

Viola Grace

Sector Guard 8



DRAGON SUMMONS

Assigned as Inventory Master to the newest Sector Guard base on Teklan, Roxanne is sure only of one thing, if the seductive singing in her mind doesn't stop, she is going to go nuts. With a little investigation, she finds the source of the nocturnal music and tells it to shut up.

Esur is a tad taken aback, after all, as a Draï sleeper, he is a full shifting dragon looking for a mate and Roxy is it. The sharp-tongued Terran won't drive him away, but he may need all of his powers of persuasion to woo her while protecting her from her new job with the Sector Guard.

Finder and Frost make quite a team, in the guard and out of it.

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**DRAGON SUMMONS
SECTOR GUARD BOOK 8**

BY

VIOLA GRACE

CHAPTER ONE

He was singing again.

Roxy groaned as she sat up. The tune in her head faded somewhat, but whomever it was that put out the telepathic song, they didn't give up. The song kept going and it was making her life a series of short naps during daylight hours.

Checking her chronometer, she cursed. Another night wasted listening to the song of a man she had never met. She may as well get up and get moving. Work never complained when she got there early.

The shower helped burn off the bit of sleep still left in her mind and when she emerged, she was ready to face the day. Well, she was ready to face dawn, it was just peeking its nose over the horizon.

Her uniform was an uninspired grey that suited her perfectly. The steel-toed boots matched her mood. Roxanne Nelson always had her hair tightly braided down her back, the gold and brown mass under control at all times.

She had been an inventory manager back on earth and here on Teklan. With the newest Sector Guard base under construction, she was doing what she was designed to do—manage things that no one even noticed but everyone needed. Inventory.

She had travelled across galaxies to get her old job back. The irony was not lost on her.

However, she did love her new job. It took a peculiar kind of mind to find something that no one else noticed. That was her skill, the thing that had caught the attention of the Volunteer committee. Her attention to detail.

That attention was suffering by the nocturnal crooning that she was listening to while she slept. No one else on base could hear it and she had asked everyone that she worked with. Only the Draï family that had just moved in was outside her scope of conversation. They simply would not talk to anyone who was unworthy of their presence and she was simply the hired help. A manual labourer.

The family was living off base, a mother and father with a daughter physically about the same age as Roxy. She would have liked to be able to make another friend, but the social-class thing was the elephant in the room.

Walking out of her cottage and down the path to the great warehouse where all of the building

supplies were being stored, she admired the silhouette of the new Guard station. It was graceful, stern and yet functional. A complicated combination.

Her first stop was the cafeteria. The night staff greeted her. "Couldn't sleep again?"

"No. That damned song was in my head."

Sama looked over and leaned in. "Ask the Drai. I heard the father asking the daughter if she heard the song yet. They may know more about it than they are letting on."

"They won't speak to me. I have tried to approach them through official channels and they are not receptive to meeting someone as low as me."

"Low? Don't they know you are an Inventory Master?"

"They don't care. It isn't like they have any use for building materials or food supplies. Oh, by the way, the next shipment should have some of the greens that you have been whining about. They will arrive in two days."

Sama grinned. "See what I mean? You know where everything is and where it should be, when we are going to run out and when we are over stocked. It is a rare skill."

"And yet, next to bloodlines that run on forever, it doesn't matter to them. Go figure." Roxy shrugged. Her own bloodlines were less

pure than they had been when she left Earth. Before being brought to this facility, she had spent six weeks in a tank having her genetics scrambled into a mix that would supposedly make her a better mate to some unidentified species.

That species was still unknown to her and even the base doctor wouldn't tell her what it was. The great mystery of who she was meant for was doomed to remain just that. A mystery.

"I will buzz you the next time they come in for a snack. You can ambush them and see if they know anything about the noise in your mind."

"That would be great. They may hate me, but at least I will know if I am just going insane or if there is a reason to the rhymes."

Sama handed her a snack bar and waved her off. "Off to work with you, I will keep an eye out for them."

Roxy smiled. Sama had four eyes and two were always rotating independently near her temples, seeing everything. If anyone would be able to spot the Draï, it would be Sama.

Working through the day to prep the supplies for the structures was wonderful. A lovely blanking of her mind that allowed her to function on autopilot. She was too tired for anything that required more interaction.

Her crew could work without much

supervision, so she was only called upon to make a few small decisions about the placement of new supplies. When her workday ended, she grabbed some dinner with co-workers and then started down the path back to her cottage.

At home, she changed clothes, loving the feel of jeans and a t-shirt, ran through a few chores and was thinking about trying to sleep when her phone went off.

“Sama? What is it?”

“They just came in. You have about half an hour.”

“On my way.”

With no time to waste, she sprinted down the path and made a beeline for the commissary. The family was indeed there having a meal and with no decorum at all, Roxy skidded to the side of their table.

“Greetings, I am Roxanne Nelson, Inventory Master of this station and I realize it is rude, but I need to ask a question.”

Taken aback, the father spoke, “I am Retingar, this is my mate, Ashla, and our daughter, Minara. What is the question that you would ask?”

She nodded her head to each as the introduction was given. “What is the significance of the song in the night?”

The three Draï blinked at her and the male raised his wings slightly in surprise. “Where did

you hear of the song?"

"It doesn't matter. What is it?"

Minara grimaced. "The song of an ancient Draï calling to his mate. That is why we are here. There is a dragon sleeping on this world and he is about to wake. When he wakes, he will start the song and I will go to him."

"So, if you hear the song, he is calling you?" She was having trouble dodging the crux of her problem.

"That is the history. I have not heard it yet and we have been here for some weeks." Minara shrugged.

"Thank you for the answer. I am sorry to have disrupted your meal." She started to turn and leave, but then had to ask, "What if he is waking, but he is calling someone else?"

Minara blinked, so her father filled in, "Then we will simply leave. There is none who should stand between a dragon and his true mate. It would be an insult that might cost a life."

"Ah. Well. Good luck then."

She was almost to the door when Ashla called out, "How long has it been going on then?" Her tone was amused. She had heard what Roxy had not been saying.

Roxy turned her head and said over her shoulder. "A month."

"Then I would go in search of him soon, or he

will come to you. If that is the situation, then the entire base may be in jeopardy. The shifters were said to be patient only to a limit before they take their mate hunt into their own hands." She was chuckling.

Roxy hazarded a quick look at the table where they sat. Retingar was shocked, Ashla amused and Minara relieved. She gave them a quick nod and left the commissary.

She sprinted to her house and closed her eyes the instant that she lay down. She was fully clothed. If she needed to follow his song to find him and shut him up, she would do it.

She desperately needed a good night's sleep.

CHAPTER TWO

She was so tense that it took her close to an hour to fall asleep. When the song invaded her mind, she was ready for him.

What the hell do you think you are doing?

His voice stopped the song and he answered her. *Summoning you, my mate, as the Draï have for millennia. How do you not know this?*

I am not Draï.

Ah. That would explain it. I greet you formally then. My name is Esur. Will you come to speak with me?

That depends. Will you stop singing so that I can get some sleep? My life has become a little dangerous now that I am in danger of nodding off due to sleep deprivation.

Will you come to me?

I will after I get some sleep. I will arrange transport for myself tomorrow. Will that be soon enough?

It will. This is where I am. A stream of images flowed between them, through mountain passes and into a pool of ice. He was located in the ice.

*I won't be able to follow you into the ice.
Do not worry, once you are close, I will come to you.
I will see you tomorrow then. Goodnight.
Goodnight, maiden.
Roxanne, my name is Roxanne.*

Her mind was silent and she sighed in her sleep. Time for a night of nothing.

A pounding knock on her door brought her upright the next morning. When the knock sounded again, she stomped to the door and opened it. The base commander was standing there with an impatient look on his Dhemon face.

"Ah, good. I thought you had been injured."

Birds were singing in the trees outside and the sun was high. She had slept in. She never slept in.

"Commander Narvi. Thank you for coming to check on me. I am sorry, I just slept in."

"You have not been able to sleep for weeks. Has something changed?"

She stepped aside and gestured for him to come in. "It is a long story. May I make you some tea?"

"Thank you. I would love a cup."

It wasn't tea the same way she thought of tea back on Earth, but it was a lovely shot of morning stimulant in herbal form. A planet in the vastness of space did nothing but produce these leaves and it was a standard infusion that was consumed across the stars.

Roxy glanced down and sighed in relief. She was fully clothed and only a little rumpled. As she prepared the tea, Narvi took a seat on the kitchen bench near the counter that separated the kitchen and dining room.

While the tea steeped, she retrieved the cups and saucers as well as some sweetener and a touch of citric acid. The standard implements of tea in the Alliance.

When she served him and set out the set, she waited for him to take a sip. The instant that he had, she was able to speak. The rules of serving tea were very strict.

"Commander, were you aware that there was a sleeping Draï on this planet?"

"Of course. That is why the Draï government has sent a likely candidate to be his mate." He drank his tea and waited for her to fix her own. "How are you aware of his presence?"

"You know the singing that I have been hearing at night? It's him."

The Dhemon's eyebrow rose in surprise. "You aren't serious."

"Oh, I am. He has been trying to call me for weeks, but no one here was able to tell me what was going on."

"How did you find out?"

She blushed a little as he looked down his aquiline nose at her. "I ambushed the Draï family

at the commissary last night. They were most helpful once I asked the right question."

"Didn't I ask you to leave them alone?"

"Yes. But they were overheard discussing a song that was supposed to be heard by their daughter. The only song I know about is the one in my head every night."

He nodded. "I can understand your urge to find the answer. What was the result?"

"I spoke with him last night. His name is Esur and he wants me to meet him in the mountains." She sipped at her cup and met his gaze over the steam.

He sighed. "What do you need?"

"A skimmer and some cold-weather gear. I am flying to the mountains today."

"Do you require a pilot?"

She looked at him and smiled. "No. I am checked out on all small craft for atmospheric flight. You haven't read my file, have you?"

He shook his head, the horns shining a bright silver against the reddish green of his skin. "No. I haven't bothered to look into the support staff."

"You might want to. There are some fairly strong talents in the ranks. Do you know what I am?" This was too funny. Why wasn't he more on the ball? He was going to be in charge of the Sector Guard base for pity's sake.

"I am only here on temporary assignment

during construction. There will be a new commander on base in the next week or so."

"Why?" It was a rude question, but he answered it anyway.

"This is not my preferred post. I wish to travel more and not spend my time bound to a base."

"But what about when the Guard starts to go on assignments? You could join them on assignment and see the galaxy that way."

"I have neither the patience nor the inclination to deal with talents of that nature. This facility is going to be the investigations branch of the Sector Guard and I am not suited to it."

He wasn't saying something and in an instant, she knew what it was. He didn't like working with freaks.

"Ah. Not everyone is suited for this line of work and I wish you luck in your future endeavours. Do you know who your replacement will be?"

"Another of my species, General Brodin. He has communication and interpersonal skills that I lack. He is giddy at the prospect of working with the Sector Guard."

"Really? Why didn't he come here for the construction of the base then?"

Narvi calmly poured himself another cup of tea. "He has to wrap up some family obligations. His parents were attempting to arrange a match

for him and he has to reject all of the women on the list politely and in person."

"Of course. For your people, manners take precedence."

"As it should be."

"Of course. So, may I take some time off to find the dragon and get him out of my head?"

He laughed—a strange expression on his normally dour face. "If he wants you, are you sure that you will have the willpower to say no? I have heard that Terrans are a little frivolous in the romantic arena."

She wanted to be outraged, but it was a biological imperative, even back on Earth. You wanted to mate with someone as different as possible from you. Whether women admitted it or not, scent was a definite factor in mate selection as well and some of the new races smelled *good*.

"The bed hopping comes and goes. I have not bothered to fling myself at the nearest male since I left my home world. But if he wants me, he will have to court me. There is a certain protocol to maintain and I am going to insist on it."

A slight flicker of respect ran through Narvi's eyes. "Are you aware of the Draï traditions?"

"Not all of them, but I am going to read first-meeting protocol before I get on the glider. After I get home, I will look up more of the basics. Are you prepared for taking on personnel?"

"I will make arrangements. By the way, what is your talent? I know you are an Inventory Master, but I did not know that there is a talent that could compliment the job."

"Ah. I sense patterns, disturbances, as well as have an eidetic memory. While there is always a chance for theft, I have never had a successful theft in any facility that I have run. I always find the stolen materials. It is part of the pattern."

"What do you do when items are disbursed?"

"I remove them from the pattern. It is complicated, but the best description that I can come up with." She shrugged and finished her tea. "Like the extra sweetener that you put in the bottom of the cup, but are not drinking. The ability for observation is the key to my talent."

He laughed and turned the cup toward her. The powder was sitting in the almost-dry cup. "Perhaps I am missing out on not being here for the advent of the Guard base. With talents like yours, it will be an interesting place to be."

"Oh, I am not a Guardsman. I just know inventory."

"You are not a Guardsman...yet. I have a feeling that it will not be long before that status is changed." He nodded and got to his feet.

"You have clearance to take a glider out as well as remove anything that you might require from stores. Good luck in finding the sleeping beast."

He bowed formally and left her small cottage.

“Thank you.” She called out before the door closed, but she didn’t know if he heard her.

Time for some research.

CHAPTER THREE

Her little research bout was well worth the time. As she took to the skies in the small glider, her mind used the landmarks she had been shown and in just over an hour, she was approaching the frozen lake in the shelter of the mountains.

“Esur! I am here. Come out, come out wherever you are.”

She left the glider, but cautiously stayed on the rocks surrounding the ice pool. The valley of rock and ice was beautiful. The winter gear that she had put on was enough to keep her from the biting cold, but her face was still feeling it.

“Hello? Esur?” She knew he was close. The same sensation that she felt when he was in her mind was all around her. He was here.

The sound of something sliding across the ice grabbed her attention. A tiny castle made of crystal was coming toward her with the grace and lazy weight of a curling rock. It rotated to a stop

near her feet and she bent to examine it. It was indeed around twenty pounds of crystal carved into an intricate palace. It was beautiful.

Tiny stairs surrounded each column of the towers that were carved in a transparent substance. The detail was stunning.

Under her boots, a rumble started and as she watched in amazement, towers and spires surged up through the ice. It took five minutes for the entire structure to appear, during which time Roxy was forced to fly the glider to higher ground.

She was standing on a safe shelf of rock, the ice on her boots cracking off as she kicked at the nearby rocks. The palace itself seemed to be drying as it rose from the lake and Roxy couldn't help but wonder, *Who the hell built that thing?*

When the rumbling stopped, there was a moment of silence where all that Roxy could hear was her own breathing in the cold air. The crack of a door opening was matched by the creak and thud of a drawbridge coming down on the very spot where she had previously been standing.

A figure walked along the bridge, the large wings folded against his back giving her all the clues that she needed. Esur. Golden skin with a blue tinge, a wild mane of black hair and a lovely set of skin-tight, embroidered trousers were all that she could see from her vantage point.

He extended his wings and with a few strong

strokes, he was standing in front of her. "Roxanne, I presume?"

"Yes." Bemused, she stood motionless as he took her hand and laid a warm kiss on the back of her icy hand.

"You are cold."

"I am not suited for this environment."

"Of course. Would you care to join me inside?"

There was something in her mind about joining a Draï male and his house, but if it was as warm as the rest of him, she was willing to throw caution to the wind.

"Certainly. Is there a courtyard where I can land the glider?"

"The glider needs a few feet to manoeuvre and it would be a tight fit. It will be easier if I simply carry you. Will you allow that?"

She paused. He was easily six and a half feet tall and his shoulders seemed to be three feet wide. If she said no, he could easily overpower her. But the look in his ice blue eyes was polite if somewhat heated.

"Yes, I will."

He carefully bent and with one hand around her ribs and another under her knees, she was pulled securely against him.

He bent his knees, spread his wings and launched them into the air.

Roxy had never flown outside a plane, shuttle

or glider before. The sensation was a little weird. The dropping and falling with every wing beat, only to rise again made her slightly dizzy. The air rushing past her face kept her awake with its crispness and reminded her that she was facing the elements.

The outside of the large structure was exactly the same as the small sculpture. The towers, stairs and pathways were life size and enormous as they hovered over them before landing in front of two large doors.

"How did you get the water to drain off it?"

"Let me have my secrets, Roxanne. Do you like my home?"

"I do. It is lovely."

He set her on her feet, but she almost heard the click in his mind at that moment. She suddenly remembered that after getting permission to court the female, the Draï had to take them home and the female had to approve their home. It was her nest from that point onward.

Damn it.

"I have a light repast prepared for you. It is getting late in the day and you look hungry." He took her by the hand and led her through the entry hall and to the right to a dining room of monumental proportions.

"It isn't hunger, it's fatigue. Your song has kept me from sleeping for weeks. No one at the base

knew what it was." She wanted to gawk at the statues, artwork and accoutrements around her, but he pulled her relentlessly into a private dining room, just big enough for two.

"I am sorry for it. Though I knew that I would not be mating with a Drai, the traditions were drilled into me as a child." He held her chair out for her and helped her to sit.

"I can understand that. Fortunately, your government got desperate to reclaim you and sent a family here to lure you to their daughter." She nodded acceptance of the tea he was preparing to pour.

"Really? I have not sensed them."

"Well, as you may know, your people lost the ability for complete shifting about the same time you and the other sleepers left."

"Yes."

"Well, they became so insular in their breeding practices that little to no psychic talents developed. They stagnated and even now, it is doubtful whether the next generation of males will keep the talent of flight."

Esur leaned back and gave her a long look. "Perhaps I should make the effort to mate with one of my own kind."

A sharp pain struck her heart as he said it. "It is a thought. If she managed to produce any offspring, they would simply be restricted to

breeding within a dying race. Good luck with that."

He looked at her intently. "You are upset."

"I...no...yes...I don't know." Roxy rubbed her forehead. "It is your business, I suppose."

Esur leaned forward and took her hand. "It is your business. I am yours and you are mine. When the link comes as easily as it did between us, I can tell you that we are destined to be together."

"This is exceptionally new to me. I also have a job and a home at the Guard Base. Destined or not, I want to take my time with this."

"What about when we get our first assignment with the Sector Guard?"

"What are you talking about, I am not a Guardsman. I don't have the talent for it."

Esur smiled.

He walked to the wall and caressed a panel in a manner that made her mouth water and her skin ache. She shook her head as he approached with a data pad that he laid on the table so she could see it.

"When you told me your name, I had the computer bring your stats online. Roxanne Nelson, Volunteer of Terra, Inventory Master and tracker of all things lost. You have already undergone the transformation necessary to breed with a Draï and were assigned here by your

species representative.”

“You do fast research.”

“We all have our talents. That is mine. You have not had a sexual partner since you left Terra and do not seem to enjoy the more frivolous things in life. You are devoted to your job and loyal to your workplace. Fixated and focused, you don’t look for more.”

She blinked. “Seriously, my sexual history is in there?”

He laughed. “That is what you focus on?”

“Well, the other stuff I can’t argue with. It’s all true.” She shrugged and reached for a cookie.

“Why? Why not live a fulfilling life? Why not get married and have babies?”

“It just never seemed right. The job is fun, I enjoy it and using my talent is exhilarating.”

“But do you not know that you were assigned here to be a member of the Guard?”

She blinked. “No. I had no idea. I just wrangle the inventory.”

“And when the buildings are up and you are no longer needed, where will you go then?”

“To my next assignment, I suppose. I never try to look too far into the future. It tends to disappoint me.” It was sad but true. The last time she had looked to the future, it had walked down the aisle with someone else.

She decided to turn the tables. “How long have

you had this home ready?"

"I just finished it, but I began it twenty-eight years ago."

"That was when I was born."

He raised his eyebrows and smiled while he sipped his tea. "You don't say."

"Mm."

"Odd coincidence."

"Very."

The glowing light outside was taking on a reddish tinge. "I had best be going. The light is fading and I have an hour's trip back to the base."

His face grew stricken. "Stay."

"I cannot. I only received today off from the base because I slept in. Tomorrow I need to straighten everything out that went wrong today." She placed her hands on the table and blinked at how fast he moved as he rounded the table to hold her chair for her.

"I truly wish you would stay with me."

"I have obligations. But there is nothing to stop you from visiting me at the base. Consider this an open invitation." She smiled and took his hand. Just that small contact sent ripples of energy through her.

Damn.

"Well then, my lady, I will escort you home."

He was as good as his word, delivering her to the glider and then shifting into an enormous ice-

coloured dragon that paced her all the way back to her cottage.

CHAPTER FOUR

Roxy was a little sleepy, having a dragon napping in one's yard tended toward a little bit of a disruption in the schedule, but was at work with her new companion on time and ready for duty.

"Things didn't go too badly. There are a few things in the wrong spot, but nothing that a dozen hours with a hauler can't fix." She smiled brightly at Esur as he surveyed her dim cavern. The storage facility was her domain, from tiny screws to two-ton girders. She kept track of it all.

"A hauler? What do you need moved?"

Roxy blinked at him. He could probably do most of what she needed just by hand. Her regular staff was already onto today's disbursements, so the offer was horribly tempting. "Are you sure?"

He crossed his arms and scowled, "Are you questioning my masculine ability to lift heavy objects?"

"No, just assessing the bulk of the objects in

question. Some of the packaging may be outside your arm span."

"Let me worry about that. I am more than capable of determining my suitability for a task. Shall we?" He gestured for her to show him what she wanted done.

"Alright, this entire pallet needs to head to the far-east portion of the storage bay, section E3."

She pointed to it and stood amazed as he walked around it for a moment and then exhaled at the base of the pallet and created a pad of frost under the plastic.

"Do you have a rope?"

"Oh. Certainly." Bemused, she scuttled into the equipment shed and grabbed a length of rope around twenty feet long. He was where she had left him, but was now laying down a layer of frost on the ground toward the eastern wall.

"Here you are. Is it long enough?" She handed it to him and watched as he looped it around the pallet and gave a few tugs. It slid forward on the bed of ice crystals in an instant.

"You know, in all my years, it is the first time that I have been asked that." He smirked and slid the load across the warehouse in less time than it would have taken to warm up the hauler.

"Do all Draï have this talent?"

"Some have a talent for fire, some wind, some water. My talent is ice."

As he shoved the load into place, she shook her head. The frost disappeared in a matter of seconds. "That is amazing."

"What is next?"

"Are you sure that you don't want to be on base with the other Draï? Exchanging home stories or something?"

"I want to spend time with you and find ways of courting you. A greedy outlook, but it is my current plan. There is a whole planet full of Draï to speak to if I get desperate, but I have the feeling that with you around, I will never lack for conversation."

"Funny fellow." She sighed and looked down at her data pad. "All right. Let's get this done and I will take you to lunch."

It was bizarre how easily they worked together. While he was rearranging the inventory, she was double-checking and verifying quantities. It worked out very well for the facility. Roxy was back in standard operations within three hours. It would have taken her all day and more if she had been alone.

When a hand waved in front of her face, she realized that she had been dozing standing up.

"Roxanne, I think you need a break. You are almost asleep on your feet." Esur extended his hand and tilted his head in an engaging manner.

"Fine. I am a little hungry as well. A few

crackers and tea for breakfast just isn't enough when you work for a living."

His stomach growled in agreement.

She sighed. "Why didn't you say something? Come on. Let's head to the commissary." It was reflex to reach out and take his hand.

When the warm, calloused fingers enveloped hers, she fought a shudder as her body came alive under that small skin-to-skin touch.

"You feel it as well then?"

"Feel what?"

"The electricity between us when we touch. Imagine that same feeling all over, not just localized on your hand."

His smirk was enough to make her want to smack him. As a seduction, it was fairly direct.

She didn't answer, but instead, took the lead through the halls, towing him in her wake. They drew looks and occasional greetings from co-workers that they passed. The commissary was relatively busy, but as she stood in line with the others, his presence at her back warmed her as he shielded her from curious eyes.

He simply flared his wings slightly and Roxy was in a corner created by his body, the wing and the counter.

Sama was watching them and all eyes were on the new Draï.

"People are staring." Roxy wasn't used to

attention. It was starting to freak her out. The shelter he was giving her was not enough to drown out the sudden silence in the previously noisy rooms.

"Let them stare. They will get used to me eventually."

"You know, I didn't think about it. Are you authorized to be on base?"

"Yes. I am an official Guardsman. I have been for a few months."

She took a tray and scooted along the line, picking selections for herself absently. "I thought you just fully woke up."

"No. I have been awake for some time, I just haven't been active. It is a confusing distinction, I know. I wasn't leaving my nest until you arrived. Now you are here and I can move the house closer to base."

She turned and blinked up at him. "It moves?"

"Of course. It is built on a lake, I can air lift it anywhere I wish. I didn't think that you would enjoy freezing every night, although the shared body heat would be a very great inducement."

A few people overheard his comments and chuckled. Roxy flushed beet red.

"You changed colour." His fingers were caressing her cheek.

She grabbed his hand and forced it away before she leaned into his touch. "I am embarrassed."

“Interesting.”

A cleared throat behind her reminded her of why they were there. “Right. Lunch.”

She piled her tray up, grabbed a beverage and waited for Esur to finish his selections. She flipped her card out and had it scanned for both their meals. She had said she was buying him lunch and she was a woman of her word.

One of the office staffers gestured for her to take the seat at the table that she and her lunch companions were leaving. *Thanks, Elsior*, she mouthed the words from across the room.

Swinging gracefully through the bodies that were coming in and others that were leaving, she settled with a smile at the table. Esur took up the chair across from her and then had to go through the introductions to her friends, one by one.

The office staff winked, flirted and asked him a few light questions before Elsior met Roxy’s unimpressed gaze and dragged the horde off to the administration office. Fortunately for Roxy and Esur, they had all the time in the world.

“Oh. I guess I wasn’t paying close attention.” The results on her plate were edible, but not exactly what she would normally consume for lunch. Most of it was dessert.

“I thought there was quite a bit of sugar on your plate. You don’t seem the sort to eat dessert first.”

She eyed the meat in gravy on his plate. "I suppose I was distracted. Dang. I suppose I have to eat it."

The sigh he gave her was one echoed by men across the galaxies when their women looked at them in that certain way. With deft manoeuvring, Esur sliced off half the meat and dropped it onto an empty portion of one of her plates.

"I am taking this dessert." His defiant look made her smile as the deal was struck.

As they ate, she broached the topic of Draï courtship.

He looked surprised, but filled her in. "Normally, there is an introduction ball and the females all attend with the available males greeting them. There is dancing—I am a very good dancer—and mingling. Many matches are made in that single instance of introduction."

"It sounds lovely. What happens next?"

"The female returns to her family and the male comes the next day to put his suit to the family. If they are agreeable, then there is one final step."

"What if the woman does not have family? Surely there must be a few orphans among the Draï."

"Most, if not all, are adopted by families who knew theirs and take on the responsibilities of raising a daughter. Making the introduction gowns and such."

"What is an introduction gown?"

"A stiff and ornate gown that is covered with beads, mirrors, elaborate embroidery and any symbols of the family. Your cold weather gear was dense enough to get the same effect. It hid all of your curves and left no illusion to your unavailability for some frivolous dalliance."

She let that one slide. It was true. The parka had not been flattering. "What is the final step?"

"The approval of the male's home. He spends years preparing a location and creating a habitat suitable for raising a family. If she approves his efforts, their match is set."

"So when I..."

"Approved of my house, you were agreeing to be mine. Don't worry. I will ask you the same question the next time that you see the house...in its new setting."

"Is it made of ice?"

"No, crystal. A traditional material for building for my people."

A thought occurred to her. "You made the model as well?"

"Of course. I needed a pattern to work from. It wouldn't do to wing it." He smiled.

Her smile came upon her unawares, creeping through her mind until giggles broke through. Wing it. A human term that had a new meaning coming from a man with burnished bronze wings.

He was smiling and she was laughing when the other Draï came through the entryway and approached Esur directly.

They all bowed deeply. Retingar flaring his wings around Minara and Ashla. They stayed bowing until Esur spoke. "Rise. You have a lovely family, Retingar."

"Thank you, my lord. This is my wife, Ashla. My daughter, Minara. How do you know my name?" They straightened as one, a rank of women and the winged man that completed their family.

"This is my world. I make it my business to know all who set foot upon it." That bombshell left Roxy blinking at him in stupefaction. He reached out swiftly to hold her hand before she could jump and run.

He owns the freaking planet?

"Ah. I didn't know. Of course, you would be aware of all within your territory. Pardon me." Retingar looked at Roxy with an accusing glint in his eyes. "Congratulations on finding your lady."

"Thank you. She was well worth the wait and our minds are already synching. It is quite the strong connection."

"Our government had given us to believe that the Terran would be unsuitable or we would never have intruded during your introduction period."

"And yet, knowing that our introduction is ongoing, you felt it necessary to interrupt our lunch? I will not be reconsidering my choice of mate and she seems content to have me once a few conditions have been met."

"She? Has conditions for you?" The outrage in his voice was palpable and his wife gripped his arm to calm him.

"The location of my house is currently unsuitable for a warm-blooded biped. I will move it and she will view it again." Esur's voice was growing rougher. He was not enjoying this meeting with his countryman.

"I still don't see why you would not take a woman of your own blood rather than this frivolous, round-heeled Terran."

"That is enough. I want you off this planet within the hour. If you don't have a shuttle, you can fly under your own power. But, Retingar, you are leaving, or in one hour, I will come for you to fight for the insult you have laid upon my chosen and you will die."

Ashla showed her strength and Minara her good sense as they each grabbed an arm and hauled Retingar out of the room.

Roxy kept her voice flat. "That was more dramatic than it had to be."

Esur was trying to get his anger under control. He was still flashing fangs as his irritation reached

to his lips. There was one way to distract him, but she didn't know if she wanted to until she saw the bent remains of his fork.

Roxy stood, tilted Esur's head back and laid a kiss on him that was guaranteed to distract him from his irritation with Retingar.

When she finished, her lips were throbbing, her tongue was tingling and her body was humming a happy but unsatisfied tune. Applause broke out in the room, bringing her to herself.

She released him and returned to her seat, trying to eat the portions of her meal that were not stone cold and inedible. "So, what do you want to do this afternoon?"

He was staring at her, his normally sharply shaped lips swollen and ever so slightly shiny. Esur opened his mouth and that was the moment that two Dhemons walked through the door.

"Inventory Master, I am glad we caught you. This is General Brodin, late of Dhema, the new base commander. Ah. Esur. Glad to see you out and about." Commander Narvi was tremendously cheerful...for him.

General Brodin, on the other hand, seemed perpetually cheerful for a Dhemon. His smile was genuine as he stepped forward take her hand and bow. "Delighted to meet my first two Guardsmen. From this point onward, your duties will be restricted to the Sector Guard. In fact, I have an

assignment that came up during my journey here if you would come with me do discuss it?"

The polite question didn't sound like an order, but that is what it was. Tired of trying to finish food that was no longer even remotely appealing, Roxy stood.

Esur stood as well. "As you have interrupted our meal, I am sure that you will arrange for something while we discuss this matter."

"Of course. Ms. Nelson, if you will accompany me?" Brodin extended his arm and when a bemused Roxy reached out to take it, her hand collided with a strong golden arm instead of the burgundy one.

"I will escort *my* mate." His words were said through clenched teeth, but Esur looked ready to bite.

Brodin held his hands up, amusement and alarm warring in his eyes. "This way then. My office is completed and I will order something as soon as we arrive."

"It would be better if you simply made your request to the staff here. They will deliver it in a few minutes." Roxy mentioned it before the men could glare each other into dust.

Brodin nodded and crossed the room to place the order. Roxy used her grip on Esur to drag him toward the door. They waited for their commander in the hallway and she hissed at the

dragon, "What are you doing?"

"Protecting my mate."

"From what, a rogue sandwich?"

"No. We have not formalized our union and therefore, I am going to be stepping in whenever there is a male in your general vicinity."

"Pleasant. Is that why you slept in my front yard?"

"One of the reasons." He looked like he was going to explain further, but Brodin rejoined them and led the way through the halls.

With her lips twisted in irritation, she held onto Esur's arm for fear of what he would do if she let go. The images in her head were not good.

The speed at which the base was coming alive was amazing. Each day it seemed a new hall, a new wing and more personnel were arriving. A convoluted lab was being set up which gave Roxy the idea that Narvi was right. That the base would be the source of the investigative branch of the Sector Guard. She had to admit the thought was somewhat exciting, but she still wasn't sure what part she was going to play.

When they got to the Guard wing, she had to admit that it was impressive. Sweeping arches into each room allowed for larger personnel, the gym and exercise rooms were fully outfitted with heavy-duty equipment and the Medical Bay was using the most advanced and, in some cases,

experimental equipment available. Roxy knew every piece—she had checked all of the equipment in herself.

A meeting room was almost complete, a huge round table holding court in the otherwise empty chamber, but it was to the commander's office that they went.

"General Brodin, has Commander Narvi exited these quarters?"

"No. He never occupied them. He preferred to operate from the administration building." He sighed happily as he walked around the desk and took a seat in the fitted chair. It obviously was conforming to him faithfully. The blissful look on his face was unmistakable.

"Go on, have a seat. There may be a few more winged personnel, so I had the Draï chairs brought in."

Roxy chose the standard chair, but Esur settled into the larger chair with the narrow strut of supportive alloy in place of the backrest. He was able to lean back comfortably without danger of crushing his wings.

"Now then. Esur, you are the owner of this planet and have been since you became a sleeper, but are you willing to travel?"

"Of course. I will go wherever you send Roxanne."

"Excellent, I was hoping you would say that.

Roxanne, as the first Sector Guard out of Teklan base, you are assigned the name Finder and you will be given the first assignment out of this base."

"You are joking."

"I am not. Esur, what would you like as a call sign?"

Roxy frowned. "Hey, if you pick my name, then I get to pick his."

Esur looked at her and raised an eyebrow. "Well?"

"Frost." It seemed right. Suited his blue tinge as well as his talent.

"Excellent." General Brodin rubbed his deep red hands together, his silver horns gleaming in the streams of light coming through the skylight. "Frost and Finder, I do so love alliteration."

Roxy sighed. Her head was pounding and mind was spinning, she had never anticipated any of this. For a planner, it was the most unsettling of outcomes. "What is the assignment that you are talking about and how do we get there?"

The Dhemon grinned and leaned back in his chair, putting his feet up on the desk. "I am so glad that you asked."

CHAPTER FIVE

“**T**he archaeological society on Lakis 3 has been having a slight problem. The artefacts that they are sending to the Alliance museum are disappearing. They are checked in, verified and put on display and then, they simply disappear.” General Brodin slid a data pad with the particulars, images and schematics over to Roxy.

Esur looked over her shoulder as she spun the data across the screen so fast that it blurred to the standard viewer. Roxy blinked furiously as she absorbed the data. This was her speciality. The pattern that was emerging needed clarification.

“They all disappear seven days into their display?” Her voice was distance, even to her own ears.

“Yes. Are you getting an idea of the possible culprit?”

“More or less. I will have to see the facility to determine the precise details, but an idea is forming.”

“Excellent.” He clapped his hands together. “Let’s go.”

“What? You are going, too?” Esur didn’t seem happy about that.

“Indeed. Neither of you are cleared to fly my shuttle—something we need to remedy by the way—and we need to arrive as quickly as possible. Another group of artefacts is going up today and it takes two days to get there.” General Brodin stood.

“Who is going to run the base in your absence?” Esur was trying to find anything to leave the Dhemon behind.

“Narvi has volunteered to remain here as my second in command until we can get all of the pesky details sorted.”

They followed the perky general out of his office and down the hall toward the shuttle hangar. A support tech threw several packages at the group as they passed and Esur caught Roxy’s and handed them to her.

Uniforms. Deep blue and silver uniforms. Hers were a midnight blue with a radiating silver starburst that began on her left shoulder. Esur’s was silver with a radiating blue starburst on the right shoulder.

General Brodin was opening the shuttle hatch and in no time at all, they were strapped in, rolling down the runway and lifting off the planet’s

surface. Roxy still couldn't believe it was happening.

She was a member of the Sector Guard with her own alias and everything. Finder. She could only hope to live up to the name.

With the autopilot engaged, General Brodin turned the pilot's chair around and grinned at them. "Did you want to get into your uniforms?"

"Sure. I suppose." She unbuckled her harness and stood up, preparing to strip off and put on the suit.

"In the lav with you."

"Esur, there is barely room in there to change your mind."

"I insist. Off with you." He thrust one of her uniforms at her and pushed her bodily into the lav.

When the door shut, she dropped her utility belt and started to peel off the loose work suit she normally wore. When she got to the boots, she cursed luridly as she banged her elbows, head, hip and one of her knees while struggling to remove them.

Completely nude, she stepped into the warm gloving of the uniform. It fit her like a second skin, but the texture was not that of a thin material. If she didn't miss her guess, this was also body armour.

Her hands broke free of the sleeves and enjoyed the point that extended beyond the wrist. The snugness of the suit at her wrist supported her for data entry as well as writing extensively, two of her favourite pastimes.

With all of the hidden seals closed and tight, she knocked on the door and peeked out. "Are you decent?"

"For five minutes. What took you so long?"

She snorted and took a seat on one of the benches across from Esur, who was pulling on a set of boots. They were new boots, not the ones he had come on with.

"You try changing clothing in a closet. Do I get boots?" She looked at Brodin hopefully and he opened a storage cupboard with a flourish exposing some boots that matched her suit to perfection.

She fought the happy squeal that welled up inside her. Instead, she bit her lip and tugged the boots on over the legs of her suit. They reached to her knee and fit snugly around her calves. She wiggled her toes and had just enough room to be comfortable. Bless the Alliance for having her sizes on record.

Esur was watching her giggling, girlish behaviour when she looked up. He grinned and asked the general, "So, we are headed to the Alliance museum?"

"Indeed. It will be a bit of a journey, so let's get to know each other, shall we?" Brodin sat at the dining table and Esur sat across from Roxy.

"Oh, good. Question and answer time." She rubbed her hands together. "Esur, do you really own Teklan? And if so, why have you let the Sector Guard build a base there?"

He looked to Brodin and then back to her. "I purchased the planet when I went to sleep. I didn't want to be disturbed by colonists or traffic until my mate was near. You know that I woke a few decades ago and five years ago, a Seer from the Citadel came to the planet and spoke to me of the upcoming plans for the Sector Guard. I agreed to let the planet become a Guard base as long as they would engage in every effort to bring my mate to me. With my home completed and my mate still unseen, I returned to nap until you arrived on the surface, only occasionally rising to assist in the logistics of the base."

"And then you started singing to me in my dreams." It was bizarre that this man would wait centuries for her to arrive when he didn't even know if she was coming.

"Correct. You are everything I could have wished for and more. Now I just have to prove it to you."

Tears pricked her eyes at the earnestness of his expression. She quickly inhaled and turned to

Brodin who was watching them with a rather paternal eye.

"What about you, General?"

"Please, call me Brodin or Might, if you will. That will be my call sign while we are at the museum, so you had best get used to saying it." He grinned at the look that Esur was giving him.

"Why Might?"

"If it happens, you'll know. Now. As for me, I am the cousin of one of Dhema's most famous and well-respected generals. General Kassil. He is wed to one of the Terran Champions and they live in disgustingly cheerful bliss with their children on his palatial estate. Since he was retired, I was called to active duty and rose in the ranks. My talent made me unsuitable for a proper marriage on Dhema, so I requested an assignment elsewhere. Since I have experience with Terrans and their ways, it was felt that I would be a good choice as base commander."

Roxy sat for a moment running what she knew of Dhemons through her mind. "You have a talent. Is it latent or acquired?"

"Latent. Very good. Dhemons do not take lightly to mixing bloodlines with those of psychic or physical talent."

"Which is yours?"

"Physical. You will see...eventually." He smiled and showed his pointed teeth. The braids

of his rank-marked hair swung with the metallic bands that bound it. His suit was unrelieved black. It turned him into a being of shadow and blood.

Esur spoke to her, "Now you, Roxanne. Why did you leave your home world for the Alliance?"

"Well, Frost, the Alliance came to Earth and asked us if we wanted to volunteer to become part of their little gathering out here. Thousands applied and I was one of them."

Brodin looked curiously at her, his ice blue eyes seeing into her soul. "There is more to it than that. Samantha has told me of the rigorous testing, the two thousand of your species chosen as exceptional examples."

She was blushing, she could feel it. "Well, yes. I went with friends on a dare to apply and they asked me to stay for further testing. By the time they were finished, I knew the entire contents of the testing facility and knew when an object was removed from its proper place. My talent flared to life that day. Before then, it had just been part of my personality. My one focussed ability. After that day, it became an obsession. I would inventory people on the bus. Grocery stores would ask me to leave because I tallied each of their products and could tell at a glance if the measurements were off."

Roxanne shrugged again, "The day I was called to the Alliance as a Terran Volunteer, it was a

relief. My brain could be useful and not a torment."

"So, that is why you are obsessed with work?" Esur looked as if dawn was lighting behind his eyes.

"More or less. It is like my brain has a certain amount of energy each day to burn off. If I don't use it, it builds up until I am sorting my socks by fibres per inch."

"I see. I will make a note to keep you on supervisory duty at the base, just to let you have an outlet."

She knew her tone would be wry before she spoke. "It would be appreciated."

"No problem." He laughed again.

"You know, Might, you are the most cheerful Dhemon I have ever met."

He snorted. "I know. The shame of my family. I just don't have the serious nature required by most Dhemon women to qualify to have them look past my talent. I know, I have tried. The last round of visits I had to make were cut short because many of the ladies did not want my formal apology for accepting the post here. It was why I was able to arrive early and why you are now here with me on this shuttle."

There was a look in Esur's eyes again that she didn't like, so instead of causing a scene, she simply wandered over and sat next to him. He

immediately took her hand in his own, stroking her palm with his thumb. The shivers that ran through her, left her in no doubt that she was meant to be with him. It was just a matter of time and logistics.

"There are some decks of cards here and Samantha has taught me to play. There is also a Mintag game, but that will take a little bit longer."

The mention of Mintag perked Esur up. "I will play against you if Roxanne doesn't mind."

"I don't mind at all. I will just go over the files and data that have been accumulated on the thefts. Is there any way to get full maintenance logs from the museum as well?" She was making her way to the desk with the screen lighting up as she sat down.

"You have full clearance, so look at whatever you wish."

There was unrestrained eagerness in his tone and she realized that the two boys were both eager to have someone to play with, they just didn't know how to ask.

She started rifling through the data, pulling logs, sorting and recombining data until she started to get the full picture. If she was right, the light bulb replacement would be the key.

She simply needed to get her hands on their inventory.

CHAPTER SIX

“Welcome, Guardsmen. We are relieved that you have been able to come to our assistance in this matter.” The head curator was wringing his hands, all four of them. Master Helugar was tall, strapping and every Yaleth woman’s dream.

“Thank you, Curator. We are eager to begin this investigation. If you would show us the way?” Might was all charm and grace. Finder could see why he had been chosen for this position. He was good at dealing with the public.

She and Frost had practiced using the aliases the second day of their journey. It was simply easier to keep an image of the ice dragon in mind while they spoke.

The halls of the museum were crammed with artefacts, displays and dioramas. It tweaked her funny bone to see that even the most advanced races liked to make three-dimensional models to make the historic moment in time accessible to all.

A display that she had not expected to see had caught her attention when she was searching the museum's display archives. There was a Terran exhibit.

She had to keep her mind on the task at hand and not ask to see the exhibit. It wasn't open to the public yet and she wasn't sure if her status as a Sector Guard would allow her to view it.

Master Helugar was still talking urgently to Might about the concerns he had regarding damage to the reputation of the museum. Might was doing his best to assure the man that Finder was the best person for the job.

She hoped he wasn't just blowing smoke.

Frost was on high alert, staying close to her with his wings spread slightly to foil attack from behind. Walking side by side, their matching costumes were striking. She caught a glimpse of them in the plexi protecting a display and almost gasped out loud. They looked like they were on a mission of galactic importance. It brought a giggle to her lips that she ruthlessly stifled.

They strode silently behind Might and the curator, official representatives of a new peacekeeping force.

If she kept it in her mind, she might believe it one day.

After five minutes of walking through chambers, halls and past alcoves, they arrived at

the Ganyel display. The cases were all full, but the worry in the curator's face was real.

Finder stepped forward. "Master Helugar, explain to me, in detail, the proceedings leading up to the disappearance. I am eager to hear it from a witness."

His three eyes focussed on her in surprise, as if he didn't expect her to be able to speak. "Well, when the items arrived, they were cleaned and prepared for display. This process takes several weeks, sometimes months depending on the artefacts. We organise the display in a mock-up room downstairs. Arrange special atmospheres if necessary and seal the cases for transport to the display area." He stopped and waved at the room around them.

"When the artefacts disappeared, the storage facility was contacted and we removed the cases as if we were simply changing the displays."

"Are the sealed displays still in the basement, as they were when removed from display?"

"Yes. Once Might assured us you were on your way, we locked down the area and no one has come in or out of it."

Finder smiled. "That must be making the thief very nervous." She chuckled to herself. "I would like to see the warehouse where you keep your maintenance supplies please. And then a tour of the preparation rooms."

He had the grace to look only slightly sceptical. "Will this actually help your investigation?"

"It can't hurt." Frost contributed that bit of wisdom and again, the curator jumped. He was indeed a twitchy sort.

He shuddered but led them into the unadorned and functional storerooms.

Finder was in heaven, but she kept her face serious as she compared the information on the data pad with the physical aspect of the actual inventory. The stores were all in good condition and matched the levels indicated on the reports with one exception. There were nine display bulbs too many.

"Gotcha." She smirked and double-checked her numbers.

"What, what have you found?" The curator was wringing his hands again.

She had just opened her mouth to tell him what she noticed when a creaking from above her made her look up. Finder was pushed to the floor, Frost covering her with his body. A hail of powder rained over them, making them cough.

Cautiously, Frost stood and held her tightly against him. Next to them, Might was standing, his fist still outstretched, covered with the plaster that was covering a ten foot diameter around them. The pattering of feet at the end of the storage racks ended when the door opened and

closed.

Coughing lightly, Finder put her hand out to lower Might's fist. "Thanks for that. Shall we continue to the preparation area?" Finder's gaze caught those of her companions.

"You still wish to proceed?" The curator was astonished.

"Yes. Of course."

"Don't you wish to pursue your attacker?"

"No. We will find him soon enough. There is no where for him to go." She dusted some of the plaster off Frost's shoulders and turned to the curator with a bright grin.

"You know who it is?" Might whispered it in her ear.

"Of course. I knew before we landed. I just needed to make sure. Have security watch the mock-up room and keep all and any personnel from leaving the museum." She gestured for him to precede them.

"No. I am going to watch your back." He took up the final position in their little parade as they made their way through to the preparation rooms.

Frost didn't let her get more than a foot away from him. He hadn't spoken since the falling object, but she could feel the tension in him.

"This is the preparation room, but I don't really know what you are looking for." Master Helugar was not nearly as dismissive as he had been

earlier. She was no longer a piece of furniture at Might's disposal.

"A certain combination of chemicals that will react with certain frequencies of light." She ignored him and began to search. Frost and Might were on guard and the staff that was in the room froze under their glares.

She hummed to herself as she went from workstation to workstation. Each of the stations had itemized inventories and she compared them with the list in her mind. It was no surprise to her when she found the ninth station containing the chemical composition that she was looking for.

She raised her hand and Might followed her signal. "That composition. It is neutral until struck by waves of complimentary light."

He took it from there. "Who's workstation is this?"

The curator looked at his staff, lined against one wall and took a quick headcount. "Professor Ardual. He should be here right now."

"Have security look for him. He is our most likely suspect at this time."

Finder wanted to argue, but the look she got from his ice blue eyes shut her up. Right. Innocent until proven guilty.

Even if he was a weasely bastard that had tried to crush her with a bag of casting plaster.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“**M**ight, I hate to be obnoxious, but do you have a location for the stolen artefacts?”

Master Helugar was looking more confident now that the culprit had been identified.

“Finder? Do you have any insight as to their location?”

“Curator, please take us to the mock-up room.” Finder could hear the murmuring behind her as they walked behind the curator. Gossip was the lifeblood of the workplace and the professors, students and assistants had just gotten enough to last them for weeks.

The halls were still sterile—none of the trappings of the main museum were wasted on the workers. It was rather sad.

Two guards stood at the entrance and greeted the curator as he approached. They saluted and it took Finder a long few minutes to realize that they were saluting the Sector Guard.

“Oh. Hello. We are here investigating some

thefts. May we access the mock-up room?" Finder wasn't sure if it was the right thing to say, but they stepped aside and let her in.

The room was lovely. Displays that were being practice-positioned were in every part of the large warehouse. She consulted her mental map and strode confidently to the display of empty cases.

"How do you know where you are going?" Frost was still next to her but now relaxed enough to converse.

"The maps were in the data packs I downloaded."

"And how did you know about the chemical agent?"

"There was a selection of chemicals that had suddenly come up missing at the last audit. The combination would produce three possible end results. One is a polymer, one is a toxin and the other is a photosensitive agent."

"So what are we looking for now?" He was close enough that the others should not have been able to hear him.

"The missing objects. They aren't missing at all. The suspect simply needed more time to remove them from their displays." She checked her surroundings and took a sharp left.

Coming face to face with the missing professor was not something she had counted on. Finder squeaked sharply when confronted by the large

lizard and when he hissed and lunged for her, she lost all ability to speak.

Her mind blanked as he rushed forward, fangs dripping with venom that would not be good for her. Her dragon stepped forward and engaged the other predator in a fight that was short, brutal and involved the smashing of two display cases.

Might had moved to stand between her and the battle, but as soon as it was finished, she rushed forward.

"Show me your hands." Blood was seeping out of wounds that the professor had inflicted. She hissed and pressed his flesh tightly to slow the flow.

"He didn't manage a bite." Frost was smiling. "I broke his jaw first."

"Yes, I see that. You also smashed some cases. Good thing they are not environmentally sensitive artefacts." She looked up to see his face just inches from her own. The kiss was irresistible.

Their breath met, mingled and she sighed at the soft-smooth feel of his lips against her own. How long they stood exploring the novel sensation of the kiss, she didn't know, but when Might cleared his throat, she leaned back with a dazed feeling that Frost was echoing in his ice blue eyes. His lips were swollen and she could feel the tingle in her own.

"Sorry, Might. Glove up and open one of the

empty cases. Reach around and pull out whatever you find, then rub it with some of the dust left on your uniform from the plaster." She was still keeping pressure on Frost's hands, bemused as the flesh sealed while she watched.

"Nice trick, Frost."

"A perk for my species. We heal quickly."

They were still busy staring into each other's eyes when Might cleared his throat again.

"I found something. Several somethings in fact. It looks like a necklace." He held out his hands and showed them the dusted artefacts.

"This seems to be what was missing from this case, wouldn't you say, Curator?"

Master Helugar had been hanging way back while they examined the contents of the display. "It seems to be correct. You mean that they have been here the whole time?"

"Yes. The professor treated them with the chemical during the cleaning process and when they were exposed to the special lighting, the compound absorbs and reflects light. They turn invisible."

The curator took the dusted necklace from Might's hands. "Can it be reversed?"

"Of course. Just wash them in water. They will clear right up. Also, you may want to remove those lights and destroy them. They have no use for any objects here, aside from activating the

compound.”

“Wonderful! I will let security know that Professor Ardual is to be held until he can be taken to a secure facility for charges.” The wringing hands had stopped. He was positively beaming.

“Please. I don’t want him around Finder anymore. He tends to try to kill her.” Frost was scowling and looking as if he wanted to attack the unconscious lizard again.

When security arrived, the professor was still not stirring.

“Make sure to keep him in a cold room until he can be picked up. He is a lot slower when his metabolism is down.” Might clapped the curator on the shoulder and grinned.

“I can’t thank you enough for taking care of this so quickly. Is there anything I can do?”

Might was about to shake his head, but Finder caught his eye. “Finder?”

“There is a display being put together for the Terran exhibit. May I see it?”

The curator could not have been more shocked. “You are Terran?”

“I am. May I see the exhibit?”

“Of course. Please. Be my guest.” He lead the way and Finder clung to Frost’s arm as they walked through the unfinished exhibits. “You know, Finder, given your talents, I don’t doubt

that you could have found this on your own. Why wait for approval?"

"It wouldn't have been the same. I am not one to infringe on hospitality when it is offered. Manners matter."

"Well said, miss. Well said." He chuckled as they made their way around the corner that concealed her species' history in space.

"Oh. Wow." A raised podium had depictions of the five Terran Champions. Kyra, Amy, Samantha, Sarah, Annabelle, all were there in full scale.

Frost leaned in and whispered to her so that Master Helugar couldn't hear. "Which one is Might related to?"

"Samantha, she was a Hunter who was forced to retire when there was a price on her head. She was also a wonderful singer from what I have been told. She now has three little Dhemons and apparently is quite happy."

He looked at her in surprise and kept his voice to that whisper. "How do you know all this?"

"All humans get a monthly and sometimes weekly flyer in the mail. *The Terran Times*. It is an update of who is marrying whom, where the new assignments are happening, who had a baby and where the deaths are occurring. It is very informative."

"I can imagine. Why do your people do this?"

"It is done by one of the Volunteers. Unlike

other races that can come and go as they please, the two thousand humans that were let out into space were the first wave and we will never be allowed to return. The instant we left, we became citizens of the Alliance, born of Terra. Our home is gone. We have to start over. Therefore, we cling to each other by any means necessary."

She went quiet and wandered around the room, perusing documents and occasionally widening her eyes at some of the letters sent by various governments to get preferential treatment for their Volunteers. The letters sent after some of the Olympic athletes were rejected were less cordial and far more hostile. Good, bad, ugly, they had kept it all.

She wanted to twirl in the glory of being surrounded by references to her race, but now was not the time. Instead, she went from display to display and soaked in all of the Terran-ness she could. It was like a display at any museum back on Earth, only now, it was her culture that was on display. The languages, the national costumes, dance, environments, it was all here.

When she reached the end of the displays, she wanted to cry. This was the place she wanted to stay forever. She felt at home here. It was so nice to be surrounded by the familiar.

"Finder, we have to go."

"I know."

Frost put his arm around her shoulders and squeezed her in a half-hug that made her feel less homesick. "I promise that when the display is up, we can and will return."

Tears pricked her eyes, but she smiled at him. "Okay."

Straightening, she took his hand and together, they walked back to where Might was still fishing artefacts out of the displays to place them in buckets with water. The items became visible almost immediately and were removed as fast as possible by fanatical assistants who were hovering under the watchful eye of security.

Might was also crushing the lights after he removed all contents from the cases. No one would be able to play that trick on those displays again.

"Curator, please make sure that the lights are changed on the exterior displays. They will be saturated and fading into invisibility within the week if you don't." She was still clinging to Frost's hand, but it felt too right to let go.

"Those displays are affected as well?" He looked alarmed.

"Yes. The number of lights here were insufficient for the additional count in the storage bay. That was the tip off by the way. The light bulbs for these displays should have been requisitioned before they were sent out to the

public areas and they were not. That lead me to believe that the lights were involved and from there, it was easy to find the chemical component." Finder was tired. She had done more talking in the last three days than she had in the previous three years.

Finder didn't want to explain anything else. Her intuitive leaps were hard enough to handle on her own, let alone to explain it to strangers.

She just wanted to go home.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The return was anti-climactic. The emotional rush of solving the crime fizzled within her the moment that they were back on the shuttle. Roxy was deflated. That was it. Professor Ardual was being held until he could be sent to an Alliance trial, either on another planet or on a passing warship. In the mean time, the Sector Guard was returning to base.

Finder's first job was done.

"Don't chew your nails." Esur's voice reached through her gloom.

"I don't chew them, I just hold them between my teeth." She held up her un-gnawed fingers and wiggled them.

"What has you so down?" He sat next to her, nudging her into an upright position from her previous reclining pose.

"I just thought there would be more excitement. Less of a let down after this case was solved. It was just so fast."

He snorted and put his arm around her. "Nice to know you like things slow."

Her lips twisted into a smirk. "You won't think so when I demand every moment of the six months I am allowed before we consummate anything. I will not be rushed in my personal life."

"Will you share the house with me?"

"If you want me to."

"Then I will use the next six months to try and move up your time table." He lifted her hand and kissed the back of her knuckles.

"Good luck with that. What do you think of our first assignment?"

He paused and his hand stroked her arm absently. "I think that if you are to continue to live a long and healthy life, you will definitely need a permanent bodyguard. I hereby volunteer to throw myself between you and danger at any and every moment. On top of you if necessary."

She leaned her head back against his shoulder and gave him a serious scowl. "Your dedication is admirable, but I don't think that will be necessary."

His grin was unrepentant. "I will be the judge of that. You are obviously unaware of the peril you can be in at any time. When on an assignment, you are the one solving the puzzle. It will be to the villain's advantage to strike out at you. I am here to prevent that."

"I am flattered."

"You should be, I am not making this offer to just anyone." Esur leaned down and gave her a kiss on the lips.

The warmth flowed between them, tiny shocks of power that notched her interest higher with every second that they kept in contact. She shuddered, if it kept climbing, she would blow apart by the time that she let him into her bed.

She would let him in, but it was a matter of time. Her family was spotted with women who had rushed into marriage and family and it rarely turned out well. It wasn't fear of commitment that held her back, it was fear that the fire between them would fade if they let it burn brightly.

"Enough you two. We have a full day's flight ahead of us." Brodin sounded grumpy. As if breaking up a makeup session was something he was getting tired of doing.

Blinking as she backed away from Esur, she did some mental math. "It took two days to get out here."

"Different gravitational fields. We are not fighting the pull of the stars this time. We are using their energy to propel us." Brodin gestured for her to join him at the controls. "You may as well start learning how to fly a shuttle. We do have some time to kill and I am tired of Esur kicking my butt at Mintag."

Extricating herself from Esur's embrace was not easy and she didn't really want to leave him, but necking on the bench was not a very social way to spend the time. Flying through empty space wasn't something she was going to enjoy, but it was a necessary skill, like using a fork. You just had to do it to get through the day.

Roxy settled herself in the co-pilot's seat as Brodin started to go through all of the toggles one by one.

Esur stretched out to take a nap and their little crew continued their flight through the stars, back to home base.

Teklan base seemed so small as Roxy guided the shuttle in for a landing, but it rapidly grew larger as they approached at high speed.

"Okay, just ease up, fire the braking jets, that's it. Keep your hands light and the steering easy. Slower, slower, back the jets up. Onto the landing pad. Easy, easy."

His constant conversation was enough to make Roxy scream, but she kept her concentration on landing the craft and when they finally dropped firmly to the ground, she breathed easily.

"Wonderful, but next time, extend the landing gear." Brodin laughed, wiped some sweat from his brow and slapped her on the shoulder.

She put her face in her hands and groaned.

"You did fairly well. Esur's fingers only dug into the bulkhead half an inch. He was only nervous, not scared."

Brodin helped her unbuckle her harness and lifted her bodily from the seat. Every muscle was locked with tension.

Several moments on the flight in, she was convinced that she would kill them all.

Esur's low growl sped Brodin's steps while the dragon removed his hands from the death grip he had on the bulkhead.

Brodin handed her over to Esur and walked to the hatch, opening the door and moving into the daylight.

"Sorry about the rough landing. Brodin seemed to take it well. Wait..." She peered out the open hatch that they were approaching. "Is he kissing the ground?"

A rolling chuckle was running through the Draï carrying her. Their leader was indeed on the tarmac in front of them, his lips to the surface.

She looked up at her companion, her mate. "Maybe you should learn to fly the shuttle."

"My dear, I know how to fly just about anything. Brodin just wanted to give you something to do besides kiss me during the flight home. We had no idea that you would forget the gear when you brought us down."

She balled up her fist and punched him in the

chest. "Put me down, jerk! There is someone else here. Someone in a Guard uniform."

The sleek lines of the ship were unmistakable. It was the Class One. Basically the flagship of the Sector Guard.

An Azon and a Terran were standing outside the shuttle, laughing and shaking Brodin's hand. They all seemed happy to see one another.

With her feet on the ground and no need to straighten her suit, she and Esur joined them. He stretched his wings out and then snapped them back in.

"I do not like small shuttles."

"No, I guess it was confining."

Pilot, for her markings were obvious, smiled and extended her hands to Roxanne. "Roxanne, I am so glad that you have joined the Guard."

"Helen. I didn't really have a choice. I was simply told that it was the reason for my assignment here. I like my name though." She smiled. It was nice to see another human up close and personal.

They went in for a hug and when they parted, both had a few small tears in their eyes.

"You may know my husband, Hyder. Formerly Commander, now most are simply calling him Match." Helen angled her body, letting her husband lean forward to shake Roxy's hand.

The contact was startling. Roxy met Hyder's

gaze and knew in an instant that he wasn't looking at *her*, he was looking at something only he could see. "Nice to meet you."

"And you as well. This is Esur."

"Pleased to meet you, Frost. We are happy to be making this visit. It should have been earlier, but there was an emergency at Station 13 that my lovely wife and I had to attend to."

"Your presence is welcome here on Teklan."

"I was worried about the match you two made, but I can see my fears were groundless." Hyder and Esur were bonding on a strange level, similar to the one that he had shared with Brodin.

The dragon smiled, showing a lot of teeth. "They were indeed. Draï can find their own mates."

"If we hadn't sent Roxanne here, you may not have found her as easily." He was looking as if Esur had insulted his very reason for living.

"Possibly, but I would have found her eventually."

The men bickered back and forth, Brodin standing by in case he was needed to intervene.

Roxy looked to Helen, "Coffee?"

"You have some?"

"Close enough. Come on."

Together, Pilot and Finder wandered away from the males who were still trying to prove who the best matchmaker was. Draï instincts or

Match's talent.

Roxy didn't care as long as she got a veto vote. She had no intent to use it, but she wanted a say in her personal future, even if it was already written in the stars.

"So, I hear that you love your job here." Helen was sipping at the coffee substitute with caution before she settled in with a slurp.

"I do. I really do. The busy nature of the base gives me plenty of items to track down and I like the people." Roxy was enjoying one of the pastries that Sama had whipped up for her. There was a small plate of them on the table between them and the other patrons were looking at it with rueful glances. Roxy received special treatment from the support staff. She took care of their supplies, so they took care of her cravings.

"How are you getting along with Esur? He seems a good sort of guy."

"He is. I just don't want to rush anything. The women in my family are not known for their appropriate choices when it comes to love."

Helen sighed and took her hand. "There is a lot to be said for waiting, but this is not Earth. When men who mate for life declare that you are their perfect match, believe them. If you feel anything toward him, give him a chance. He will make it worth your while."

Helen's pilot ports were still visible, but they had been faded into her skin somewhat. Roxy gave her a long look and noted that where the stressed and drawn features had previously been, Helen was now relaxed and glowing.

"You are really happy, aren't you?"

"More than you could imagine. It isn't always easy, especially when Hyder was running Morganti Base, but now we are spending time as a couple and there isn't a day when I don't feel blessed."

"Blessed?"

"Luckier than hell? Hyder is a doctor as well as a matchmaker and he can be a busy fellow, but now that the burden of leadership is off his shoulders, he always makes time for me. We are even talking about starting a family. Not something that I had even considered before we left Earth. I was planning to be single with occasional affairs. You can't always plan your future. Sometimes you have to let it just rush up and grab you."

"Here, here." Roxy raised her coffee cup and toasted the possibilities. What if she just jumped into bed with Esur? She wasn't the kind of girl to fling herself at strange men, but he wasn't a man by human standards. Flinging herself into the arms of a dragon was a pleasant thought. She knew that he would catch her.

That was part of the problem. He would do whatever she asked, but she didn't want to ask. She wanted to be pursued, not taken for granted. It was a sticky situation.

Helen seemed to read her mind. "Now, I know that the Alliance is a little highhanded when it comes to just handing us over to the mates that they choose, but you knew coming out here that you would have to give in to their choice. He will court you, if you tell him to, and I know it would be nice if he pursued you. Maybe bought you a coffee at Starbucks or something. This isn't Earth, we aren't there anymore and I haven't seen a dragon with pockets on his hide yet."

"You may have a point. But even Draï regulations indicate that there should be a courtship." She crossed her arms and frowned at Helen.

"What is the criteria?"

She ticked the list off on her fingers. "A formal meeting, attraction, knowing the spark of destiny is there, family agreement and approval of the male's home."

"What is he missing?"

Roxy thought about it. "The formal meeting and my approval of his home. I like it, but I hate the location."

Helen was grinning. "So you agree the spark of destiny is there? Good start. The attraction I

already knew about. You shocked poor Brodin by making out."

"We were hardly making out. It was a simple kiss."

"That lasted five minutes."

That would explain the look on Brodin's face when he broke them up. "Oh."

"So, we need to arrange a formal gathering as well as some proper clothing for you." Helen looked at her, considering something in her own mind. "I have it! It's a fairly elegant design that can be altered to fit you in a few minutes. Of course, if Fixer was here, it would be easier, but Mala is still planet bound with her pregnancy. That little thing is exceptionally active, keeps her up to all hours of the night. She can hardly even design suits anymore." Helen shook her head.

"I had heard she was pregnant, but didn't know whether or not to believe it."

"She's pregnant all right. Shade is beside himself getting the addition ready for the new arrival."

"That is wonderful, send her my best."

"Well, as a member of the Sector Guard, you will probably have to go to her for a customisation of your uniform. Since you don't have a physical talent, you will need more body armour as well as some emergency communication systems. Now, I saw that landing...were you drunk?"

Having to explain her crappy landing to a pilot was beyond embarrassing. "With my talent, I look at the big picture and put the pieces together. With flying, you have to be in the moment and I just am not quite wired for that."

"It's okay. Not all of us need to know how to fly."

"Esur says he knows how. Come to think of it, he has a shuttle bay in his home. There is probably an old ship in there."

"Good. We will get one of Vasu's designs here. They are big enough for a Draï and are designed for wing comfort. That man knows his shuttlecraft." Helen nibbled at one of the pastries, widened her eyes at the flavour and rapidly finished it so she could consume another.

"These things are amazing. They taste like cream puffs."

Roxy had to smile at that. "They are...sort of. Sama loves new recipes and even makes a fabulous taco if you give her some advanced warning. She has to get a suitable taco shell in. That is trickier than it sounds."

Helen laughed. "Have I ever told you about the ravenous Fixer and the tale of the missing roast beast?"

Smiling, Roxy helped herself to one of the pastries. "Please, enlighten me."

The pilot pushed up her sleeves and leaned

forward. "It was a dark and stormy night. Fixer's morning sickness had just passed and she was eating everything not nailed down. Relay Wyt had arranged for a special dinner for some dignitaries and the staff had been preparing all day..."

The tales of other Guardsmen and their spouses spilled into the chamber and together, the women basked in the moment that was theirs. Two Terrans out on a strange world. They needed to take the time to enjoy the company of a shared history.

CHAPTER NINE

Roxy twitched the skirt and fidgeted. "I still can't believe you did this."

Hyder smiled and patted her arm. "Helen was very precise. You need the formal introduction to Esur and this base-wide celebration of completion of the Guard's quarters is the perfect venue."

"Brodin agreed?"

"Of course he did. He is as eager as I am to see you and Esur together as a couple."

Music was playing, couples were dancing and the bulk of Esur's home was now visible on the horizon. He had moved his home three days earlier and had been busy with Brodin ever since.

Tonight, they would see each other for the first time in days. Roxy had to admit how much her heart ached to see him. She missed him and he was still here on base. She couldn't imagine what would happen if they were separated for a longer period.

Helen and Brodin were dancing, Hyder was on

chaperone duty until Brodin could take his place. They were acting as her family at this event, even though the formal agreement for Esur to take her as wife was already signed by the Terran Representative as well as witnessed by three councillors.

Tonight was all for her.

She nibbled at some of the snacks and watched the dancers until the tingling in her spine told her that Esur was here. Esur Wallaz was his full name. She would become Roxanne Wallaz as soon as they filed the change.

That would wait.

He crossed the room, his white shirt flowing and his large wings out on either side of his body, displaying for her. He walked up and bowed to Hyder. "An introduction, please."

"Esur Wallaz, this is Roxanne Nelson of the Alliance Protectorate of Terra. Member of the Sector Guard and Inventory Master." Hyder bowed as he made the introduction.

"Roxanne Nelson, this is Esur Wallaz, late of the planet Draï, Third Flight Master of the Draï Elite, frost dragon, Lord of Teklan and member of the Sector Guard."

Roxanne curtsied and Esur bowed. "Pleased to meet you, Esur."

"You as well, Roxanne. May I have this dance?" He held his hand out to her, a sparkle in his ice

blue eyes.

"Yes, thank you." She placed her hand delicately in his and smiled at the sparks between them.

Together, they spun onto the dance floor and moved together as if they were partners for years instead of seconds. "So, you are a Flight Master?"

"From years gone by. When the Draï were a more warlike race, we still had a need to defend and attack. Most Draï can learn to pilot shuttles and fight ships." He spun her gracefully around another couple.

"So, when I was getting a lesson, you were laughing your head off?"

"No. I was amazed that you showed no aptitude and yet kept trying. You didn't give up even when we made that sudden landing."

"And you didn't scream."

"I wasn't breathing. You can't scream when you aren't breathing."

She scowled at him and she deliberately trod on his toes.

"That was earned. Do you have family?"

"Back on Earth? Yes. My mother and two sisters."

"No brothers? No father?"

"My mother and father had a flare of passion that burned out after my little sister was born. My sisters have both been married and divorced

twice."

"Have you ever been married?"

"No. With the examples around me, I steered clear of those entanglements."

A sudden understanding came into his eyes. "My parents have passed, but they were married for four hundred years, my grandparents, three hundred, my great grandparents, three hundred and fifty. We do not make sudden decisions regarding our mates. We choose once and forever."

Tears pricked her eyes. "I really hope so, because I am already very much in love with you."

"I am glad. I feel the same."

It was all she was going to get, but she would take it. For now.

"May I show you something?" They were at the edge of the dance floor on the tarmac under the full moons.

"As long as it isn't your etchings. Yes."

He didn't get the reference, but he tugged her into the darkness beyond the pool of lights.

In the darkness, he shifted form and his great glowing eye looked down at her. She heard a voice in her mind and the timbre shook her. The rest of his body was glowing as well, an ice blue that fought the moons for beauty.

Climb up my arm and onto my back. There is a short

mane there that you can grip.

She scrambled into his palm and walked up his arm until she was firmly wedged on his neck. She had to sit just a little forward of his shoulders or be crushed when he flew. Settled, she tapped her feet to the sides of his neck and it was all the encouragement he needed. With a powerful push, he surged off the ground. She almost passed out.

Oops. Sorry. I haven't had a passenger in a very long time.

The air rushed past her and she couldn't speak. She also was not going to project any thoughts to him. He didn't need to know everything.

They reached the castle in minutes. He circled it slowly and it was then that she realized that there were lights everywhere in and around the structure. It was humming happily with warmth in the night.

The landing was far more delicate than take off had been.

She dismounted without being prompted.

She was looking at the great doors and remembering the first cold moment she had seen it. A few steps brought her to the wall and a touch confirmed what she had already guessed. It wasn't ice. It was a form of glass.

She could feel him behind her. Turning, she looked into his eyes. His expression was wary. This was the moment. "I love your home."

The smile that broke on his face made her laugh and then shriek when he picked her up and spun her around.

The spin turned into a kiss and this time, she let her instincts off the chain. She caressed his shoulders, chest, waist and below. His muscles jumped as she caressed him and he took the hint to do some exploring of his own.

Wind blew past Roxy, throwing her hair into disarray. She drew back from the kiss to see a new room around them. He had flown them to his bedroom. Their bedroom.

“Are you sure?” His words were muffled against her neck while his hands freed her dress from her body.

She pulled his head away from her collarbone and looked him in his dilated eyes. “Forever begins tonight.”

The feral grin would have scared her if the tenderness hadn’t been blazing in his gaze. His own clothing was dealt with in short order, the boots tangling for a moment before he simply sat on the floor and wrenched them off.

Gently, he laid her on the bed and came down beside her. Each touch did flare her passion higher and when she finally begged him for more, he gave it. Their bodies blazed with sensation as they moved together, peaking when the charge that grew between them could not be contained.

He sealed her cries with his mouth and she took his groans as her due.

"The lights on the castle are lovely, but they are rather bright." She smiled as she snuggled against Esur, his body curled around hers.

"Ah. I have a solution for that." He nuzzled at her neck and she shivered.

"Well?"

She felt the smirk against her neck as he freed his hands from her body and brought them together, twice.

Everything went dark.

"You have to be kidding me." Giggles spilled out as she clapped her hands and turned the lights on, then off again.

"Terrans are innovative people. I look forward to learning all about you." In only the light of the moons through the window, he slid down on the bed and proceeded to continue his education.

As her body wound tight with energy under his touch, she had one last thought. *Destiny might actually know what she is doing.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

We have now moved to Teklan base, with Hyder and Helen popping in. Brodin made his appearance as the roguish cousin in Deal with a Dhemon and he is, indeed, now related by marriage to a Champion of Terra.

Tears of the Star is the next Sector Guard book and will touch on the sentient properties of stars that was touched on in Star Breaker.

Have I mentioned that I love writing this series?

If you wish to comment, suggest or poke fun at me...

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Thanks for reading.

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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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