the Star Breaker?" Kale-Gant crossed his arms and prepared to fight for the use of the one item that could help them save his world.

"Movik the Keeper will come with you and maintain the sphere. Aside from that, we are forbidden to charge for the use of the Star Breaker." He looked uncomfortable, twitching and scratching at his neck with one of the three arms the W'Chan sported. "We expect to get it back in operational condition."

"I can agree to not breaking the sphere myself, but cannot swear to regular wear and tear on the mechanism. If that occurs, I will not be held by the agreement." They extended their hand and one of the grubby appendages of Dramek closed the deal. A deep sigh of relief flowed through the Avatar. He had the weapon. Now he just needed to get home and use it.

"Done. Movik is on his way up. He wants to be

done with this and back at home with the Star Breaker as quickly as he can. Don't worry about his manner, he is always a quiet one." With that warning, Dramek left the observation deck of the platform.

Kale-Gant was left alone.

Did you think that it was a little too easy? They didn't argue, fight or try to kill us. Kale was bewildered. He had been prepared to spend the stipend that the Alliance had given to Morganti for the first hundred year lease.

Well, they are not being honest about the Star Breaker. I can feel something inside that sphere. It's calling to me.

He couldn't feel it, not even through Gant's senses. *What kind of a call?*

It is a humming in my mind. A tickling tease at my nerve endings. The last time I felt this type of a touch was a few hundred years ago.

What was it?

The touch of a star. There was a sentient planet symposium five hundred years ago, two stars attended and this is the same type of flaring energy.

Curious. Could a star fit inside that sphere?

No. Not even a portion of one. That is what makes the energy signature so puzzling, and so teasingly familiar. It can't be, but it feels like it. Gant's frustration simmered below the surface and continued as the scowling W'Chan called Movik appeared and carried tanks of fluids onto their

shuttle.

"I am Movik, let's get this over with." He gestured for them to board their shuttle.

Kale-Gant was perplexed as the W'Chan took charge of their expedition. Bemused, they followed him into the shuttle and watched as he arranged the grapples to pick up the sphere and fasten it to the bottom of their shuttle.

Kale took up his position at the helm and programmed in the coordinates to the first jump. The ship was handling as if there was no large weight attached. In fact, it was manoeuvring as if it lighter than usual. It was impossible, of course, but a steady feeling.

Moving through the mining area was tricky, but with his ship handling so delicately, it was much easier than the journey in.

Ships pulled out of their path, silent fish in the reef of the ice and rocks of the W'Chan mines. Movik didn't say anything. He simply took over the only cabin and locked the door.

I guess he doesn't want to talk. Kale shook his head at the antisocial behaviour. He still had questions about the Star Breaker, but he now could not ask them until the W'Chan reappeared.

I suppose not. But the feeling that I mentioned earlier is getting stronger.

What kind of feeling?

Anticipation and amusement, mainly. Whatever is in that sphere has a sense of humour and is eager to try

something new.

I wonder why I can't feel what you are sensing?

Perhaps it is because it is speaking to me on the same level as other planets do? You tend to tune those out.

Well, that is a deliberate evasion. This is odd, no matter how hard I try I can only hear static.

Stop trying so hard. Simply let it flow into your consciousness, just as you did with me. Perhaps that is the problem. Your mind is already full of mine.

As much as Kale didn't want to admit it, Gant was probably right. He didn't have much room in his mind for Gant, let alone another consciousness. He would have to deal with the buzzing in the back of his mind.

Movik remained in the cabin for two days. They were entering the final jump ship that the Alliance had arranged for them and making the leap into Morganti space when he emerged. "I need to run some diagnostics on the sphere. I need to get it into an orbital dock to check it."

Kale blinked. Those were the first words that the man had spoken. "There is no orbital dock near the planet, but we will arrange space on one of the evacuation vessels for you."

The W'Chan snorted and rubbed his hands together nervously. "I need complete privacy for the procedures. There is the matter of proprietary technology at stake."

"We understand, but Morganti does not have a

station and you will have to make do.” Kale-Gant was speaking and as such used *we* more frequently. “Your privacy will be assured.”

He made the arrangements with one of the battle cruisers standing by to evacuate the inhabitants of the planet. They even agreed to cut off the recorders in the hold when Movik went out to manage the maintenance.

It was a bit anticlimactic. He put on an EVA suit, left the shuttle through the airlock and hauled along the fluids that he had brought with them from the mining station.

As Movik returned to the interior of the shuttle, Gant sent a broadcast of surprise to Kale. *She’s awake.*

Kale was almost as surprised, *She?*

She was the avatar for a star. I don’t know what happened, or why she is here, but that is what is inside that sphere.

How is she still alive?

A star’s energy burns for millions of years. There is no reason that the avatar should burn out more swiftly.”

Kale was shocked. To think that a living being was inside that hull of metal and unseen by living eyes was horrifying, but his agreement kept him from shattering the sphere as soon as he got it to the atmosphere of the planet. Frankly, he didn’t even know what atmosphere she breathed.

Movik removed his helmet. "We need to head for the asteroid now. The Star Breaker is ready for action."

Back to the matter at hand. First they needed to destroy that asteroid, then he would work on freeing whatever was inside the Star Breaker.

CHAPTER THREE

She was moving. She could feel it, even without being able to see any of her surroundings. The stimulants that now coursed through her system woke her completely and rapidly to full alertness.

Her senses could not expand beyond the sphere that held her, she would have to wait until she was pointed at her target to find out what it was. There was also someone nearby, she could almost feel him as if he were in the sphere with her. A planet and his Avatar were near her. That was surprising. In all her centuries in this shell, they had never let another planet or star near her.

She would deal with that later. Now she could feel an approaching mass, faster and stronger than any of the passive meteors she had destroyed in the past. This would require a lot of skill to destroy. She was positively giddy at the prospect.

As they got closer, she began to project energy into the shell. It would hold it until she opened the

port and directed it outward. Her mind assessed and sought the weak points in the rock, ice and gasses coming toward her. When the out-riding particles hit her sphere, it came as quite a shock. The pilot was risking his life to get her the perfect shot, not a courtesy that she was used to.

It was foolhardy. The shell she was in would survive a few hits by projectiles, the shuttle would not. If he was the Avatar that she was sensing, he had a planet to go home to. She would not let him waste his life in pursuit of the ideal attack point.

A surge of power released the magnetic clamps that held her conveyance and she used her power to shoot ahead of the shuttle. Flying blind was her favourite part of the job. Flying at all was a relief from the monumental tensions that pulled at her skin in an effort to split her apart. Working for the W'Chan miners had satisfied her urge to expel her power, but it lacked an emotional satisfaction that she craved.

Stepping between the shuttle and the asteroid satisfied that craving. Opening the vent and seeing the asteroid she was about to destroy also held a certain attraction and the focus and direction of the energies of a star gave her a rush that had been unparalleled.

As her power flowed forth, she watched the disintegration of her sphere with some surprise. The remains of the asteroid flowed past her body

in chunks and she felt what she had never thought to feel again. Home. The shattered rock had been her home.

* * * *

"What was that? What happened? What did you do?" The normally taciturn Movik was frantic. When the sphere uncoupled itself, he had started to wring his hands and when it shattered into blazing particles that they could see from their vantage point above the breaking asteroid, he freaked.

"I did nothing. Whatever or whoever was inside that sphere is now out in the cold blackness of space."

"What do you mean *who*? What do you know?"

"The planet consciousness inside me felt the proximity of a star. That star is now humming happily as the creature from the sphere tears apart those rocks." It was hard to see, but here and there a form appeared, shattered a rock between its hands and then dodged away to strike another one. At the rate it was going, the great asteroid would be head-sized balls when it struck Morganti's atmosphere, easily destroyed by entry.

"An Avatar? Oh, nononononono." He was clutching at his head now, rocking back and forth, moaning as he watched the fragments of the

sphere come apart wherever they touched the debris. "Where did the asteroid come from?"

Kale had to ask the base for that question. "This is Kale-Gant to Sector Guard Base Morganti."

Mala's tired tone came through the communications unit. "Go ahead, Avatar."

"Has an origin for the rock been determined?"

There was silence for a few moments while she brought up the information. "It has been travelling for just over four hundred years. Remnant of the Emhara system. Their white dwarf went black, the nearest planet to the star exploded, but everyone was evacuated. Is everything okay?"

"Yes. The bulk of the asteroid has been destroyed. Did you get the shield up and running?"

"Only just. When you get back, you are going to have to work on increasing food yields. I am afraid I had to replace quite a bit of energy and the commissary is pissed."

"Whatever you need, Fixer. Make me a list."

"Will do. See you when you get home. Sector Base Morganti, out."

Kale turned to Movik. "Whoever made the shell, made it from the same alloy that the occupant is so cheerfully tearing apart. The Emhara system ring a bell?"

If it was possible for Movik to turn any greener, he would have. As it was, he sat on the floor,

rocking himself into a pattern saying, “Nonononononononono,” as a constant chant.

With the momentum of the oncoming disaster modified by the lack of forward movement, Kale guided the shuttle closer. He wanted a closer look at the occupant. When she came out, he focussed the scans on her and took in the pale skin, midnight hair and humanoid body. It wasn't until she turned to wave at the camera that he saw the appalling truth.

She was a Terran.

With her job done, she propelled herself to the shuttle by unseen means. Being completely naked, she obviously did not have a rocket pack to assist, nor did she need to breathe.

A polite knock on the airlock had him granting access before he could think better of it. He opened the outer door and quickly had a full decontamination run done on her before he would open the inner door. She was fine. Completely clean and impervious to his scans.

When the inner door opened, she simply walked in as if she were a regular member of the crew. Movik was still rocking and moaning in the corner and she looked curiously at Kale-Gant before trying to speak.

She tried again, then paused and actually drew a breath. “I keep forgetting that you can't speak if you don't breathe. Hello. I am the Avatar to the

dead star, Emhara."

"I am Kale, Avatar to Gant, sentient planet of Morganti. We are in your debt, Star Breaker." He executed a formal bow, not easy considering that his body was responding to her nudity in a most enthusiastic manner.

"It was nothing, but it does beg the question how long was I in that sphere? I was set to remain for four hundred years or so. How long has it been?" She was asking Movik and he was squirming under her direct regard.

"It was four hundred and eighty two years, mistress."

"Did you plan to release me?"

"No, mistress. And there were many who made profit on your skills indirectly, mistress."

"Did you participate in these events?"

"No, mistress."

"Then you may live on. You did your duty and fed me as required. You are now released from your obligation and may seek employment elsewhere in the universe."

Movik grovelled in his gratitude. "Thank you, mistress. May I continue to serve you?"

"I cannot think of what capacity you may serve in. Perhaps these will have better employment for your skills." Her gesture took in Kale-Gant and it was a relief to know that she saw them both.

"Lady, as much as I am enjoying the view, I do

have one question for you."

"Ask it." Her smile reached her eyes and the soft grey reached into Kale's soul to pull on his heart.

"How did you come to be in that sphere?"

"I think we need to sit and have a cup of tea. Hmm...I haven't had tea in hundreds of years. Make it a good one." She sat at the crew table in the common area, folded her hands elegantly on the table and smiled at the two men in the shuttle.

Kale went to one of the benches and out of the storage compartment, drew out a female uniform. "I would be much more at ease if you wore this, Star Breaker."

She started to step into the form-fitting leggings and pulled up the suit over all the portions of her anatomy that caused him distress. "Then I shall wear it. Now make that tea."

CHAPTER FOUR

“According to our documentation, Emhara was a white dwarf star that burned out over five hundred years ago.” Behind Kale’s eyes Gant was astounded. For an Avatar to survive without a host world or star for this long was almost unheard of.

“I suppose. I only know that I was Emhara and then everything went dark.” She shrugged. “When I woke, the W’Chan were wiring me into that cage and started using me for their own defences. Or I think that is what happened. I am not one hundred percent sure.”

Gant came forward. “Why were you away from your orbital station when she died?”

The woman cocked her head and concentrated, her silky black hair sliding across her shoulders and down over her breasts. “She sent me away. She gave me the power, took back her mind and sent me away.” She sighed deeply. “I have missed her for a very long time.”

He cocked his head. "That makes a certain amount of sense. Emhara is now a black dwarf star. No more life burns within her."

"That is sad. She was quite good to me, despite our rocky start." The woman smiled softly and they both basked in the gentle glow of her grief.

Gant nodded sharply and went back to the scanners to complete the work started in the cage. He ran the portable units over her, as close to the skin as he could manage without setting off one of those power sparks.

"What is that for?" She seemed only idly curious as Gant ran the scanner past her face.

"We are trying to confirm your original species and the changes made to you by Emhara."

"Oh." She blinked and then their Star Breaker was up and walking to the viewing window on the shuttle. "That knowledge was taken from me when Emhara died. My mind stopped and restarted at that moment. It took me years to figure out that the sphere was not my natural habitat."

Gant turned his back to her for a moment, letting Kale link the scanners to the communications unit. "Sector Guard base Morganti, this is the shuttle Netral. We have found the Star Breaker and need you to analyze the data that we are sending."

Hyder's voice came through loud and clear.

"Data received and analysis underway. Is the Star Breaker everything you thought it would be?"

"The Star Breaker is beyond description. Contact me when the analysis is complete." He flipped the toggle for the communications terminal off.

"What do you think it will show?" She was next to him and he jumped at her voice.

Kale looked into those eyes whose grey lights were hypnotic and swirling with power. "I think it will show that you used to be a member of the Terran species of human. That you carry enough energy controlled inside you to burn a star brightly for eons."

"Terra? I remember something of Terra. I volunteered to come out into space. One of thousands." She sat in the co-pilot's seat and closed her eyes to pull the memories forward. "I was a courier when a wormhole pulled me to Emhara."

In the softest voice possible, he whispered, "What was your name?"

Her eyes snapped open. "It is gone. The star took my name." Sparks of power flowed into her gaze.

Gant was outraged. "That is impossible. I knew Emhara. She would never have done something so vile."

The Star Breaker scowled at him and a distinct

heat began to build in the room. "It is true. I do not think I was a willing Avatar. Emhara used my body as her own. Until she finished with my body I was not allowed to surface."

Gant was reeling at the cruelty and breach of etiquette that had been perpetrated.

Kale spoke, "That is not how it is supposed to be between the Avatar and the host planet."

"I know, but I believe that Emhara was desperate. She needed to clear her system before she died. I just did not choose to join to her. Apparently, women who can link with stars are rare and a female was called for."

"Why a female?"

"Emhara had a strong feminine side that she wanted represented in her Avatar." The woman shrugged gracefully. "Apparently, I fit the bill."

"It is still appalling. Don't you think so, Movik?" The W'Chan jumped when he was directly addressed by the other male. He seemed to be watching the Star Breaker's face with a sort of worshipful attention.

"Uh. Yes. Appalling. Mind you, there were some amazing histories written of Emhara, showing her care for the people in her system until the very end."

That got the woman's attention. "Really? Where can I get these histories? I don't remember much of my early days, or the later ones for that matter."

"You would have to apply to the Alliance archive. They were all sent away centuries ago. I only know about it because of my place as the keeper of the Star Breaker."

"Well, that job is over now." She looked over at him with a scowl.

Movik shrugged. "And that may cost me my life."

Silence fell and Kale served tea. It was very odd. For the star to have taken an unwilling Avatar was strange enough, but for her mind to have been wiped meant that something else had to be in play. He was going to make it his job to find out what. In less than a day, they would be on his turf and he was going to find a way to track down her planet and her people.

Hyder's voice came through the com a few hours later. "I think we have found her identity, but we are having trouble believing it."

"What? Is she Terran or not?" Kale couldn't help but feel a little impatient.

"She is. She was one of the Volunteers. Four years ago. Two years ago a Terran courier named Carella Masal disappeared on a run, ship and all. A spatial anomaly was tracked in the area of her disappearance."

Wormholes were not unheard of, but the likelihood of it taking her through space and time

was... "How did she end up in the past?"

"No one knows. She was delivering a data pack for the Alliance that was considered too sensitive for a burst transfer. She disappeared after making her last check-in at Research Station Thirteen." Hyder paused. "There was no contact with her after that, and no trace of her shuttle at the next station. She was presumed dead."

"Do you have a physical profile or hologram?"

The Avatar was leaning on his chair, tears shining in her eyes as she listened to their calm discussion.

The Commander was silent for a few moments. "Sending. Does the picture look familiar?"

Hovering in the air between them was a hologram of the Star Breaker. Her statistics scrolled down a readout below her phantom feet. The height, weight, hair and eye colour matched hers to the letter.

The woman's hand shook as she reached out to touch the name. "Carella Masal. I am Carella Masal. But I still don't know *who* I am."

"One thing at a time. We have your name. Your life may come to you through that." Hyder's voice was kind. There was a reason that he had been chosen as the Commander of their odd grouping. He was the most level headed of the bunch, and he had the ability to see patterns in everything. Seer had his own foresight, but it revolved around

his own life and the love lives of others. Not very useful in the long run.

Kale-Gant was happy that he had offered Morganti as the first Sector Guard base. These women and men had been selected for the honour of defending worlds and it was interesting to see them grow into their talents. He was at a loss of what to do for the Terran female crying softly next to him. "Thank you for the information, Hyder."

"There is one more thing, Kale. Another, larger, asteroid has been spotted on the edge of the system. This one is a planet killer. Is Carella up for another workout?"

"Do I have a few days?" Her voice was husky from weeping.

"Four or five."

She gathered herself and cleared her throat. "No problem. I will see you when we land and we will discuss its trajectory then, Carella out." She flipped the toggle to disengage the com and then looked at her hand. "How did I know how to do that?"

"If you were a Courier, then you would have spent your life inside a shuttle. After a while it would have been like breathing." He tried to stay calm, wanted nothing more than to take her in his arms, but the protection that Gant afforded him stopped him. He could not touch another living being skin to skin. The energy keeping the virus

within him wrapped him and kept him safe from everyone else in the worlds. He couldn't even offer comfort. "We will arrive in less than two hours. That is Morganti over there." To distract her, he pointed out the view screen and she smiled slightly, then took in the approaching planet.

"It's beautiful."

"Thank you. I am very proud of it. I was thinking of restricting tech on the surface, but then realized that it would preclude having any fun visitors."

"Wise choice." She laughed, a light and relaxed sound. Not true joy, but it still warmed his hearts.

They passed the hours in casual conversation about his planet's surface and his enthusiasm for returning. They did not talk of Avatars and Kale-Gant was relieved. She had reason to hate the living worlds, and that she seemed disinclined to do so, showed that once upon a time, she had been a fair and open minded woman.

He only hoped she would one day be that way again.

CHAPTER FIVE

Meeting the Sector Guard had been a quiet introduction. The second asteroid that her senses had vaguely picked up was on its way and it made its sister look like a pea next to a walnut. This one was a planet killer.

She had three days to get ready to face the second asteroid and in that time, she needed to find out who she was and how she had come to Emhara. Not knowing who she was bothered her more than she wanted to admit.

The Guards had been polite but wary when they were introduced and as soon as the Azon known as Hyder ran scanners over her, the intermingling was over. She was sent to a shuttle hangar with Mala, the Fixer. Apparently, her radiation emissions were a little intense for the average living being. Fixer had a plan and it amused Carella to give in to the smaller woman.

"So what position were you in, in the sphere?" Mala had her diagnostic equipment at the ready.

The hangar was unusually empty. The radiation that was being put out was tolerable, but only if Carella stayed calm.

Carella took up a spread eagle position and explained. "My hands and feet were bound to links inside the sphere to keep me lined up with the port. I would build up a charge and then blast it out the hole. It was easy, really. I didn't have to think, just started to build a charge when the keeper started the fluid drips. As soon as they wore out, I would fall asleep again."

"Wow. That's horrible. And you passed centuries like that?" Mala was darting around her with the monitors and making frantic notes.

"Apparently. The memories are slow to come back, but Hyder assures me that they are still there. I just need to want them to return." It struck her that Mala was a little too free and easy with the radiation. "Are you impervious to the radiation, like Kale is?"

Mala just chuckled. "No. I am alright for the casual exposure. My cells heal the damage as soon as it occurs. I will be hungrier than hell after this, by the way, but relatively unharmed."

"That's a good thing, I suppose. What are all the measurements you are taking?" She kept her arms and legs splayed for the examination.

"I am creating a suit for you. You can resume a normal pose now. I just needed to see how much

of a passive charge you put out." Mala nodded to her and shot her a happy smile. "I do more tailoring for this place than other work, but it does present some unique challenges."

Carella saw a mound of silvery fabric with some black starbursts on it. "Is that it over there?"

"It is. The studs are conduits for your power and the rest of the material is designed to retain your ambient radiation. Your face does not seem to emit as much power as other parts of you, just in case you were wondering."

"That's comforting, although I have always wanted to have laser eyes." She tried to make eye contact with the woman, but she was busy fiddling with the fabric. Chunks of sheet metal dissolved at Mala's touch and became part of the suit. It was fascinating to watch. Carella was a little surprised when Fixer turned and threw the suit at her.

"Try it on. I can make any adjustments to the fit and then we will work on the exposure and release problem."

Eager to put the suit on, Carella stripped and began tugging on the thick material. It was softer to the touch than she had expected, the star bursts of studs across the suit were beautiful and elegant. Silver and black pulsed on the suit as she settled it against her flesh with a final pass on the seal.

"How does it feel?" Mala was behind her in an

instant, smoothing the fabric and tugging it into place. "It looks good, and your ambient radiation levels have dropped to a normal level."

"That's good. What do the studs do aside from look pretty?" It was impossible to keep from running her hands over the raised dots. They were fun, spiralling across her arms, gathering in a peak over the back of her hand and doing the same across her chest.

"They are vents for your power. If I guessed correctly, you will be able to point your arms and emit a beam of radiation through the vents."

"Really? That is so cool." It was tempting to let fly with a blast to test it, but with Mala so close, she didn't want to hurt the creator of the suit that gave her the possibility of control.

"Don't worry. Kale-Gant is working finding a place for you to try your talents out. You need some control practice and he needs to make sure that no living things are harmed while you get a handle on the funnel effect of the suit."

Finished with the alterations, Mala came around her and smiled brilliantly. "The basics have worked. You are emitting a regular level of radiation, no more than the average human."

"I had to be average to be accepted as a Terran Volunteer, but I don't think I have been human for a very long time."

"It will come back to you. We will make sure it

does."

In a move that surprised them both, Mala rushed forward to give Carella a solid hug. Carella stood quietly before returning the embrace. This was the contact that she had needed from Kale and his personal shielding had kept her from it.

Wiping tears from her eyes, Mala leaned backward and smiled. "Do you like the colour? I can change it."

"It is lovely. But perhaps some red and blue for formal events? I don't want to scorch anyone by accident. Plus, every girl needs a change of clothes." The form fitting jumpsuit made her look like a superhero. Hell, it made her feel like a superhero, just the like the ones she read about in comic books growing up. It suddenly struck her. "I remembered comic books!" She laughed out loud and clapped her hands.

"I will imagine that that is a good thing."

"It is a part of my childhood. A snip of a memory that just came back." She hugged Mala again. "It means that my mind still has pieces of my past inside it. Emhara didn't wipe me clear." Impulsively, she swung the smaller Moreski in a circle while laughing and crying at the same time.

"Carella, I am happy for you, but put me down or I am going to puke." Mala stumbled back as she was suddenly released and laughed out loud. "You have no idea how excited we are to have you

with us. Kale is very pleased that you agreed to come and make your home on Morganti."

"It seems like a lovely world. His offer of a home was very generous, as was Hyder's offer to let me join the Sector Guard." A thought occurred to her. "Does this suit work in space? Does it freeze? I need to work up a plan of attack for the big sister of that asteroid. It's still a few days or so away, but I can go naked if I have to."

Mala chuckled. "You don't have to. This suit will keep warm as you move. It will insulate your body and let you channel your power freely. Did you want to try it? We have set up targets."

"We?"

"Helen and I. She may not have told you, but she is from the same Volunteer section as you. A true Terran. Human, through and through."

"I am sure that she would have mentioned it if she thought it was important. Maybe she knows what comic books are?" It hurt that the woman who knew what she was and where she had come from was keeping it to herself. Pilot had been cold and polite when they met, earning several curious looks from the others. She had mumbled about getting the evacuees to stay put and had left the room.

"She probably does. I seem to recall her mentioning something along those lines when I created Morph's first uniform." Mala snickered.

"That one was a lot worse than yours. She needs all kinds of flaps and closures that you could not even imagine."

"Very skilled detour of the conversation. Can I fly in this?"

She looked confused and stopped her fussing. "Like in a shuttle?"

"No. Atmospheric flight. I used to be able to."

"The suit shouldn't restrict you. Give it a whirl."

When Mala stepped back, Carella took a deep breath and concentrated. Power flowed through her arms, swirled in her abdomen and focussed out through her feet. Slowly and carefully, she released the power into a concentrated swirl of energy and air under her feet and around her body. Up she went. "Cool. This is great."

"Does Hyder know you can do that?"

"I don't have to breathe in space and am self-propelling, so I think it may be a little self-evident. If not, one of us can tell him later." She stretched and turned slowly about six feet up. "How does the suit look from that angle?"

"Great, and I am glad that I didn't put you in a skirt. Go ahead and fly around for a bit, we are sharing a meal at six and if you are late, you will get to experience your suit's communication system." A flip of a switch and a skylight opened above them. "Off you go."

She squealed in delight and waved goodbye as she shot skyward. Time for some alone time.

CHAPTER SIX

Free. Flying through daylight, then night and then daylight again. Frightening flocks of birds, watching her image in the water of Morganti's oceans as she blazed past. Her mind spun with the feeling of joy that being able to fly was giving her.

All those years. Those centuries of being locked inside the sphere and she hadn't gone mad. With everything going on, she hadn't even wondered why she hadn't gone insane until this moment flying over a field full of flowers. Why hadn't she? Did Emhara leave enough of herself behind to keep the madness at bay?

Carella came in for a landing and just walked the surface for a while. The feel of the air in her lungs caused memories to flicker to the surface. Daisies, bluebells and the sweet smell of clover were the scents she was used to. The flowers of Morganti were close, but not what she had grown up with. Memories. She was having a memory of a

meadow like this one where she grew up. Damn!

Taking care not to hurt the flowers or the meadow, Carella gently lifted off and flew to an area that she had passed earlier. Deserted and raw, this was a place where she could practice her art.

The first blast went wide, her right arm shaking with her frustration. The second and third blasts were better, closer to the charred and blackened tree. Finally, it exploded in a burst of charred wood and dust.

She was satisfied, but not happy. Why did that one memory come to her when the others were still hidden?

“Sector Base to Star Breaker.” The voice was emanating from her own throat, using her body to produce the sound.

“Star Breaker, here.”

“You are late for dinner. Please stop blowing up trees and make your way back to the base.”

“Will do.” She didn’t even ask how they knew. Kale-Gant was the planet and Avatar and he would know when her power touched his surface or atmosphere.

Since they had rung the bell, it was only polite for her to show up.

Dinner was being held in the commissary. It was the only place large enough to comfortably

accommodate the twelve of them and the table full of food that Fixer required. "You were not exaggerating. You do need a ton of food after that kind of exposure."

Mala nodded through a mouthful and waved at her to sit. The women and men preparing food were moving with military precision, prepping and presenting dishes as each person took their seats. Apologetically, Carella's server said, "We didn't know what you liked, so we gave you some Terran specialities."

The plate was filled with readily identifiable foods if you squinted a little and used your imagination. A hamburger was holding court, with some orange fries and a purple pickle. Taking a leap of faith, Carella bit in. It wasn't bad. It wasn't good, but it wasn't bad. She smiled and nodded at the servers who seemed relieved. She muscled through the meal while deliberately pushing the thoughts of the consequences of consumption out of her mind.

When she and the others had eaten their fill, Hyder stood up at one end of the long table. "I would like to take this moment to thank Star Breaker for agreeing to join our Guard. We have needed a space-capable talent and are delighted that you are with us.

"I would also like to thank you for the quick work you made of the asteroid. We are impressed

with both your abilities and the talent that you have to wield them. Carella, I thank you from the people of Morganti." He raised his glass

She sat bemused as the others followed.

Kale-Gant stood. "As the Avatar and living presence of Morganti, I would also like to thank you, Carella. Your efforts on our behalf, both past and future, will be remembered by this world."

"You are assuming that I can take out the next asteroid." She shrugged. "I will try, but it is in no way certain. You had best keep your people at a safe distance while I try it. Speaking of people, where is Movik?"

Haaro rubbed at the back of his neck, his wings fluttering. "He seemed fairly competent so we sent him to the orbital station to work on the shuttles."

"Good. That will keep him out of the way." At their startled looks, she expounded on her sentence. "He was my keeper. The keeper of the sphere. When the sphere disintegrated, he was out of a job and a danger to the W'Chan. He knows what the Star Breaker truly is now and having a Terran in confinement warrants a death sentence. He would know that and it would explain his pallor when he first saw my tattoos. So either our people will kill him, or his will. He doesn't have a lot to live for."

They looked surprised. Kale especially. "You have tattoos?"

She chuckled. "Obviously you were looking at my face when I came aboard. I had just gotten my standard Terran tattoos on my abdomen when I left on the mission that ended at Emhara." Carella blinked. "How did I know that?"

"Your memory is coming back. It may have something to do with being in your proper time or just the death of the star, but it does seem to be coming back." Hyder looked pleased and Helen had a hopeful expression on her face. That still bugged Carella, but she couldn't say why. She knew Helen from somewhere and just couldn't put her finger on it.

"Back to business. Why do you want me to wait until the asteroid is closer?"

"We didn't want to chance your first attack draining you."

"I feel fine, and with this lovely meal under my belt so to speak, I am ready for action. Just one thing for Mala though." When the Moreski perked up and looked at her, she nodded to her wrists. "I need the ports on the hands moved more toward the index fingers. I don't point at objects with my middle finger, tempting as it is."

Chuckling, Mala got up and made the small alterations. It was amazing to be able to watch the material and metal flow at her touch. As if the particles had turned to water and then re-solidified. "Try some light."

Nodding, Carella held out her hand toward a dim corner of the commissary and projected a beam of light radiation. The particles clung and then dimmed in a moment. "Much better. Thank you."

Hyder sighed and came around the table. "You are not going to take off until we can get you a full physical workup. I want to know everything that Emhara did to you before we send you to blow up a small moon."

"Then let's get me up on the table. But no stirrups." Shaking her head at Helen's laugh, Carella couldn't help but wonder what the heck were stirrups?

The physical consisted of clipping monitor leads to her collar and cuffs.

"With the radiation that your body puts out, this is the safest way to examine you. Out in space, we won't be able to communicate so I will be attaching monitor pods to you in an effort to find out how it is that you do what you do. Also, there are traces of alterations to your physiology and a power signature that isn't yours in your body. Residue of Emhara, perhaps? We will run all of the tests that we can and hopefully, when you get back, we will have some ideas about restricting your emissions without keeping your wrapped in a suit."

"The suit is very comfortable. I have asked Mala to create a few more in more festive colours." Another flickering memory came to her. "No one wants to blend in with rocks in the vastness of space."

The Azon pulled his feline features into a scary fanged laugh. "That is a valid point. Perhaps some flight lights or something on the focus nodes. Are you really planning on leaving immediately?"

"Of course. Well, as soon as I throw up the meal I just ate."

He was reaching for his scanners in an instant.

She swatted his hands away.

"Are you unwell?"

"No. I haven't eaten in over four centuries. I needed to start with some liquids, but I didn't want to offend anyone. So I will just hurl and fly. Hopefully in that order." Carella felt her stomach flip. "Right now in fact."

It only took a minute to expel the food that had taken the better part of two hours to eat, but she felt a little better for it. She rinsed her mouth with water and then walked out the nearest exit. She touched the com device that she had used before and spoke, "This is Star Breaker, on the way to meet the big one. Wish me luck."

Focussing her energy around her body in a shield, she rose from the ground and took off. She was half a mile up when she remembered, "Which

way am I going?"

It was Kale who answered her. "Three degrees from the left side of the pink moon. Good luck, Star Breaker."

CHAPTER SEVEN

She aimed her body carefully, propelling upward until she exited the atmosphere and when she achieved weightlessness, she aimed her body and pulsed out her power.

While atmospheric flying was fun, open space was just amazing. Once she got up to speed, she could just cut the power and glide at the same rate until effected by a gravitational body. It was beautiful in its simplicity. Straight lines were key as well. Since she was a narrow body of propulsion, she either went in a straight line or splayed her legs to steer to one side or the other. She had done this before the sphere. These familiar actions had her sighting the asteroid. Her stern resolve moved her toward it at an ever increasing speed.

Her mind searched the rock, looking for patterns, cracks or anything that could prove to be a weak point. The mineral was the same as her sphere, the same as the first rock she had

pulverized, only larger. Much larger.

Attacking from behind seemed like a viable option, so she swung around the mass and paced it, looking for that danged weakness. She didn't find it, but did figure out that if she struck it from behind, she would accelerate the debris into the planet.

Front-on assault it would have to be.

She propelled herself through cold nothing until she had enough space to turn around and become a living battering ram. Tensing her muscles, Star Breaker let it rip. Wrapping her body in as many layers of energy as she could, she ploughed into the centre of the asteroid. It was denser than she had imagined and she ran out of steam half a kilometre in.

Buried in rock she could not really move until she carved space out for her limbs. There was enough gravity for her to stand lightly inside the planet killer and she tried a new plan of attack.

If she couldn't break it apart with her energy, perhaps she could absorb whatever was propelling it. It was worth a shot. Standing in the centre of the asteroid, she concentrated on pulling energy *in*. Nothing happened at first. But she persevered. A rapid crumble started around her and spread outward. The rock turned to dust and in a few minutes, she was standing in a space larger than a garage, then a basketball court, then

a football field and then space could be seen through the open gaps. She kept pulling inward, stockpiling the energy that she was not designed to hold.

Her limbs were shaking with the effort it took not to fly apart. The power wanted to break loose, but she needed to keep it in just a little longer. She was almost finished eating the molecular bonds that held the rocks in place. Stealing the energy from the rock would not have occurred to her until she had ended up inside the rock wondering what to do. As she dissolved the last of the rock into small shuttle-sized chunks, she could let go.

She stood on a last chunk of rock and spread her arms, releasing the pent up energy into the immediate vicinity. Debris popped and exploded all around her as she rode the last vestige of the asteroid through the vacuum of space.

It was wonderful, it was freeing, it was exhausting. She stopped the power flow and crouched on the tiny rock, trying to get her bearings. She was deeply exhausted, and disoriented. Despite her attempts to cling to the rock, she floated free.

The blackness of space blended with the blackness in her mind, so when she saw an EVA suit coming toward her, she tried to fight. Her rescuer was determined though and hauled her into arms that held her tight as the cable on the

ship reeled them in.

The airlock cycled and Kale took off his helmet. "Gotcha."

She dropped her shielding enough to breath. "I am sorry you had to come for me."

"If Hyder hadn't been watching the readouts so carefully, we never would have made it in time."

"I thought you didn't like to leave the planet."

"I don't, but I was the only one who could track you. A planet can always find a star." He was crouching next to her and smiled gently. "You did it. You lived up to your name. The asteroid is no more than a few small rocks that will burn up on entry to the atmosphere."

"Fabulous. So why can't I stand up?"

"When you ejected the energy that you absorbed, you didn't stop there. You started on the personal reserves that keep you alive. Without Pilot doing an in-system jump, we never would have been here in time."

She raised her voice to be heard in the cockpit. "Thank you, Pilot."

"It's fine, Star Breaker. You did a good job. You didn't deserve to die, again."

That last word escaped Carella as she let her nice, safe body slip into a deep and regenerating sleep.

The glaring lights of the medical bay greeted

Carella when she woke. Hyder was shuffling around with a number of monitors and watching readouts all over the room. As soon as she tried to sit up, alarms went off.

Hyder was immediately at her side, forcing a cup of water into her hands. "Drink it. We were both stupid. When you started eating, it started your metabolism. Your body ran out of biological energy, not radiation. So we need to get you eating regularly as soon as we can."

"Really? I passed out for need of a carrot stick? That's sad." She sipped at the water and felt the moisture re-hydrating her mouth. "What else is on the safe food list?"

"Soft foods, pastes, breads. And chew your food until it is almost eradicated. That will help you build up your stomach acids. I know, it isn't appetizing, but the faster you can move to solids, the happier we will be."

"By we you mean you."

"Yes. I am trying to spend more time with Helen, but with all of the incoming Guards lately, it has been difficult. She has been going through quite a bit lately."

"Yeah, I can sympathize." She had a thought that might help her out. "Can you get me access to my Terran Volunteer records? It might help jog my memory."

"That sounds like a good start. Come with me."

He took her to the conference room and set her up with full access to the Alliance records involving Terran Volunteers. He was probably breaking about ninety protocols, but it didn't seem to concern him.

That they had declared her dead was the first thing that she saw, the rest was a rundown on her training, her short career and a footnote on her disappearance. It was less than informative.

She finished reading up on herself, her job and the Terran Volunteers in general, then went to confront her demon.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“I went to your funeral.” Helen was holding herself and rubbing her arms as if they had gone cold. “They told me that you were dead and I was at the memorial they had for you. You were yet another Terran to disappear in the line of duty and you were presumed dead.”

“Oh, god. Helen. I didn’t know.”

“All of us within a week’s travel came and put flowers on your memorial. It still gets regular visitors when Terrans pass by.” Helen was looking out the window.

Carella didn’t know what to say. “Really? Visitors?”

“People liked you, you know. You were an easy friend, always cheerful and ready for a laugh. We missed you when you were gone.”

“I didn’t know I was gone. I am fairly sure that Emhara was trying to put me back where she found me, but missed because of the W’Chan’s

greed. If things had gone according to plan, I would never have been missing, but I still wouldn't have had my memories. I would have been released and hopefully returned to the Alliance, but I don't know. I can't feel bad about something I didn't have control over and you are just going to have to give up your grudge, Bells." Another memory. Carella used to call Pilot Hels Bells, Bells for short. "I am back and I am not leaving."

"Oh lord, I don't want you to go! You were my best friend. We went through basic together and you took on Courier when I went to Pilot. Every chance you had, you hooked up with my ship and hitched a jump while we caught up on gossip. You painted happy faces on the outside of my monitor tank and kept me sane during the long cold first year in space." Helen turned back and tears were streaming down her face. "You aren't the you I remember. Star Breaker is a new woman in my friend's body."

"Helen. I get more of my memories back everyday, but I need people around me to jog my mind. I want to remember being human. I want to remember Terra. Did I have a family? Why did I leave in the first place? I didn't have any particular skills that I recall. I could barely do the job of Courier without getting lost." That had been nagging at her since she started to come to herself.

That one memory was missing, the audition that she had read all Terran Volunteers went through.

"I have no idea. You didn't really fit in, but you also didn't stand out. You were remarkably unremarkable. They had you marked for Courier from the moment that you left the planet. If I hadn't been in Pilot training, we never would have met." Helen finally seemed to relax. Her tears had eased.

Carella put a hand on her shoulder. "I think I know who to ask the next questions of. Just bear with me as I figure out who I was. We may both like who I am becoming." She smiled and then giggled. "But I am going to have to work on my wardrobe. This bodysuit thing is a little too form fitting for me. Get me some sweats and I will be yours to command."

Laughter lit Helen's face. "I know just the l'nal. Her designs could cover a jump engine on your back. Tomorrow at noon?"

"Done. Be there or I will hunt you down and take you flying without a ship." A quick hug was dicey, but when the other human's arms closed around her, Carella smiled through her tears. "Enough blubbering. I have a man to ask about a delivery."

With promises to meet tomorrow ringing in her head, Carella went to talk to the one man who had access to all the answers. It took a little bit of effort

since he lived off the Guard Base.

Flying through the fragrant air of spring, she gave in to the urge to do a little bit of fancy manoeuvring. Loops and swirls in the atmosphere were lovely and she almost forgot her purpose when the sun began to set. "Damn."

Quickly, she stopped her silliness and flew straight to the neat house overlooking the cliffs. Landing at the edge of the walk, she made her way to the door and knocked in a polite manner. When he opened the door, she lost her urge to speak for a moment, the planes and angles of Kale's face and body had been chiselled by the gods. The Berhar were truly a lovely race. It was horrible that he was trapped behind Gant's field for the rest of his life, all due to a madman on his homeworld.

"Hello, Kale. I need to use you."

He quirked an eyebrow at her. "Do tell?"

Her blush heated her skin and the air around her. "Um, yes. That came out badly. I was wondering if you and Gant could use your connections to find out why I was chosen as a Terran Volunteer."

"Please. Come in." He waved for her to enter his home.

She walked forward curiously. The home was sparsely furnished, but it had a number of wall hangings and touches that spoke of his Berhar

heritage. "Is that a Berhar wedding prayer rug?"

Kale looked more than surprised, he looked shocked. "Yes. How did you know?"

"In basic training we were told to research an extinct race and culture. I picked Berhar. You came from a fascinating race. Unlimited technology level. Evolved open religious tolerances and a wicked set of recipes. I made three for my final exam."

"You can cook Berhar food?" He sat heavily in the only chair in the room that was built for him. The rest were far too dainty.

"Well, I could. It must have been your face that brought back the memories. I don't know if I still have the recipes in my mind." His desperation for pieces of his homeworld was palpable. "I will try as soon as it comes back."

"Thank you. That would be wonderful."

She took a seat and squirmed a little as silence dropped in between them.

"Did you come here for anything in particular or were you just flying by?"

"I came to ask Gant for a favour."

He looked disappointed, but soon Gant was looking out at her through Kale's eyes. "Yes? What would you like?"

"I would like you to use your status as a sentient planet to search for *all* of my records. Someone sent me to that spot. Emhara didn't get

possession of me by accident. I need to find out what happened to me." She took a deep breath. "Will you help me?"

"I have wondered if you would come to me for this and I am glad you did. Come with me." He rose from his comfortable chair and strode into an adjoining room.

Bemused, she followed. Inside was one of the most complex communications consoles that she had ever seen. Gant was seated at it and triggering a connection.

"I am contacting the Alliance Archive. They should link up in a few minutes."

"Why is the shield in place around Kale all the time?"

"The virus that he was infected with is still active. I can't drop the shielding if there is another living being in contact range."

"Doesn't it get tiring?"

"With the stamina of a planet at my disposal, it is just another lifeform that I maintain. Do not mistake me, I enjoy Kale's company, but he is no burden to me."

"You can drop the barrier around me, you know. The radiation in my system is enough to kill any interlopers into my system."

"That will be his choice, not mine. Kale's arrangement with me is dependant upon my keeping him inside that barrier."

The console beeped and an image appeared. The Ontex was a little cranky, his silvery skin and large black eyes screwed into a scowl until he saw Kale on the screen. "Yes, Avatar. What may I do for you?"

"I wish for records on a Terran Volunteer. Designation Carella Masal, Courier. All records pertaining to her life, death and transfer."

"Just a moment."

His head bent and he did something on a data bank that Carella couldn't see.

"I am sorry, Avatar, those records are sealed."

"I am not Kale, I am Gant and I demand the information in those records immediately." He slapped his palm down on an identi-pad and whatever the Ontex saw, was enough to have a message flashing *data received* in a few seconds. "Thank you. You have been most accommodating. Also, you need to switch Carella Masal's status to active. Have a nice day." Gant flicked off the connection and loaded the received information onto a data pad. Turning in his chair, he handed the pad to her. "Here you go."

"Thank you, Gant. It was nice of you to help me." She leaned down and kissed him on the cheek, despite the barrier. She was stunned that she made contact with warm flesh. She drew back in surprise. "I thought you would have the barrier up."

"Gant did. I dropped it. I have waited a very long time for someone to voluntarily touch me, knowing of my condition. Your radiation won't affect me and my virus won't affect you."

He stood and held her by her elbows. She could have gotten away simply by heating up, but she didn't choose that path. Instead, she waited for him. The kiss that he pressed to her cheek mimicked hers, his lips warm and pliable against her skin. Carella heard him inhale and then felt the pressure of his mouth on hers. The kiss was chaste and sweet. The kiss of someone who was learning as he went.

When he leaned back to see her reaction, she smiled shyly, but stopped him as he moved in again. "Kale, I really want to keep kissing you, but I need to read the information that Gant just got for me. I promise, as soon as I read it, we will have an old fashioned necking session."

"That sounds fascinating. What is it?"

"While I am reading, you can check the Terran linguist archive and figure it out." She felt like she was dismissing a teenager, but he was almost a foot taller and his muscular frame outweighed her human body by over sixty pounds. He was also over one hundred years old. She was not robbing the cradle, he just lacked physical experience. Carella shrugged. For all she knew, she lacked it, too.

Sighing heavily, she went into his sitting room and started to learn about her life.

Anger and betrayal ripped through her as the Alliance portion of the story came out. She had been deliberately selected for her position as Courier, and then Avatar. The Alliance had watched for someone with her genetic signature and when she appeared, they grabbed her. She had volunteered with thousands of other Terrans, but she had won because of her DNA. Once she was in the Alliance, they waited until the day that they had been informed was auspicious and sent her out to find the wormhole. The information she carried was not high priority, it was simply banking information for Emhara. What a star needed with a bank was beyond her imagining.

It didn't answer the problem of her lost memories, but it did give her raw information and interviews that she had given before she signed up. Carella watched the body language and listened to the voice. It looked like her, sounded like her, but also sounded like she was going to laugh at any moment. The attitude made her smile.

"Something funny?" Kale had taken up his seat in his comfy chair and was watching her intently.

"Yes. No. I was watching some of my original interviews and something in my voice made me

smile. I was happy, I think." She shook her head and put the data pad aside. "Well, it was a conspiracy, but I still don't know why. It is frustrating."

"Speaking of frustrating, I looked up necking." He made as if to stand.

She waved him back and instead, climbed on top of him and sat in his lap. "Ah. What did you find out?"

"It is the practice of kissing for hours on end, with no other purpose."

"It can be fun, you know."

"I would have to see it to believe..."

She silenced him with a gentle but firm kiss. Her fingers threaded through his hair and his hands tentatively came to her waist. She continued until his hands flexed on her and then she lifted her head. "So should I stop?" Laughter bubbled up in her and this time he silenced her with a kiss.

He lifted her and sat her across his lap so that he could wrap one arm around her waist while pressing her butt against his burgeoning interest. He caught on quickly and soon they were hot and heavy in a full blown necking session.

The temperature in the room was rising and Carella thought absently that she might be warming the area with radiation, but if Kale didn't care, neither did she.

Honestly, she had wanted to be this close to

him since she met him on the shuttle.

CHAPTER NINE

“Star Breaker, can you get back to Base please?”

Gasping, she separated her mouth from Kale’s.

“Why, Mala?”

“The W’Chan are claiming that you are their property. They are on their way to Morganti and I thought you would want to be here for that.” The light tone belied the seriousness of the message.

Moving out of his embrace, she carefully stood on wobbly legs. “On my way.” Regretfully, she gave Kale another sweet kiss and then turned to leave.

“Would you like to use my personal shuttle? It will be faster and make it far less likely for them to try and snatch you out of the air. I can accompany you.” He held out his hand to her. His skin was still as flushed as hers no doubt was.

She smiled. “Sure. That would be very helpful.” She placed her palm in his and followed his lead underground and onto a monorail. Seated next to

her, he pushed the button that would send them subsurface at nearly the speed of sound. His hand was overcome by his shielding as they approached the surface. She missed the fleeting contact, but knew that it would wait until they were alone once again.

Berhar courtships were long and if he wanted to pursue her, she was going to need stamina or she could just do things the Terran way.

For the W'Chan males she would deal with, she needed patience. Patience and her ace in the hole.

The monorail was incredibly fast and in only minutes they were climbing out and walking up the stairs to Kale's quarters on base.

"You keep a room here?"

"Yes. It adjoins yours if that intrigues you at all."

"On several levels." Their earlier kissing and cuddling was still very much in her mind. She was going to talk to Hyder about an antivirus or a cure as soon as she could. Her radiation protected her, but Kale wasn't going to take any chances with other personnel on the base. She couldn't help but admire and resent his honour and duty.

"This way to the conference room." He extended his elbow.

She took it, her hand resting half a centimetre above his skin. She knew that he meant it as a show, but she had no objections. She was his for

all intents and purposes. No other man had made her heart pound in her chest like this and no one could withstand her radiation. It made for a pretty small dating pool.

The Sector Guard were all assembled with the exception of Commander. Pilot filled in, "Commander is escorting our visitor to the conference room. Take your seats." There were two seats open aside from the head of the table where Commander usually sat. Kale seated her and then took his own spot across the table from her.

Fixer sat next to her with her husband, Shade across the table. Shade winked as her gaze skimmed off Kale and rested on him for a second. The amber-eyed Selna was an incorrigible flirt, but it did keep her from snarling when the W'Chan Ambassador entered the room.

The Guard stayed silent as Commander introduced them. "This is Ambassador Shassik, of the W'Chan Mining Consortium. He is here to reclaim the Star Breaker."

Carella smiled. "He is, is he?"

"Indeed I am, Miss. Simply hand it over and I will be on my way." His six arms denoted his rank among his people. The more limb sets one had, the higher up the caste system they were. He had the same iridescent green flesh as Movik, but poor Movik was only a worker with two limbs. He

must have been delighted to be the Keeper. It would have given him added social status.

"That will not be possible." She stared directly into his yellow eyes.

He puffed up with indignation and looked to Commander for help, when none was forthcoming, he said, "And why would that be?"

"Because I am not going anywhere."

"You? You are the Star Breaker? But you were in the sphere! How did you get out? Where is Movik, I will ring his neck."

"Movik could not have prevented it. The mineral that made up the sphere was the same mineral that comprised the majority of the asteroid I was sent here to destroy." She leaned back and drummed her fingers on the table. "Once free, I was able to return to the Alliance and to find out who exactly I was before I became the Avatar to Emhara."

"That's not...you can't...you belong to us!" His spluttering would have been funny if the topic was not so offensive.

Carella flared slightly. There was no other word for it. She got herself under control when she saw Mala flinching. "I do not belong to you. It is illegal to own a Terran in the Alliance, and I have just obtained proof that I am most definitely a Terran."

His mouth hung open, exposing rotting teeth. "That's impossible. I demand to know what kind

of proof you could have.”

Commander stepped in. “There is an easy way to resolve this. Star Breaker, open your suit to the navel.”

Pilot smirked and chuckled. She knew what was up.

Shrugging, Carella opened the closure to her lower abdomen and then looked over to Commander.

“Part the suit over your abdomen for a moment and then reseal it.” He nodded in encouragement.

She did as he instructed, hearing the laughter start in everyone who saw her flat belly. Looking down, she noticed an elaborate tattoo. “What the heck is that?”

Pilot filled in. “It’s a Terran tattoo. We were all given them after some races decided to make off with our species. I have one as well.” She opened her own suit and parted it to display the same tattoo of a star with nine orbiting bodies. “The tattoos are keyed to our human genetics and contain mineral components that cannot be duplicated. Minerals from our planet.”

“There has to be some mistake. She has been in the sphere for centuries. There is no way she could be one of yours.”

“I went through a wormhole in time and space to reach Emhara. I was sent by the Alliance at her request, I was selected at her specification. Don’t

tell me that she didn't leave you anything to tell you where I came from?"

Shassik turned blue. He was blushing. "There is a data crystal, but no one can use it. It's on a genetic key."

"Do you have it with you?" She drummed her fingers on the table again. "Is it by any chance that light blinking in your left pocket?"

He paled under her scrutiny. "It isn't blinking."

"Sure it is. Mala, you can see it right?"

"No. But if you say you see it, I believe you."

Commander piped up. "Shassik. Empty your pocket. Now."

"But I am an Ambassador of the W'Chan Mining Consortium. I don't take orders from you." He was trying to be indignant, but was far too pale. "Ambassadors have carried this crystal for four hundred years. This isn't right."

"The crystal." Carella held her hand out and as soon as the crystal hit it, she sighed. A light burst of power and a figure bloomed from the gold faceted surface.

It was disconcerting to stare at her own face and have no recollection of the speech that she was making. The golden tint to her eyes was new and must be the soul of the star bleeding through.

"Hello, Carella. I am hoping that this finds you well and that you have arrived safely in your proper time. You may have wondered why me during all of this and

I can only tell you that most people are not designed to be a star's Avatar. You were born for that task and no other, but I could not find you in my time.

"A message was sent to the Alliance, they ran it through the Seers at the Citadel and agreed to provide me with the body I needed to finish my last works. I have known that I was dying for some time, and the Alliance of Federated and Sentient Planets was attempting to help me by finding you. You see, I needed a body to contact the citizens of my star system, one planet at a time. They had to be told to evacuate and most had opted to restrict their technology and had no interplanetary communications. I needed you to do that.

"What I am here to tell you is why your memories are blocked. Despite my ordering you like a slice of pizza as you said to me once, I never intended to keep you in the past and have you die here. With the W'Chan scientists assisting me, I have come up with a sphere that should keep you preserved physically, and blanking your mind will keep you from going insane. Your mind will not remember anything, but your body will react to any threat. A power valve has been added for your defence and the W'Chan are honoured to host you. They will release you when you are back in your timeline and you can rejoin the Alliance as a Courier or whatever you choose. Your memory will come back to you naturally after you are freed from the sphere.

"I am a sentimental star." Emhara rubbed at her shoulder. "I have marked you with my symbol and

hope that you think of me fondly. Your presence saved many lives and gave me a companion in my final days. Know that you will always have the heart of Emhara within you.

"If for some reason the W'Chan have failed me, feel free to take whatever revenge is appropriate. You served me well and you deserve your freedom and your people."

The image flickered out and then surged back to life. *"I have been reminded by you that you have an account with the Alliance and with the W'Chan accumulating for every year of your life in the shell. This should ease your transition back into a normal life. Again, thank you."*

The image was gone and the jaw of the W'Chan Ambassador was slack.

"I am guessing, Shassik, that you were not expecting that message. So where are my accounts?" Getting over the shock of seeing herself speaking with an alien consciousness behind her eyes was easier if she went on the attack.

"Uh, I don't know."

"Lie."

His mouth flapped open and closed for several moments. "We can't give you that money. Our entire economy is based on that seed of hard currency."

"Then transfer it. You used me for centuries to defend your mining colonies."

He was startled, "No. Of course we didn't."

"I remember the screams of the pirates in my mind. The endless trips into battle as you used my defences as a weapon of aggression. I didn't remember my past, but I did remember everything that happened after the wipe and after Emhara left me. I simply had no emotional response to it then. I do now." She slammed her hand down on the table in front of him and melted the surface under her palm. "The accounts will be transferred to Morganti in an hour, or you don't get on board your shuttle with all your limbs attached, and then I will seek out every W'Chan outpost and sterilize the population, manually if I have to."

Isabi came up behind the shaken Ambassador and escorted him to the com room. "I haven't known her long, but I don't think she is kidding."

As they trailed away, she heard Shassik whining and crying. She fought a smile and looked back at the others. "I will have the table repaired. I promise."

Mala smiled and put her hand next to the hole. "One dinner after I have been working all day. You owe me." The hole sealed up in seconds and Mala took what looked to be a ration pack out of one pocket.

Shuddering at the amount of food that it would take to satisfy Fixer, Carella nodded. "Fine. And I owe you for the suits. That is some excellent

workmanship."

"Considering that you are getting five hundred years of back pay from two societies, you can afford it. I think some of the shuttles need new panelling."

The evil laugh that emanated from the normally affable Mala was completely out of character, but very funny. Laughter spread throughout the Guards in the room.

It was a few minutes before someone noticed the tears tracking down Carella's face.

"Oh, honey. Come here."

Helen's arms came around her in sympathy and she bawled into Pilot's shoulder. Racking sobs for a life not lived and a star that burned out centuries earlier spilled from her throat, and one by one, the Sector Guard held her as she cried. They all took a turn, even Kale's barrier crackled under her hands as she mourned her losses.

Dragging in a deep and controlling breath, she stood back from the arms that held her. "Thanks. I needed that. It's been a while since I could cry."

"You need to hydrate more." Hyder's no nonsense voice made her smile. "You are an unbecoming shade of pink right now."

Kale handed her a glass of water from the pitcher on the conference table. The cool water soothed the burn left by her emotional storm. Mala pressed a wet cloth into her hand and

gestured for her to blot her face.

Carella took a minute to compose herself and rehydrate, and by the time she was reasonably composed, a defeated Shassik was slinking back to the conference room. "It is done. The W'Chan miners now hover on the brink of insolvency, but it is done."

"Get along the same way you did before I was trapped into a mineral bubble. The W'Chan were successful before I came along and they will be after I am gone. You just need to start taking your own defence into your own hands."

"Yes, Star Breaker. Thank you for allowing myself and my crew to return home unharmed." He bowed deeply to all of the Guards and started to take his leave.

"Wait!" It suddenly hit her that Movik might want to go home. "If Movik wishes to return to the mines, he is released from his vow of service. He is on the orbital station that has been set up for the evacuation. Please communicate with him and offer him a position among the W'Chan."

Shassik hesitated and then looked around at the solemn faces of the Sector Guard. "Of course. Whatever pleases you, Star Breaker. Who knows, the Guard may be needed in our area of space one day." His six hands rubbed together in uncertainty.

Commander confirmed the situation for him.

"And we will come when we are called. No grudges held."

"Excellent. I will be going then. There are several financiers that are about to commit suicide and I want to be home to watch it on the monitors." The morbid comment stunned the Guards to silence and they let him go without further interference.

Watching the shuttle take off, Carella felt lighter. She picked up the recording crystal and held it to her heart. Breathing deep, she repeated to herself that she was back where she belonged.

Back in her own time.

She looked to Helen.

Back to her friends.

Kale stood silently waiting for her next comment.

Back to all kinds of possibilities.

"So, Bells. Since I have come into some money, do you want to go shopping?"

"We have to wait for the shopkeepers to come back from the orbital station. They were all evacuated while the asteroids were flying at us." Mala snickered and gnawed her way through another ration bar.

"You can't ignore her, Car. Mala is a champion shopper. Just ask Isabi. He has had to surrender most of his considerable closet space to her." Helen waved her hand at the Selna who tried to

look sad and dejected.

He ruined the effect with his snicker. "There are compensations." He bent double as Mala punched him in the stomach and once again the room exploded in chortles.

Hyder ruined the fun by putting his foot down. "Morph, Thinker, get the evacuees back here. Pilot, fly the big shuttle. Seer, Order, I want you organizing people on the landing sites. Fury and Beast, I want you moving people on the ground, get them home again. Mala, repair the ships as they return and keep yourself fueled up. Shade, run the communications station. Kale, meet me in the medical bay. Star Breaker, if you wouldn't mind, see that the W'Chan get away without any trouble or picking up anything they didn't come with."

Blinking in surprise, they scattered to their appointed tasks.

CHAPTER TEN

“Why the sudden change of heart, Kale?”
Hyder prepared the clean room and used the waldos to extract a blood sample. Kale held still as the needles and scrapers approached him.

“I am interested in courting Carella. I can’t do that if we can’t even hold hands.” He sighed in pure frustration.

“What does Gant think of this?”

The idle chitchat was obviously designed to distract him from the scraping of his dermis. “He has lowered the barrier for you to take blood and tissue samples so he likes her just fine.”

The blood sample was carefully stored in a containment field and the tissue sample followed closely. “I am going to try to isolate the virus, but I don’t know how long it will take me to find a treatment.”

“I have waited over a hundred years for a woman who wouldn’t drop dead at my touch. I can wait a few more months or years, if

necessary." He shook his head as Gant healed him and the barrier snapped back into place. Three rounds of decontamination and he was able to leave the sterile room.

"Well, you may want to keep in mind that she is highly radioactive and can probably never have children."

"Do you think that it matters to me? I am the last of my kind. No half bloods exist and one man cannot reproduce a species. I want the chance for happiness and companionship that everyone else seems to have. Just that chance. And I believe that Carella is willing to try as well." The time that they had spent cuddled together burned in his mind, but if he was going to do this, he would do it by the rules of his people. After letting Hyder clap him on the shoulder, he turned to the most important thing on his mind. The first thing he needed to do was to find the most beautiful flower he could. Then he needed to learn the flute.

Star Breaker had to keep from trying to laugh in the vacuum of space. Movik had decided to keep his position as support personnel for the Sector Guard. Her first clue had been when Shassik's starship began to shudder and buck, the fuel cells obviously contaminated. She hauled them in to one of the Alliance jump ships standing by and flew back to the surface of Morganti.

She wanted a shower and she needed a nap.

A member of the security personnel escorted her to her suite, and it was with a great deal of relief that she stripped off her suit and stepped into the shower. When she left the shower, she was faced with a conundrum, how was she to not contaminate the area while taking her nap?

Mala had been ahead of her and in the wardrobe were her rainbow of jumpsuits. Grateful, she climbed into a blue one and then dropped into bed. They would call her if they needed her.

True restful sleep is hard to obtain, but when Carella woke, it was a heady smell that teased her into consciousness. She turned her head and noticed the flower on the pillow beside her head. It was lavender, pink, and a deep blushing red with a smell that reminded her of a summer meadow.

The dark, heady scent made her smile and she sat up, pushing the sheets aside.

A sound was teasing at her. As if wind was blowing through the reeds. She looked around for the source and followed the sound to the adjoining door.

Pressing her ear to the panel, she listened as the music got stronger and a tear formed in her eye as she realized what was going on. She was being

courted by traditional Berhar method.

As his song wound to a close, she looked around and cursed to herself. She needed to give him a token, but she didn't own anything. As her hair swung forward, she had a eureka moment.

Quickly, she made a thin braid and then knotted it and broke the hair above the knot. As his song started up again, she opened the door and sat watching him play. This time, when the song ended, she extended the braid.

He bowed and took the braid, then frowned and said, "It's not enough."

Her heart sank. She didn't have anything else.

"A kiss will even things out." His eyes were sparkling with amusement.

Taking a deep breath and letting it out with relief, she walked to him and drew him down for her kiss. His arm wrapped around her and held her tightly against him while the other hand threaded through her hair to keep her against him. Wow. He learned fast.

When he let her go, she was blinking up at him stupidly. "Wow."

"Thank you. I have researched kissing in the Terran manner and I have to confess that there are quite a few things that I want to try. But not until we are in a shielded environment and after I have completed my courtship."

"Are you really going to go through with the

whole thing? The singing, the weaving, the hunting? Not to mention the metal work and making my wedding gown."

"Every bit of it." He extended a data pad to her. "These are a sampling of Berhar recipes. You once told me you like to cook."

"I do. Thank you. At least this will give me something to offer you after your courting. I was a little at loose ends. I don't have anything." She grimaced.

"You are all that I want. So I will continue to court you and you will improvise. I wouldn't mind more kissing."

That last was said with such a hopeful tone that she laughed. "I like it to, but I think parts of you would start turning blue if we keep it up to long."

That confused him, but he brushed it aside. "As long as you are the one that I get at the end of the process, I will happily put up with anything."

She pulled him to her again. "That deserves a reward."

She wasn't going to rush into anything, but if she still felt this way about him when her memory came back, she would be a happy woman indeed. Now if Mala could find a way to make lingerie that had radioactive shielding on it...she would have to ask her later.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This concludes this story arc for the Sector Guard. The series will continue with the book Imperial Guard in which Mala and Isabi have to come to grips with her Moreski heritage.

The relationships in the Guard will continue to develop, including Carella and Kale. I didn't mean to cut them short, but their courtship is going to take a while. I didn't want to rush them.

The Guard will also extend its influence to Station 13, an outpost manned by a scientist and his once-rival and now spouse who has the tendency to walk through walls.

If you like this series or wish to send me a comment you can contact me at viola@violagrace.com.

Thanks for reading.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Viola Grace was born in Manitoba, Canada where she still resides today. She really likes it there.

She has no pets and can barely keep sea monkeys alive for a reasonable amount of time. Her line of day job tends to be analytical which leaves her mind hopping to weave stories. No co-worker is safe from her character analysis.

In keeping with busy hands are happy hands, her hobbies have included cross-stitch, needlepoint, quilting, costuming, cake decorating, baking, cooking, metal work, beading, sculpting, painting, doll making, henna tattoos, chain mail, and a few others that have been forgotten. It is quite often that these hobbies make their way into her tales.

Viola's fetishes include boots and corsetry, and her greatest weakness is her uncontrollable blush.

Her writing actively pursues the Happily Ever After that so rarely occurs in nature. It is an admirable thing and something that we should all strive for. To find one that we truly like, as well as love.

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