



Viola Grace

Sector Guard 1

FREAK FACTOR

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Freak Factor
Copyright © 2009 Viola Grace
ISBN: 978-1-55487-275-6
Cover art by Martine Jardin

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

Freak Factor: Sector Guard Book 1

By

Viol a Grace

Chapter One

"You know, the kind of repair that you are requesting will cost you." Dock master Vin nodded wisely as he spoke into his com unit. "I have a specialist who can do the job, but not at the price you want."

"Whatever. Your station comes highly recommended. As long as your specialist can do the job, we will pay. If I bring this thing in in this shape, I'll get fired." The male voice was tense and it made Vin smile.

The commander of the vessel was obviously concerned and Vin was fully willing to take advantage of that concern financially. Kaddaka station was out of the way, but his secret weapon was making them known for their perfect repairs.

The com crackled again, "And, just so you know, we are coming in hot. We have no engines and are moving at speed. If you don't send out your specialist, we are going to hit the station."

* * * *

"Mala! Get that lazy ass of yours out of bed and get down here. We have a repair and it is coming in hot!" Her com unit shrieked her awake as it had several times this year.

Struggling to wake, she rolled out of bed, "Geez, Vin. How long do we have?"

"They are inbound and they have no power. Your team is on its way."

She was hopping up and down on one foot to get into her coveralls. A few sharp tugs and it was covering the bodysuit that she slept in. "Get the cradle ready, Vin. I am gonna take it to them as soon as I get there."

"Then get your ass moving. We have less than an hour to do this." The click of the com was enough. He was serious and she was moving.

Her tiny quarters on the station were sparse. The money she had saved by doing impossible fixes for incredible prices was piling up nicely. She bolted through the halls, crew and vendors backing up against the walls to let her pass. The screaming scarlet of her repair suit was enough of a warning to them and so she passed dozens on her way to the repair bay.

Gergar was holding out her space suit in two of his four arms. She jumped into it and started slapping the closures. He sighed, took her hands away and slowly sealed her suit for her.

"You keep doing it that way, Mala, and you are

going to be breathing nothing out there.”

“I know. Sorry. It’s just that Vin sounded so excited on the com. It seemed urgent.” Her understatement was marked by a roar.

“Get your asses in gear and get out there.”

“You heard the man. Let’s get our asses out there.” She clipped her helmet into place checked her tanks and stepped into the mag boots. “Checking interior coms.”

“Check.” Gergar gave her four thumbs up.

“Check,” Rihal hissed through her mic. Her suit had a tail extension and she pressurized it to make sure it was sealed.

With her small team ready, Mala nodded for them to take their scooters and she took driving position on her pride and joy, the cradle. The cradle was a connected network of rockets that expanded to surround and lock onto a powerless ship to steer it back to the station.

“Coordinates coming up,” Vin’s voice echoed in her helmet.

Mala flipped the toggles that would get her up and running. As soon as the data flashed in front of her, she was out. This was her favourite part of duty, the thrill of the race through space. Vin had cleared the path outbound so her team could really haul ass. So haul they did. Traffic was steady around the station, but no one was dumb enough to get in their way. A broadcast had gone

out to keep private ships out of the area because an emergency ship repair crew was coming. Everyone knew what that meant.

It took fifteen minutes of dodging debris and terse communications, but finally they were at their prize and it was a beauty.

"Lady and gentleman, do you know what this is?"

"It looks so new." Rihal was in awe. Gergar was silent.

"Oh, it is, very. That is a Reflex ship." She was already jockeying for position. "Ahoy the ship!" It was tricky, suddenly in reverse to match the speed of the approaching craft.

"This is the Class One. Please identify."

"Repair crew from Kaddaka Station. Please be advised that we will be fastening rockets to the hull for manoeuvres back to the repair bay."

"Do you have confirmation of your identities?"

"No. But we do have a rocket assembly. How many pirates would be out on scooters with an engine cradle? My name is Mala, you can check with Vin." She sighed and looked at the sleek hull of the ship. "I will be using magnetic attachment so as not to mar the hull, please have your pilot notify me of any discomfort." She started to move fast. Her boots enabled her to walk the ship's surface and, in only a few minutes, she and her team had locked the magnet grips into place and

were climbing back into their respective conveyances.

"Uh, we will. Thank you." The masculine voice sounded amused. "Let us know when you hook up."

"I am attached and we are heading for Kaddaka station. Estimated arrival time, three minutes."

The male voice was a little stressed. "I thought you were going to attach rockets."

"I did."

"Then why are we still moving at this speed?"

She chuckled, it wasn't the first time that she had gotten a panicked call from a ship at this point. "I am not going to hit the brakes until we are within easy pushing distance of the station. What would be the point?"

He didn't seem happy, but replied, "You are correct. Or at least I hope you are. If not we are going to make a large splat at the station."

"I have been doing this for years and have never lost a shuttle or ship."

He was suddenly suspicious. "How many years?"

She laughed, he had caught her. "At least two. Whoops. Prepare for braking." His chatter had distracted her and she winced as she triggered the front thrusters to slow the ship. This was the one moment she was worried about the connections. Traffic was still going around their path so Vin

was doing his job.

She slowed the ship down to a controlled float and eased it toward the open repair bay. Gergar and Rihal floated in beside her, keeping the ship from bumping the edges of the doorway. It wouldn't do for them to put more damage on the ship. It would come out of their pay.

With finesse and not a little pride, Mala landed the cradle in the docking area. Clamps came out to hold the ship and she disengaged her pride and joy. The rockets folded together and another clamp came out to bring the cradle to storage. She climbed out before that could happen.

Mala stood and smiled at her crew through her helmet and gave them both a thumbs up. Mission accomplished. Now for the hard part. "Team, prepare for complete scan and repair of the ship. Be warned. Reflex ships are wired to a living operator. The operator can feel the ship like their own body. Be gentle." She crossed the floor and grabbed a data pad. It was time to make some notes.

"Blast damage on the forward nacelle," Rihal piped up.

"Blast damage on the nose, indicative of a battle," Gergar was decidedly cheerful.

"Blast damage on left engine port," she put in her own two cents.

"Blast damage on right engine port."

“Tail broken and metal fatigue throughout rear portion of the hull. Yup. This would keep them from flying straight all right.” It was a final confirmation of the damage. She sent the report to Vin and he told her he would forward it to the occupants of the ship. She looked forward to the go ahead. She wanted to get her hands on her first Reflex ship.

Chapter Two

Inside the ship, Isabi was busy removing the results of a cold sweat from his body. “Did you know she was going to cut it that close, Helen?”

The pilot leaned against the frame and smirked at him. “From what we have heard, yes. I did think that she would conserve her resources until the last moment. I didn’t know you were this twitchy, Isabi.”

“Only when my life is at stake and an unknown quantity is controlling whether I live or die. I am funny that way.” He stretched and flexed muscles that had grown taut. The repair woman had almost killed them and Helen Taline was remarkably calm about it.

“Didn’t you read her histories? She is incapable of damaging a ship. She knows every inch of every ship she has ever seen, she knew that this was a Reflex as soon as she saw it. That is not an identification that most techs in the Alliance could have made.”

"Fine. How did she know?"

"That is what we are here to find out." The ship shifted and it began its slow progression into the detail repair bay. They would soon be in a breathable atmosphere with access to the station amenities, including restocking their galley. The light to the outer airlock went green. "Now, we will see what she can do."

* * * *

Taking off her EVA suit was a lot easier than putting it on. Boots first, then helmet and finally, she unsealed the baggy thing. She stumbled free and stretched just as the hatch opened to reveal the occupants of the ship.

"Holy mother of stars," Mala whispered it as quietly as she could, but there was no getting around the fact that the male Selna was one of the most attractive things she had ever seen. She shook her head, of course he was. All Selna put out pheromones causing compatible races to want to mate. Mala's mixed bloodline was no exception.

She stayed out of their way and merely nodded to the pilot as she passed. It was easy to determine that she was the controller for the ship. The ports in her wrists gave it away. The pilot looked with a smile between Mala and Isabi. Apparently, Mala should have been writhing on the floor in front of

the Selna. That just wasn't her style.

Her repair crew helped her look busy as the occupants made the long walk to the end of the repair bay and they waited until the Selna and pilot were out the door. The instant that the coast was clear, Mala stripped off her gloves and ran her hands over the hull. The minor and major damage caused by the blasts ceased to exist at her touch, the metal joining, sealing and healing under her fingers.

This was why she made the credits that she did. The money was compensation for the perfect repairs that she was capable of. It was her one skill, this repair talent, her freak factor when it came to blending in with other techs.

She moved slowly along the ship, inch by inch, clearing and eradicating all trace of the battle. Whatever had hurt this beautiful ship had been brutal. The damage had been deliberate and designed to turn the ship into a paralyzed meteor, it had worked. The poor baby.

She was murmuring to the ship when she reached the engine damage. "Gergar, I need some metal here." She stroked the superficial damage on the exterior of the housing and waited for the hand to tap her shoulder. She took the metal sheet blindly and held it in place, feeling it melt into the surface of the ship. She could repair anything as long as she had enough materials to patch up the

holes.

"I am going to need three more of those if this engine was any indication." She clambered over the ship, keeping her focus on feeling the entirety of the ship at all times. It took her two more hours, but at last she was finished. Dizzy and terribly pleased with herself, Mala sat heavily next to the ship and turned to face her crew. Dismay filled her.

"You know, if I hadn't seen it for myself, I never would have believed it."

The Selna from the ship leaned on one of the pylons and played with one of the chunks of metal she had been using to reconstitute the engines.

"The report was quite insistent that she was capable of it. I am glad to see that it was not exaggerated." The pilot was smiling.

Whatever race she was from was in Mala's own makeup. She could feel kinship with the strange pale creature with its wide eyes and cheerful grin. Her crew was huddled together near the door, mouths gagged and arms and tail confined. "Let them go and tell me what you want."

The beautiful Selna moved close to her and whispered, "We want you."

Chapter Three

"For what? Your ship is fine, you have already paid, so you can just go." She kept her back to the ship and reached out to support herself. She was always weak as a kittling after a repair.

"Is there somewhere we can speak? Privately?" The Selna was still close.

Too close for her peace of mind and he smelled too damned good. "Sure. Give me a few minutes to refresh myself and we can go to one of the station diners." She needed a cleanse and she definitely needed food. "Untie my crew first."

The pilot simply nodded and, with a few economical movements, she released the workers. Rihal's tail was the last thing unfettered and the pilot jumped back as she triggered the release, narrowly missing the swipe of retribution.

"Rihal, Gergar. Leave it. It will be fine," she barked the order and they immediately stood down. She didn't often throw her weight around, but when she did, she meant business. Her

discomfited crew slowly left the bay, leaving Mala with the two newcomers.

The Selna came toward her again, seduction in every line of his body. "I would rather we talked immediately."

"Well, I would rather be half a meter taller. It isn't going to happen." She took a deep breath and strode for the door. "My quarters are this way, I need a cleanse and a change of clothing. Then I can eat." She moved through the halls with a weary plodding gait. All she wanted was a way to eat as she slept, but that wasn't going to happen. Her two shadows stayed with her up one hall and down the other. When they finally reached her quarters, she stopped. "You can't come in."

He blinked at her. "Why ever not?"

He was completely clueless. "I have one room and a small cleansing unit. No room for dressing in there. I am not stomping around naked with you in there."

The pilot stepped between them. "Isabi. Just stay outside. I will go in and keep my back to her."

"Good compromise." Mala headed into her room and, as soon as the pilot crossed the threshold, she triggered the lock. "Just in case he gets noseey."

"He is really too cocky for his own good. He is far too used to women just flopping onto their backs and spreading their thighs."

Mala blinked. "Uh, that is quite the image. I will be right out." She headed into the cleanser and stripped. She had lied, there was room in the chamber for clothing, in fact it was where her wardrobe was. To conserve space, she had opted for the gel cleanser and now she took a deep breath and stood under it as it covered her from head to toe and then hardened into a shell. She waited for a three count and then the sonic blast hit her, blowing the gel into bits. A quick swipe with a towel and she was ready for fresh clothing. She used the com unit in the room to place an order at her favourite diner for lunch for three. It would be ready when they arrived.

One baggy jumpsuit and some clean boots later, she was ready for company. "Sorry for the wait." Oh, she was so glad she had dressed in the cleansing chamber. The Selna was inside her room. A quick glance told her two things. One, her door was still locked and two he was looking very disappointed that she was wearing a jumpsuit.

She opened and closed her mouth in surprise. Something was going on here and she didn't know what. Never mind that, she was still hungry. She said nothing, merely led the way out of her room and down the hallway. Her favourite diner had private rooms. As soon as they were behind the silence screens, she was getting to the bottom of this. It was one weird day.

The brighter light of the commercial halls made her blink and she stumbled for a moment until she acclimated. The instant that her footing became uncertain, she felt a hand under her elbow. She didn't need to look to know who it was. The Selna had an unusual fascination with her and she was going to disabuse him of that idea as soon as she could. Men were a department of her life that she wanted to leave dormant. She straightened her shoulders and simply moved out of his grip. They were at their destination.

"Mala! How nice to see you. We have your room ready." The Ontex nodded, his small silver frame and enormous black eyes incongruous to his voice.

"Hey, Milton. Thanks for being so attentive." She followed him to the private room that she had reserved and sat on a floor cushion next to the low table. Her guests sat to either side of her. The food arrived while they were staring at each other. As the host, she portioned out the food and filled the beverage cups.

The Selna looked surprised by the courtesy.

"I wasn't raised in a field. We did have manners where I came from."

"My apologies for the surprise. You seem to be a woman of many talents." He took a sip from his cup and the pilot did the same.

Mala was now clear to eat. She ate as rapidly as

she could while maintaining her manners. It was a tricky proposition. She managed to stifle the belch that was trying to escape and deliberately put her utensils down. She wiped her hands on a small towel and took some of the berries that were available for dessert. A sip of the tea and she was full.

The pilot was about to speak when Mala held up one hand for silence. She got to her feet and touched the privacy screen that would ensure that no one could listen in. A subtle manipulation of the wiring and she deactivated the recorder that Milton had in place. Sneaky little bugger. “Now we can speak. Milton has more greed than good sense, just like the other facility owners on this station. Money leads the way. Now. Who are you and why are you here?”

Chapter Four

"First. I am Helen Taline of the Alliance Protectorate of Terra, pilot of the Class One. This is Isabi Reda, Master Companion of the Selna. We are both members of the Sector Guard. But let me first tell you why we are here." She took a deep breath and then looked to Isabi, he wasn't going to help. She hated public speaking, but he was far too interested in their new friend to give her the background. Twit.

"The dramatic rise in pirate activity in the outer sectors has been a concern for the Alliance planets. The representatives of the various mother planets discussed their options and it was suggested that groups of agents be selected to act on behalf of the Alliance. Volunteers were selected by their governments based on their talents and divided equally amongst the sectors. Bases have been set up and there is only one missing piece to complete the project."

She knew it was a rush of information, but she

tried really hard to make it make sense. Mala seemed nice enough, but it hadn't made sense to her when they had explained it, well not until she arrived at the Base. Then she had met Hyder and it had all made sense.

"The Base for this sector is located on Morganti. We currently have a crew of six, including myself. Our mission as Sector Guard is to answer distress calls and to assist in any planetary evacuations and such." There. It had almost all been said.

Isabi decided to contribute. "Do you have questions?"

"One. Why are you here?"

* * * *

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Mala knew. They wanted her to join this project, this Sector Guard.

"We want you. Your talents with repairs are phenomenal and could be of tremendous help when we are assisting stranded vehicles." He smiled.

There it was again. He wanted her. Parts of her shivered in response and she internally slapped them into calm. "Why would I join you? What benefit is there to me?" It sounded mercenary, but a woman on her own couldn't be too careful with her financial future.

"The annual salary for the guard is three times what you earn as someone in ship repair, even on this station." He smiled again. "We checked all your records, official and not." His eyes were a dark gold, and when he smiled, they crinkled in the corners. The full pouty lips that were moving... "So will you join us?"

"What? Oh. Can I think about it?" Mala's mind was whirling. She wanted to follow him to the end of the universe, but she didn't know if she could work with him.

"I am afraid not. We are on a schedule and the others are picking up the last of our team members." He didn't seem sorry at all, in fact he seemed to relish her distraction.

"I'll do it." The words shot out of her mouth without any additional prompting. Helen and Isabi looked surprised and then pleased.

"Do you need to collect your things?" Helen was speaking again. Her voice was stronger now.

"Give me five minutes. I will meet you at the repair dock." She nodded politely to them both and rose to her feet. She waited until they had preceded her out of the diner and then paid for the meal. Watching Isabi walk away was almost too difficult, but knowing that she would see him in a few minutes was heartening. She broke into a trot as soon as they were out of her sight. She didn't want to waste any more time.

Her jumpsuits were ready for travel, and two small duffels later, she had wadded up her entire three years on Kaddaka station. It was funny really. She had lived here, but never been at home. Home was still where her mother was, halfway across the galaxy. Chuckling to herself, she closed her door and started down the hall with a quick stop at Station Registration so that they would know her room was empty. She wasn't expecting to greet Vin on her way back to the repair dock and she certainly didn't expect him to be holding a blaster to Helen's head.

"Go back to Registration and get your room back, Mala. You aren't going to leave me." His voice trembled, but his hand stayed firm on the blaster.

"I am not leaving you, Vin. I am just getting on with my life. You remember life. It is something you do when you are not working."

"But the money! You can't leave me. The station repair dock is famous and it's all you. You and that freaky talent of yours." He shifted from side to side.

Mala saw a shadow flicker behind him.

"I have tried to duplicate what you do and it doesn't work!"

"Of course it doesn't. I can't do underhanded deals like you can. We all have our talents. And besides, Rihal and Gergar can do the jobs, no one

has to know I am gone. The cradle still works just fine. Now let the nice lady go." Mala had her hands open and she was stepping toward Vin when he went down.

The shadow became solid and Isabi stood there, fists clenched.

Helen worked her way free of Vin's unconscious body. "What took you so long? He wanted to fire and he was going to, you twit!" She gasped for a moment and then punched Isabi in the arm. "Jackass."

Mala was just blinking. She had seen something that should have been impossible. Isabi had become shadow and then solid again. It was weird. Freaky. "What did I just see?"

Isabi grabbed her bags and took her by the arm. "I will explain on the way to our base. For now, let's get off this damned station as soon as we can."

She didn't have a chance to argue for an immediate explanation as she was dragged through the halls and to the repair dock.

Helen sprinted in front of them and was warming the engines as they arrived.

Isabi ran Mala through the entryway and sealed the door behind them. He stowed her bags, then shoved her into a seat.

"Sit still until we are away."

She sat and watched Helen become one with

the ship. The pilot's seat was curling around her while cables descended from the ceiling. She plugged her wrists, knees and the back of her skull into the ship and it came to life at the contact. It was beautiful to watch. Mala clung to her seat as the ship lifted with a whisper of sound and began to move through the docks to the outer repair bay.

"Alliance priority override, Class One." Helen's voice was strong. The doors hissed open and they flew through to face the great doors opening out into space. This time, no one had cleared the lane for the ship, but it didn't matter to Helen. The Class One was wheeling, dipping and spinning through the traffic, sliding with the ease of a fish in water. "Prepare for jump."

Mala's eyes widened. "Jump? A ship this size? Are you nuts?" No ship this small had ever received a jump engine. It was the ultimate feat of engineering just to get an engine into a midsized freighter.

Isabi grinned at her. "Hold on. This is going to be rough."

He wasn't kidding. As soon as Helen barked *jump*, space folded around them, putting them in two places at the same time. Time stretched around them as they saw where they had been and where they would be. With a wrench, they were in a new star system.

Mala shook. Her body was in shock.

Isabi assessed her, then moved swiftly to the rear of the ship. He returned in a minute with a hot cup of sweetened tea. "Drink it. It works wonders on your species."

She sipped a few times and then sighed as it did indeed help. "I have no species. I am a mutt. I have no idea who or what most of my ancestors were."

"If you are interested, we can help you with that. Our medical systems have most of the species specs for the Alliance and surrounding races." He held one of her hands and stroked her palm with his thumb.

She sipped at the tea. She took a deep breath and relaxed. She made no move to withdraw her hand. "I know my mother and knew my father. Few on Cadith could say as much."

"Knew?" He was close now, very close.

Stars, he smelled good. "He died five years ago, skimmer crash. It was when I had to go abroad to make enough credits for my mother to live comfortably." It had worked and she had sent enough money home to provide for her mother the rest of her life. A few lifetimes actually. Her job had paid very well.

"A laudable activity."

He was almost kissing close now and it took all of her shaken self-control to hold back.

"Back away from the trainee, Isabi. No touchy

feely until you are safe at home, and even then, she may not want your particular brand of attention." It wasn't Helen's voice. It was a male voice emanating from the com unit.

He did back away from her and released her hand. "Shut it, Hyder."

"Is that any way to speak to your commander?"

"It is the lesser of the comments that I could have given so yes."

Mala piped up, "Who is that?"

Helen half-turned. "That is Hyder Mihal. He is our team leader. Azon by birth, he has a talent for organization." There was a bit of pride and something else in her voice.

"And he is her partner in the Guard. So she is biased about his talents." Isabi's tone was dry and based on the look that Helen gave him, she would punch him if she could reach him.

"Shut up, Isabi." Helen and Hyder's voices were in sync.

Mala giggled. Isabi's head snapped up as he stared at her and she blushed from the roots of her hair to the middle of her ribcage. Fortunately for her, he couldn't see past her neckline.

"You have a nice laugh, Mala. You should laugh more often."

"And you should sit down for the landing. We are home," Helen barked the order and Isabi scrambled for the other seat. Her warning had

come just in time as the small ship rocked and bumped in the outer atmosphere.

Mala fumbled with her empty cup and the straps, finally clamping the cup between her thighs as she buckled herself in. "We are going to the surface, not an orbital station?"

"Nope. The planet proper. Our facility is on the Western Continent."

Isabi had his eyes closed against the dizzying sight of the cloud cover whipping past their ship. Mala loved it, it reminded her of home. She hadn't been on a planet's surface in five years. She was looking forward to breathing unprocessed air.

She looked over at him again when she could tear her gaze away from the view out the main screen. His hands were curled around the armrests and he was extremely tense. "I am guessing that you don't like re-entry, Isabi."

"Not particularly. I have been in one too many crashes to be comfortable with it." The ship rocked and he clenched again.

As suddenly as it had started, it stopped. Helen guided them through the sky and toward a large group of structures on the far edge of a town. "Ladies and gentlemen, we are home." She did a slow loop around the facility before heading in for a landing.

They landed with nary a bump and unbuckled themselves. Helen had the ship retract the

connections and she stretched. "That was a nice little jaunt. Hopefully the others will have similar luck on their recruiting runs."

"The others?" Mala remembered something about there being six members of the Guard.

"Yeah. We need a full compliment before we start operations. Once you go through your entrance procedures we will have seven."

"What procedures?" She should have asked a lot more questions before agreeing to come with them.

"Level testing, medical testing and of course, you need to go shopping."

"Shopping is a requirement?"

Helen winked at her. "It is in my book."

Chapter Five

Helen wandered off, leaving Isabi to lead her where she needed to go. He had recovered his calm and picked up the two duffels she had packed. “You really don’t like flying do you?” She was trotting to keep up with him. She breathed deeply of the unprocessed air and smiled. Nothing like being on a living world.

“No. It is not a comfortable experience for me.”

“I love it. There is nothing in the universe like flying through the stars.” She smiled in remembrance. Had it only been that morning that she was on the cradle rushing to their ship. Right. Their ship. “How did Class One come to be damaged? Was Helen damaged when it happened?”

“I will let our medical officer explain that. He knows more of it than I do.” The topic was closed, but it made Isabi uncomfortable.

She could tell by the way that he turned away from her. Silence fell between them as they walked

the halls. Living on the station had helped her orient herself in grey expanses, but the brightly coloured doors and stripes in the halls made it ridiculously easy. MEDICAL was printed in large letters on a door in Alliance Common. It made it simple to find if you were in the right hallway.

"Hyder, we have our newest recruit, reporting for duty. Mala Deeha, this is Hyder Mihal, our commander chief and medical officer." Isabi stood aside and bowed formally to both of them as he completed the introductions.

"Welcome, Mala. Glad to have you here." The Azon was tall, muscular and covered with a fine bronze velvet. His feline features glowed in the interior lighting. "I am sure that you are familiar with the standard exam so just hop up here on this table and we can start the scanner."

She moved forward slowly. "I am not familiar with it. Will it hurt?"

Isabi blinked at her. "You haven't had an exam before?"

"No. I repeat, will it hurt?"

Hyder came and took her hand in his. "It doesn't hurt. It is a standard scanner, the same as you would use on a ship to check the wiring. Which is basically what is being done here."

He helped her sit on the scanning table. She lay back at his gentle prodding and the hood began to slide up and down the table , beeping and

chirping as it collected data. He kept his voice calm and she remained quiet as he explained the variety of tests that the scanner was running.

"It seems you have a minor mineral deficit as is to be expected if you have spent a few years without being planet side. No major defects of the respiratory or immune system, and oh..."

Isabi was still in the room. He straightened from his leaning posture against the wall and looked concerned. "What? What is wrong?"

"Isabi. Wait outside." It was an order and he backed it up with a glare to the Selna. As soon as the door closed, Hyder looked over at her worried frown. "Don't worry. The scanner just confirmed that you are a virgin. I didn't know if you wanted Isabi to know so I sent him outside."

"So a hymen will keep me from joining?" She couldn't see the problem.

He laughed. He had a good laugh. "No, not in the least, but Isabi is a male with considerable experience and if you two ever interact on that level, he may expect you to be on population control."

"Why would you think that? That he and I would be. Would do. That."

"You are his partner. You will be sent on missions together without Helen, which will take considerably longer than if you are in the jump ship. You will be alone in a small ship for weeks at

a time and a sexual relationship would not be unexpected." His eyes were kind and non-judgmental.

"Do you and Helen have a sexual relationship?" She sounded a little truculent, even to her own ears.

"Yes. We had been paired on a few assignments for the Alliance and it evolved very naturally."

"Do you love her?"

He looked surprised by her frank question, "I don't know. I know we are meant to be together, but I have not looked at it beyond that."

"How do you know?"

"My talent is the ability to see patterns. Patterns in data, in living beings, in the stars. It was how I knew Helen when I saw her and how I matched you and Isabi as well as the others."

She looked at him suspiciously. "How often are you wrong?"

He moved the scanner hood off the table and helped her sit up. "Less than half of one percent of the time. And I have never been wrong about interpersonal relationships."

Mala mulled it over for a moment. "Does Isabi know? That we have been matched, I mean."

"He knows. It was why he was sent to bring you to us." He checked and doubled checked the results and waited. "How can you be of Terran blood?"

"What?"

"Your mitochondrial DNA is Terran by extraction. There is also some Nyal, Enjel and Moreski in there."

"Ah, according to my mother, my great-great-great-great-grandmother was stolen from Terra centuries ago and made a slave in the Nyal Empire." She bit her nail and looked at him seriously. "Is this what triggered my talent? The Terran DNA?"

"Well, it certainly helps to have all that diversity in your bloodline." He laughed and tapped at his data pad. Then frowned and tapped it again. "Stupid thing."

"May I? This is one thing I can do without prompting." She held out her hand had he placed the pad in it. She checked the workings and fiddled with it a bit. "Stop hitting it, for one thing. The electronics can't handle it." In her mind, she pictured it fixed and rewired. She could feel the mechanics squirming inside the box as it fixed itself. "That should do it." She handed it back.

He prodded it gently and then smiled. "It's faster. What did you do?"

"Rewired it a little. Took out some of the unnecessary components to use for the new bits." She shrugged. It was always a little weird to fix something and then have to try and explain what she did.

"You can do this with any mechanical devices? Make repairs, reconstruct?" Suddenly he was all business. He had switched from doctor to commander in seconds. "Will you demonstrate?"

"Something else? Something broken? Sure. It's what I do." There was comfort in it. In simply building, fixing, repairing with a mindless focus. "Lead the way, commander."

He nodded, helped her from the table and held her until she got her balance. He also held the door open and caught Isabi as he fell into the open doorway. "Listening at doors lacks a certain amount of decorum, Companion."

"But it lets me hear what is being said, most of the time anyway."

"You could have just shadowed through the door."

"That would have lacked decorum. I would not have interrupted the physician visit. The commander kicking into action, however, is fair game." He scooped up the duffel bags and gestured for Hyder to lead the way.

They trekked through the halls and with the echoes up ahead, they were approaching a hangar or workshop of some kind. It was a workshop.

"This is your new office, Mala. When not on assignment, you can come here to work on repair projects or create your own. For now, I want to see your work on something that I can watch."

“Sure. What do you have?”

“A food dispenser. Some light engines. And Helen’s toaster. Please, please fix Helen’s toaster. It popped up and I struck it in reflex.” A little sheepish, Hyder handed her a mangled piece of metal.

She had to hold it for a moment to determine its purpose. An image of bread came into her mind and she analyzed the process of the heated elements and the temperature trigger for the popping that Hyder mentioned. She took a deep breath and began to fix it. Her skin tingled and she felt Isabi behind her. He was watching her, almost touching, but not. His scent enveloped her and she finished the repair in record time. “There all done. Test it out.”

Hyder whipped out some bread slices and shoved them into the toaster. They all waited pensively as it heated the bread and they heaved a sigh as it ejected with the distinctive pop that Helen must like. They examined it.

Hyder nodded. “Yup. That is what it is supposed to look like.”

Mala jumped to her feet. She gave Hyder a brilliant grin and then turned to Isabi. *The turn was a miscalculation.* Everything went black.

Chapter Six

Her voice was a harsh croak, “How embarrassing.” There was a cold compress on her head and she was back in Medical. She tried to sit up, but was held back by Isabi’s arm across her chest.

“Stay still, Mala. You fainted.”

His voice was a warm rumble in her ear. She enjoyed it for the few moments required for the scanner to complete its rounds. “Huh. Two scans in one day. Lucky me.” She laughed. “Usually I sleep for a while after I fix something, but today that just didn’t seem to be in the cards. I think I was just tired.” Isabi was staring at her, but she didn’t know what she was seeing. Concern, fear, exasperation and a strange tenderness that she shouldn’t have been seeing. “Hyder, did you tell him?”

“What? That you were exhausted and need some rest?”

“No, that I am a virgin.” The words were out of

her mouth before she remembered that she tended to feel like she had been given a few stiff drinks when she was tired.

Isabi blinked several times. He smiled, his teeth blazing white against the black velvet of his skin. "Virgin, huh? That explains a few things." He seemed almost relieved.

"Save it for later, Isabi. I need to get her chemistry balanced." Hyder shoved him out of the way and pressed a spray canister against her neck.

She flinched at the cold spray that invaded her and swatted him away when he came back for a second round. "I just need sleep and some food. I haven't had any rest and have done quite a bit more than is usual for me. The damage to Class One was extensive, it took a lot out of me. I just need to rest." She paused for a moment. "Maybe a sandwich first."

He looked at her with his physician's face on. "Is this kind of collapse regular?"

"The larger the repair, the more it takes out of me. If I have the ability to rest after the initial exertion, I am fine, if not I will collapse within twelve to twenty hours. Is that enough for your records?"

"It is a start, but I will require you to wear monitor pods for the next few days to continue your observation. I want to know what your talents do to your body and how your body reacts

in turn."

"Fine. But I still want a sandwich." She was still lying flat and simply flinched as the tabs were put on either side of her neck. When Hyder moved to open her jumpsuit, Isabi stopped him.

"Hands off. I will do it."

Mala looked over at Isabi to find that he was almost bristling with hostility.

Hyder looked at him for a long moment and then nodded. "Fine. I will point the positions out and you need to apply the monitors."

"Do I get a say in this?"

"No." Both males were distracted by the monitors as Isabi prepared the next one for application.

When he reached for the join of her jumpsuit, she glared at him as he slowly opened it. He opened it to her navel and gently spread the centre just wide enough to get to the side of her left breast and attach a monitor pod, then attach one just below her collarbone. His fingers were warm and sure as they moved the fabric just enough to get the job done.

She felt unaccountably warm as he placed the monitors on her abdomen. There was something in his touch that she hadn't run into before. Something that had her body reacting to him as if it knew him and wanted him.

The instant he pulled his hands back, she sealed

her suit.

The monitors were sending signals to Hyder's data pad and he looked between the two of them speculatively. "Well, we can't do anything else. We will just have to watch and wait. You are dismissed, Isabi will show you to your quarters."

Hyder turned his back to them, but Mala could have sworn she saw a smile as they left. She stumbled a bit and Isabi swept her into his arms. "I can walk. I just can't walk fast."

"Be quiet, this is faster and I enjoy the feeling of you in my arms."

She decided to be direct. "Why is that? A guy who looks like you could have any woman he wants, why me?"

"I have been a Companion for over ten years and have met many women, but not one of them made me feel like you do." He kissed her forehead and smiled at her dumbfounded expression. "Is that so hard to believe?"

"Yes!"

His laugh was wonderful, he threw his head back to expose the cords of his neck and howled. He was still walking the halls with her while he chortled and they passed several support staff who looked startled to see the Selna laughing. It seemed to be an unusual occurrence. "Here we are."

It took a moment for it to sink in, *we* he had

said. Not here you are. As the door opened, she whistled in admiration. It was a common room with couches and a vid screen, several doors led off the main room and Isabi carried her to one of them.

"This is your room. The sanitation chamber is to the left behind the bed. A personal vid and com unit is inside the wall. You palm will trigger it."

She was feeling disoriented. "What about my sandwich?" It was all she could concentrate on, it was either that or start nibbling on her companion.

"I will take you to the dining hall now. I just wanted to drop off your luggage."

His blinding smile flashed at her in the shadows. He released the duffels from his shoulders and moved to one of the walls. A stroke of his fingers and the wardrobe released from the wall. Before she realized what he was doing, he had started to hang her collection of jumpsuits and undergarments up in the wardrobe. It took him less than two minutes.

"You don't worry about your clothing much, do you?"

"Not really. On the station there was nowhere to go and at home, well, my matchmate died twelve years ago and on Cadith you don't get a second chance." She shrugged. "Home and family was never in the cards for me after Jin died."

"Did you love him? The man you would have

mated to?" Suddenly he was next to her, his golden gaze burning into her mossy green eyes.

"No. I didn't love him. I liked him well enough. We were friends first, a match second. If he hadn't died in a shuttle crash, we would probably have had a few kids by now." She laughed lightly, trying to break his concentration. His form fuzzed slightly as she mentioned kids, then solidified.

"Did you grieve for him?"

She reached out to touch the smooth velvet of Isabi's cheek. "I did. I mourned him and the life I could have had. It wasn't meant to be and then I went to Kaddaka, where you and Helen found me. Perhaps fate was involved." Mala leaned up until she could feel his breath mingling with hers. She cupped his jaw with her hand, loving the feel of him.

He leaned forward, trying to close the kiss.

"Where is my sandwich?"

Chapter Seven

"So this is our main dining hall. All of the support staff as well as the Guards eat here. Let's see what we can find for you."

He popped her into one of the seats at an unoccupied table and wandered off to make selections from the dispensers. There was an actual person behind one of the counters and he stopped for a moment to speak to her. Of course it was a her. Mala sighed and kicked herself for her foolishness.

Companions were known for their sexual prowess and he had probably slept his way through most of the female staff. In their conversation, they stopped and looked at her for a long moment and the woman smiled brightly at her, waving. Bemused, Mala waved back.

The woman gave Isabi a plate of something. He nodded formally to her, then returned to the table. "Here we go. Something here should qualify to fill that belly of yours. Stal gave me some of Helen's

private stash of something called peanut butter and jelly."

Oh. So that is what the conversation was. She reached for the white fluffy sandwich with brown and purple paste, then bit in to it. Heaven. It was just what she needed. She scarfed it down and continued on the rest of the tray. Her manners deserted her and she grabbed everything that looked like food or a component of food. When the tray was finally empty, she reached for the tea that Isabi held out to her with wonder in his eyes.

"I have never seen a woman eat like that."

"It's the downside of my talent. I can fix anything, but I lose my manners. I apologize." She nodded to him, but blinked sleepily. Her body was sated, now it needed sleep. She leaned her head on her hand and smiled. "Thank you by the way. That was just what I needed."

"I live to serve. Now, I am going to get you back to your room before you fall asleep on me."

"That's nice." Everything was getting warm and hazy around her. When Isabi got closer, she climbed into his arms without any complaints. He would keep her safe. Safe and warm.

She woke from the most restful sleep she had had in a while. She turned to see where the light in her room was coming from and couldn't. There was a masculine body blocking her way. Whoa.

Isabi was watching her sleep. "Is it morning?"

"It is. You slept for twelve hours." He stretched.

She blinked. He was naked. Beautifully deliciously naked. She wasn't. She was still wearing the monitor pods. Nothing else. "Did you undress me?"

"Of course. We are partners. We have no secrets." He pulled her down on top of him.

She stiffened for a moment until his warmth relaxed her. His erection was hot and very noticeable against her belly so she froze again. "Good morning, partner." It was her first kiss and it was enough to shake her world. At first the gentle brushing of lips had her sighing in pleasure, but as she began to feel the rise in her blood, she wanted more. She wove her fingers into his hair and held him still as her mouth duelled with his. When she parted her legs to get friction where she desperately wanted it, she moaned. It was the sound of her own voice that snapped her out of the sensual daze she was in. She jerked free of him and rolled off and onto the floor.

For a while they simply stared at each other, panting and then Isabi uttered a curse and swung off the other side of the bed. "I am sorry to have rushed you."

"I rushed myself. It felt so good that I forgot I had the monitors on. I am sorry for, leading you on." She rose to get her clothing from the

wardrobe, blushing and he could see every inch of it. Including the spots that marked her spine and shoulders. That was the residue of her father, a Moreski. Anyone who knew about their mating habits would have taken the spots as the easiest way to arouse her. Stroking, blowing or licking them would have her climbing the walls. But he had not.

“Do not apologize. I knew it was foolish to stay here last night, but I wanted to be near in case you needed me.” He was putting on his trousers and tunic.

Damn. All that beautiful muscle covered by cloth. It wasn’t fair. “Uh, I have to use the sanitation chamber, I will be back in a moment.”

“If you say so.” He smiled and let himself out the door.

With that cryptic comment tumbling in her mind, she went into the sanitary chamber and stopped short. The facilities were beautiful, an enormous tub, a waterfall shower and a lavatory that looked carved of granite. A door that didn’t open at her touch perplexed her, but she was far too eager to take the shower for a test drive.

It was bliss. She spared a thought for her monitors and then decided that she didn’t care. If they washed off, they washed off. The pounding of the water soothed her muscles, but more than that, when she turned her back to it, the water

caressed her spinal marks in a way that had her shaking. She staggered forward and sat on the stone bench across from the fall. No wonder her mother had always insisted that she use the gel.

Shaking with her heart pounding like a drum, she staggered to the towels and dried herself. She jerked on a breast band and underwear, then closed up one of her baggy jumpsuits. She fell to her knees under the power of her hormonal reaction and was getting up when the locked door burst open. She widened her eyes, but still couldn't see.

* * * *

When Hyder called him, the urgency in his voice was unmistakable, "There is something wrong with Mala. Go to her now."

Cursing in every language that he knew, he ran from the common room, through his room and into their shared bathing chamber. She was on the floor with eyes gone blind with lust. The thick smell of her pheromones in the bathing room almost took him to his knees. He tried to calm her, "Mala! Are you all right? Hyder called me and told me you were in some kind of distress."

"Goddamned shower! Goddamned spots!" She was shaking uncontrollably and tears began to snake down her face in fat tracts.

"Your Moreski spots?" It finally came to him. She had showered in less than five minutes on the station, she must have been using gel showers. If she had never had a shower, then she would have been over stimulated when the water pounded against the spots. It would have set off every hormone she had.

"Damned spots." It was a sob. "Can't even wear my hair loose because of the damned spots."

Her hair looked down to him. "What do you mean?"

"I have a confinement net on my hair. The surface cut is what you see, but my locks are underneath."

She didn't move to undo the net, but he found himself wondering exactly what she looked like with her hair spilled around her, preferably on his pillow. Damn. He had never thought to find a mate and when he joined the Sector Guard, he had thought that it was an impossibility. After the orientation he learned, as did the others, that they were expected to pair off to create a foundation for the Guard. Romantically involved teams had their problems, but they were much more stable in small group assignments. No lover would leave their other behind.

"So your father was Moreski?" He had thought that the blood was further back and that the spots were a throwback. He was mistaken. He felt

himself smile. No wonder she wore loose fitting clothing on the deck. Normally it would be suicide for a repair specialist, but for her it was self-defence. She couldn't have anything pressing on her back. She was calming, he could smell it. Slowly, sanity was returning to her eyes.

"Yes, he was of minor nobility and marrying my mom made it impossible for him to keep his title. She was descended from slaves, you see, not worthy of him."

"But he took her as his wife anyway."

"Yes. Their love was one thing I never doubted. It was comforting when my talents developed." She blinked hard, then stood on her own.

Her suit gaped open in front and he was unabashedly staring at her breasts in their pretty blue band. "I hate to say this, but you may want to check your suit closure." She flushed that delightful pink again and fumbled her jumpsuit closed. Pity. All that creamy skin and now it was hidden. Damn. "Shall we return to medical? Or did you want some breakfast?"

"Breakfast sounds..."

She didn't finish her sentence, or perhaps she did and he didn't hear it. A claxon rang in both of their rooms. He grabbed her arm and pulled her along, "Come on. We have an assignment." He headed for the meeting room and sure enough, Hyder and Helen were waiting for them.

"I know we told you that we would not be engaging in any assignments yet, but we have an emergency. There is a ship foundering in orbit around Lexiss 3. It will completely lose orbit in the next two days if we don't render assistance." Hyder was all Commander now.

Mala piped up, "What is the problem with the ship?"

"There is a leak in the engines. The crew have been unable to stop the contamination and are now holed up in the shielded area on the main level."

She was aggressive and took a seat next to Hyder, looking at his report. "Any other ships who could render assistance?"

Isabi had to admit that he didn't want his *partner* that close to the Azon.

"Nothing in the area. The ship is a freighter and can't be towed, it is far too fragile and will shake apart if it hits the atmosphere."

"Do we get a pilot?"

"No. It will be just you and Isabi on this one. The planet is too close for a jump and Helen can't help inside the ship. So you two get to run solo in Shuttle Arion. Can you fly?"

His delicate little partner snorted.

"I had to catch ships in mid-flight before they crashed into the station. I can fly."

His pride in her skills was unwarranted, but it

still warmed him. She slapped him on the shoulder and he looked at her curiously.

“Come on, Reda, let’s go.”

Chapter Eight

She brightened and wanted to get the show on the road, but it wasn't that easy.

Hyder moved to block her. "We have not yet settled the matter of your little incident this morning."

"I need a gel shower installed. I have a problem with the water pressure on my spots." She reached into her suit and pulled out all of the monitors one by one. The two she pulled off her neck were easy, but the one in her bra had been a bit of a struggle.

"The Moreski spots? Oh. I see."

He seemed to blush a little under her frank gaze. She guessed that he, too, thought the spots were for decoration. He knew better now.

"Isabi, keep an eye on her. Mark any change in her health and expect to have another scan when you return, Mala."

"Fine. Where is Shuttle Arion?"

Isabi grabbed her arm. "I will take you. We should get going." He led the way to the shuttle

hanger.

She whistled in surprise. "Another Reflex ship?"

"Sort of. We are working on making it useable with a person who isn't wired like a pilot."

They entered the machine and she immediately headed for the pilot's seat. She ran her hands lightly over the controls, learning them one at a time until she was confident that she would be able to hit the correct button at the right time.

"You really enjoy flying, don't you?"

"I do. My father taught me as a teenager and I would engage in any number of manoeuvres that turned his hair black while we were going over our properties. It is one of my favourite memories. Shall we go?"

"Has Hyder given the ship the coordinates?"

"He has."

"Then by all means, terrify me." He gave her a grin and a wink, then strapped himself in. He had a package tucked in his hands, which he held on to firmly.

She backed out of the hangar and made for the launch ramp. "Do I need to contact ground control or anything?"

"No. No other ships are cleared for unsupervised takeoff and landing. Launch at will."

His eyes were closed so she did what she

needed to do. She launched the shuttle as gently as possible. They floated upward through the atmosphere as lightly as a leaf on the wind.

He opened his eyes in surprise. "When did you launch?"

"Five minutes ago. You were too busy remembering all the women you have had in your life to pay attention." She was grinning at him so he would know that she was joking. Some people missed out on her sense of humour. The upper atmosphere was slightly rougher, but no more so than ripples on a pond. The instant that they cleared the planet, she programmed the ship to take it to their destination at full speed.

She released her harness and stood to stretch and explore the shuttle. "I am going exploring." There was a tiny lavatory, a couch for two or more, a small counter for food and a dispenser for beverages and snacks. She had one immediately. The small repairs she had made to the ship while flying were enough to make her hungry, but not exhausted. A dry fruit bar and a hot cup of tea satisfied her craving and she went back to the pilot's seat with a sigh of relief. "Sorry. I got hungry."

"You will need this."

He held the package out to her and watched her carefully as she opened it. Inside was a bodysuit. It was blue and silver with a small SG intertwined

above the heart.

"And you will need to decide if you want the people we meet to know you as Mala Deeha or as something else."

"Why wouldn't I want to use my birth name?"

"Will your family be safe if it is known that you are in the Guard? That you can fix any technology?"

His voice was serious and she had to think it out. "I want my mom to live in peace so I think I will go with an alias. But what?" She chewed her nail and he took her finger from her mouth.

"Stop that." He smiled at her. "I have a name for you, Fixer."

"Fixer?" She liked it. "But if my name is different, my face is still the same, that will be a problem, I think."

"Look at the complete suit. Try it on. Your identity will be safe."

He knew something about what she was about to put on. But she was going to have to try it on to find out. She walked to the back of the cabin and then stood for a moment, deciding whether to do it or not. "What the hell, you have already seen me naked," she muttered under her breath and then peeled off her jumpsuit. She had his full attention now so she turned her back to him, unconsciously showing him her spots. She heard his sharp intake of breath and shimmied into the new suit as fast as

she could.

A cowl folded around her neck and she pulled the hood up over her head, then down over her face. So this was how she would protect her mom. By not being herself. By becoming Fixer and embracing her freak factor. Her dad had always laughed when he mentioned it. She had come home complaining of being called a freak by the other kids. He said her freak factor made her special. That it was part of her and that it was why he loved her. The arms of her suit left her palms open, but hooked around her middle finger to cover the back of her hands.

"There are boots to match it, in the couch storage area."

Curious, she flipped the seat of the couch up and sure enough there were some female boots. The masculine versions were right next to them, along with another suit. "Who are you when you are not Isabi?"

"I have no name. I have no one to protect."

"I think you need a name. Shade. You are Shade." She crossed her arms over her chest and smiled at him.

"Why Shade?" He was stripping off and putting on his own suit. Black with just the tiniest black embroidered logo on his chest.

She wanted nothing more than to run her fingers over it. "Shades are ghosts, but shade is

also the place I fell asleep as a child, knowing that the sun couldn't burn me there, that I was safe. In the shade." He had frozen halfway through her explanation and looked into her eyes as a wave of emotion ran through him. She saw lust, fear, envy and a deep caring. Going up on tiptoes, she put a gentle kiss on his lips. He grabbed her waist and pulled her against him, deepening the kiss until they were both panting and the fit of his suit around his groin was no longer as precise. She backed away regretfully. "I don't think this is the time or the place. Dammit."

He scrubbed his face with one hand and stepped back himself. "You are right. But one day it will be the right place, and right time, and we will have a door that stays locked."

"Right. Right. I wonder how much time that will take?"

"Hopefully not long or parts of me will be turning blue."

"Right. A distraction. So does my suit have any extra features?"

"It is radiation resistant and the fabric is stiff, it shouldn't bother your spots. Let me know if it does."

"If it does, what will you do?"

"Find a time, a place and a locked room."

The devilish look on his face made her laugh out loud. "It isn't fun, you know."

"What isn't?"

"To know that someone touching you in the right spot will make you theirs until they tire of you. It was always something that my parents taught me. Watch my back." She stretched and looked back over her shoulder, catching her reflection in the view screen. It was not her. It couldn't be.

The creature looking back at her was strange, sexy and had eyes that were wide in surprise in the confines of the mask. She started to run a hand down her suit and then stopped. It was far more form fitting than it had any right to be and her breast band stood out noticeably. She turned to Isabi. "Is it supposed to look like this?"

"Well, it wasn't designed to be worn with undergarments." He eyed her up and down, then nodded.

"Well, I am not stripping again." Mala mulled it over for a moment, then parted the centre closure. She simply undid the front binding and released the band, then drew it out of the suit. For her underwear, she reached into the pocket of her old jumpsuit and withdrew her knife. Cutting the bands on either side released them and she took them off. The closure of the suit was smooth and when she looked at her reflection again it was better. No unseemly lines to mar the sweep of the suit. "Better?"

Isabi was sitting down and swallowed heavily. "Much. Do you cut your clothing off often?" He wasn't hiding his erection, but it was fighting with the fabric of his black suit, one more shadow on the darkness.

"I have gotten stuck in engines a few times. It has been a necessity. Part of the problem with wearing the baggy suits." She turned from left to right and enjoyed the feel of the suit. "I can't feel this one on my back at all. What is it made of?"

"I have no idea. I only know that it is impervious to slicing, fire resistant and insulating. The researchers have also created a few other specifics for other talents. Mine, for example, moves as I move."

"You mean when you go shady and walk through things? I noticed that you made it into my quarters on the station without opening the door and you snuck up on Vin in the hallway when he had those eyes in the back of his head. It wasn't too hard to figure out." She shrugged and winked at him.

"And here I try to be a man of mystery." He smiled. "It made me very good as a spy on Companion assignments."

Mala headed back to the pilot's seat. "A spy? Is that what you were?"

"Amongst other talents. Yes." He took the navigator station and turned to her. "So, Fixer.

What is our ETA?"

"Two hours. What shall we do?"

"I think that we should engage in a time honoured method of wasting time."

She raised one eyebrow in surprise. "Really?"

He raised his hand holding a small object. "I thought a little card game would be in order. Winner buys dinner when we make it home."

"The winner buys? That is a little counter to regular rules."

"I like to walk on the wild side." He popped a table up between them and shuffled the cards. "Would you like to cut?"

She reached out to take the slick cards from him. "You have no idea what I would like at this point."

Chapter Nine

The proximity alarm went off after the ninth round of cards. "I win, so dinner will be on me."

Isabi shook his head and smiled. "You have no idea what image that puts in my mind."

Mala swung around and looked at the freighter through the view screen. "Don't be so sure of that," She muttered it under her breath, but his reflection in the screen gave her a startled grin, followed by a wink.

"Freighter Dunlap, this is the Sector Guard shuttle Arion. Please confirm status." He sounded so calm and controlled as he spoke, a small thrill went through her.

The signal crackled, but was audible, "This is Captain Anar of the Freighter Dunlap, the crew have taken shelter in the secure, hold but the leak in the engines has contaminated most of the ship. We are falling into the planet. Can you help?"

"I have a repair specialist onboard who should

be helpful. We will contact you once we have more information on the repair."

"I look forward to it. Dunlap out." The connection was broken.

"Fixer, can you put us down near the engines?"

Her lips twitched, "Shade, it would be better if I moved that chunk of debris over there against the damaged engine."

"Why is that?"

"If there is a breach I need to seal, it would be better if I have inert material to use for the patch, rather than our shuttle."

He turned to her, surprised. "You do that?"

She winked. "When I have to. It is rather draining. Bring a sandwich." She was still chuckling when she had another thought, "Do we have environmental suits?"

"Third cabinet on the left."

She nodded and concentrated on using the nose of the Arion to move chunks of debris up against the engine, careful not to block the flow of radiation. She had to embed them in the ship so she shoved hard. A resounding dent in the nose of their shuttle was the result. "I will fix it later, I promise."

Now, all she had to do was to set the shuttle up against the nearest airlock, but out of range of her talent. One quarter of a kilometre should do. She had the side of the Arion kissing the hull of the

Dunlap and engaged the mag locks. The two ships gravitated to each other with a clunk. "Honey, I am home." She smiled and turned to her partner, half dressed in his environmental suit, "Are we ready to go?"

"I am, Fixer. Suit up."

"Fine. Don't forget my food."

He patted a pocket on his thigh. "Have it right here."

She clambered into her suit and then waited impatiently as he checked her seals. She put on her helmet and snapped it into place. "Let's go." She was hopping from foot to foot with impatience, but stopped him long enough to check his seals. "Safety first."

Their enviro suits were colour coded the same way their bodysuits were. She was in blue and silver and he in solid black. She imagined that they made quite the striking couple, bubbleheads and all.

The Dunlap was in rough shape. She could have spent a year in it and still had more to do. For now, her focus had to be on fixing the engine and getting the ship able to run. First task, keep the environmentals up and running. Isabi led her through the ship and gave her the run of the repair. From the bridge, she accessed the enviro controls and turned up the oxygen, then made sure that the food dispensers were working. No

stupid deaths on her watch.

After she was sure that the existing crew was fine, she moved to the problem area. Behind her, she heard Isabi in contact with the Captain of the ship. He was updating the man as she moved through the ship. The tears in the hull were obvious to her senses and she felt the *wrongness* of the state of repair that it was in. "This ship is in crappy shape. It hasn't been inspected in years." She was murmuring to herself, but he heard her.

"If you fix it, how long will it last?"

"*When* I fix it, it may have one year left. It needs a full overhaul. The metal fatigue alone is appalling." She was muttering. "Okay, time to earn my pay." She turned to Isabi. "You might want to wait out here. There is a lot of radiation in there and you don't need to expose yourself."

"I will expose myself if I wish." His grin was easy to read. "When I shift, I am impervious to the effects. These suits also defend you longer than a standard suit."

She paused in front of the engine room door. "Well, here we go." The blast of heat that rushed from the room almost took her breath away. "That has to go."

She rushed to the cracked and bleeding power supply and pressed her hand against it. Nothing. Aw hells, she couldn't do this with gloves. Sneaking a glance at her escort, she peeled off one

of her gloves and held her hand against the glowing metal. She hissed in pain, but kept the contact as she sealed the leak. Rubbing at her palm, she took a deep breath and concentrated on what needed to be done next. Propulsion was needed to move them from orbit so she had to bend her mind to the most efficient means of repairing it.

“What did you do to your hand?” Isabi was scowling at her, his gold eyes shooting sparks.

“I had to make contact to fix the containment. Now I have to crawl around in the ducts to make enough repairs to the engine to make it suitable for propulsion. See you in two hours.” She gave him a cheerful pat on the arm and opened the access panel. With both gloves back on, she scooted into the bowels of the ship.

She was glad that she had placed the debris in contact with the ship. Her repairs ate half of them in the first hour. Wiring had to be replaced, new ducts generated, coolant replenished and cracks sealed. She had no idea how long she had been in the engine itself until her stomach growled. Time to go.

The engine was in working condition. It would get the crew to the next repair station, but she had not done the full overhaul that the ship needed. It was no longer her job. She was here to get them out of danger, not to rescue them from their own

stupidity. She crawled along her new ducts and had to admit that the engine was in better shape now than it had probably been in for twenty years. She did good work.

Coming out of the crawlspace was a relief and Isabi's hand had never been more welcome. She smiled up at him through her bubble and then unsnapped the seals and took off her helmet. "All clear. You can tell the captain that as soon as we are away, he can fire it up and get out of here." Her environment suit was trashed. It was covered with soot, coolant and some things that she didn't want to identify too closely. She grimaced and peeled off the suit. It was limp so she turned it inside out to confine the stains. "Sorry. I hate grubby suits."

He shook his head and took his own suit off. "So that they won't think you are the only one impervious to grime. The Captain is on his way."

The stomping of feet on metal grating let her know that it was more than just the Captain coming to greet them. The crew stopped short just inside the door of the engine room.

Mala whispered to Isabi, "I am not naked, am I?"

"Nope. But that suit fits you very well." He wrapped one hand around her waist and moved toward their audience. "Captain Anar. I am Shade, this is the Fixer. Your ship will make it out of orbit

and she has sealed the leak. The engine will not be at full power, but should get you to a repair station."

"*You* fixed the ship? I thought that Shade was the repair person."

"Uh. Nope. And you should kick yourself for letting your engines get in that kind of shape. They haven't been checked in years. No wonder the power housing cracked." She stood with her head up, shoulders back, chest out. No one could tell her that her work wasn't precise.

"I thank you and the Sector Guard for your help then. We should be on our way. Will you remain in the area until we are sure that the repairs will hold?"

Isabi's fingers tightened on her waist and she kept her voice controlled, "Of course we will. It wouldn't do to have you falling back planet side after I did all that work. Shade? Let's head out."

"We will be in contact the instant that we reach our ship and separate." He nodded to their audience and simply walked straight through the group. Not around them. With his arm around her, he walked *through* them. She wobbled a bit when they solidified, but was able to keep her balance as they made it to the airlock. She had it cycle once and then open, the lightest touch of her hand controlling the seals. With her worksuit and helmet under one arm and the other wedged

against Isabi, the instant that he let her go, she hit the floor knees first.

"Fixer, are you all right?" He picked her up.

"Just hungry. Get me in the pilot's seat and get me a snack bar. I have a feeling these jerks aren't going to wait until we are off to fire up." He dropped her into the seat and she strapped in. A few toggles had the mag locks releasing, but she had to wait until they drifted off before firing her own engines. Their drift took them right into the path of the newly repaired engine exhaust ports. She counted down as Isabi slapped a snack bar into her hand. She munched and watched the distance from the ship grow second by second. "Strap in. This is going to hurt."

He buckled in then snorted, "Isn't that my line?"

"No, your line is it will only hurt for a moment." She grabbed the controls and hit the throttle less than a second before a blaze of superheated gasses hit the mooring spot that they had occupied. "Assholes!"

"Captain Anar, what the hell are you playing at? You almost barbequed us!" Isabi was furious. Apparently he hadn't actually thought that the crew of the Dunlap could be that stupid.

"Almost? Then I was too slow. No one shall know of our presence here."

"Aw hells." Swallowing the last of the bar,

Mala gripped the controls and gunned her engines. The Dunlap was way too heavy to follow, but she now knew why their ship was in such bad repair. They were Travellers. It explained the brightly coloured clothing that she had seen and the off the charts oxygen consumption. There were women and children on that ship. Whole families. "Anar, I have no quarrels with the Travellers and would not report you to the authorities. We *are* the authorities and we don't care who you are. We simply came to help. We wish to leave without incident as well."

"You are serious, you do not wish to have us hauled to the nearest secure facility?" The disbelief was obvious in his tone.

"At this point I simply want you to get the repairs that the ship desperately needs. I will send you the specs and those repairs will take you to a conclave. You are putting your people at risk in such a minimally active transport." She kept her voice calm, but she was watching the movements of the ship closely. If they set up for pursuit, the freighter would never make it. Mala was not going to have those people's deaths on her conscience. She would go back to the ship if it was necessary, but she was hoping that Anar would see sense.

Long moments of silence ran between the Arion and the Dunlap. Finally, "I apologize for my impulse. It is seldom that we meet someone

willing to offer assistance without an ulterior motive."

"Your apology is accepted and I wish you the luck of the stars." Breathing a sigh of relief, Mala turned to Isabi and gave him a wink. "Now, follow the directions I have sent and get those emergency repairs as soon as you can. Sector Guard Fixer out." She closed the com and sat back looking at her partner, "How was that?"

"Amazing. How did you know that it was a Traveller ship?" He was leaning back in his chair and observing her closely.

"They were consuming much more oxygen than their official tally should have been using. That and the seventeen ear piercings on all of the men over twenty." She set the autopilot and left her seat. She was halfway to the small galley when she fell to her knees.

He was at her side in an instant, lifting her. "Mala? What is it?"

"How long was I in the engine?"

"Five hours or so. I checked on you a few times, but you didn't respond."

"Isabi, I really need some food. Now." The world was growing brighter, large spots swimming in her vision. He deposited her on the couch and went to the galley.

"You know, I should request extra pay for being a waiter."

“Ha ha. Make with the food.” She flopped her hand weakly. “You can take it out of my hide later.” She made the offer before she realized what she was saying, but his sudden spin and grin brought her impulsive words back to her in a moment. “Hells.”

He barked a laugh and returned to her with a tray of snacks. “I will hold you to that when we land. For now, I am more concerned with the fact that you just turned grey. Start with the fruit juice.”

He ceased to exist as she took the tray. She needed to eat and this was food. When the tray grew empty, hands took it away and replaced it with some hot soup and bread. She finally was full after a third tray had been given and emptied. “I need some rest now.” She put the tray aside and lay on the couch. Isabi was looking at her in concern. He tidied up the food trays, then returned to her side, picking her up to move behind her on the couch, becoming a living bed for her to rest on. His breathing soothed her and she felt herself slipping away.

* * * *

Isabi was sure that the food that she had consumed was going to swell her belly to enormous proportions, but her stomach was flat

and there was no trace of all the food that he had seen her eat with dainty bites.

Hyder was going to have to investigate her metabolism. He suspected that her body used her own materials for certain repairs and the food was an internal replacement of the minerals and vitamins that she had lost.

It would explain why she ate thousands of calories at a sitting, but didn't gain any weight. Her body hummed gently on top of his and he wondered what was going on inside at the molecular level. Mala was a symphony of biochemistry all working together and the trust that she showed by curling gently against him had him shaking with the urge to peel her suit from her.

The suit was so form fitting he had had to stop himself from punching Captain Anar in the jaw. The scent of masculine interest had been thick in the room the instant that they saw Fixer and his own reflexes had swung into the possessive range.

All those years as a Companion and he finally found the woman he wanted at his side forever, but she had no clue that his interest was this powerful. She would learn. There was no way that Fixer would get out of the Shade.

Chapter Ten

"So I hear that your first assignment went successfully." Hyder was waiting for them after she brought the Arion in for a landing.

"Apparently. They were on their way when we left, the engine should last them the better part of a year." It was hard to keep a serious conversation going when Isabi had her clutched to his chest like an infant.

"Isabi updated me on your condition. You consumed half a week's rations in one sitting. That is impressive. What is even more impressive is that you don't weigh three hundred pounds right now." They were on their way to their quarters. "Why aren't you taking her to Medical?"

Isabi snarled, "Because unless we monitor her during a large repair and then immediately after you won't have the full spectrum of information. So watching her digest her lunch is not really going to do you any good."

Bemused, Mala simply cuddled against the source of warmth that was Isabi's chest. They

walked through the common room and into his quarters. "Your room? I thought I was going to sleep."

"You are. But from now on, you sleep with me."

He was being very alpha, but she decided she didn't mind. It was just easier to let him carry her to his room and undress her. Wait. Undress her? Her skin pinked with embarrassment as he peeled her suit off her. He stopped to examine her hand and shook his head with a quirky grin.

"So you heal fast. I was wondering."

She had forgotten about her burn, come to think of it, she had often fixed radiation leaks with her bare hands and been fine afterward. It had never occurred to her that it was part of her talent that fixed her body. She had simply put it down to not being severely injured. Apparently that wasn't the case. She healed herself. Interesting.

He moved back and stripped his own suit off. His interest in her was obvious and standing in a curve that almost reached to his belly, but he wasn't in a hurry. He simply pulled back the bedding, tucked her in his bed and then curled around her as if he was guarding her. He was warm and his heartbeat was soothing. A jaw-cracking yawn later and she was out.

Something was tugging at the back of her head.

"Wha..." She batted at it, but it continued.

"How long is it anyway?" He was unravelling her hair. It slowly came out of the confiner and then he spread it out and across the pillow. "Wow. Pretty." His fingers were combing it smooth and he finished his task.

"My father would hate it. I had to cut it to fit in the confiner. It used to hang to my ankles in Moreski fashion, but I couldn't go onto a station like that." She was blushing again, she could feel it. His admiring look was far too frank for her.

"It is beautiful. Every colour of the rainbow is here, why do you cover it with such a drab dye?"

"Moreski nobles don't socialize with other species. It marked me as different and I had enough trouble with that already." He was nuzzling at her neck and inhaling her scent. She returned the favour and soon they were rolling together in a tangle of limbs. Mala's heart was pounding as he moved between her thighs and then she sighed in relief as he entered her.

He rocked into her, gaining ground inch by inch until he hit the barrier. He took her mouth in a kiss and reached behind her to stroke her spots. She moaned and arched to him, breaching herself on his turgid length.

He kept one hand on her spine and stroked her every time he withdrew, her body arched up to keep him inside and they set a rhythm of attack

and withdraw. A firmer pressure on her spots made her moan again as her body clenched around his and he moaned in return at the grip that her channel provided, milking him. A few short thrusts and he joined her in release.

He slumped over her for a moment to get his breath, then withdrew to lay beside her. His hands gently moved over her back, this time avoiding her spots, to sooth and relax her. He gave her a gentle kiss on her forehead. "Next time it will be better."

She was confused. "It wasn't good?"

A startled look washed his sated expression away. "It was amazing. But it was your first time and I didn't want to draw it out too much. You would have been too sore."

She thought about that for a moment, "All right, if you say so. But you are forgetting one thing."

"What is that?"

"I heal really fast." She gave him a quick kiss on the nose and watched his eyes as the ramifications of her statement washed through him. She gave a shriek of laughter as he rolled her beneath him again. "Do it better this time."

His mouth was on her collarbone and he was moving lower when he said, "Oh, I intend to."

She was giggling as he continued his exploration and it was almost an hour later when

they fell apart again. "That was better. But next time, I want it to be *amazing*. Isabi, you had better get some rest."

"Moreski women, insatiable." He was muttering, but didn't seem displeased. In fact there was a certain pride in his tone.

"No, I am sated. I am simply optimistic." She couldn't help it, some laughter escaped. He delivered a swat to her behind and dragged her with him to the shower. A gel shower had been installed, but that wasn't where he towed her. He went straight to the waterfall and stood with his back to the pounding water, letting the mist and the water run off his body and onto hers.

"This is how you take a shower, Fixer."

"So I have to stand in the Shade." She smiled at him over her shoulder and enjoyed his ministrations as he soaped his hands and washed her back with smooth gentle strokes. He washed her hair with the same thorough attention and smiled as she ran her own hands through her locks. The dye faded away and the shortened hair grew out before his eyes to flow into the rainbow of hair that fell around her. "I am fixing it." She smiled at his surprise and turned to let him wash her front. That led to another round of frolicking and Mala learned why sex in the shower was such a popular fantasy for women. It was fun and then you rinsed yourself off for the rest of the day.

Chapter El even

"So you used the Arion as a battering ram?"
Hyder was not too impressed with the dents in the shuttle. He hadn't turned to see them, he was caught up with the inspection.

"I had to move debris in place so that I would have raw materials to make the repair." She was wearing one of her jumpsuits. The baggy fabric was still serviceable, but she felt it was lacking a certain amount of style. She had really liked the new uniform, but it was being cleaned. She let her hair flow free today. It felt good. Even inside the open hangar, it caught the breezes and swung as she moved.

"You will have to explain to me how that works."

"Get me some sheet metal and I will show you." She passed him and moved to place her hands on the nose of the Arion. He stopped her with a hand to her arm and was spun around as Isabi grabbed him. Mala looked at her lover in

surprise.

He looked down in embarrassment. "Sorry. Instinct."

Hyder actually looked at them, took in her loose hair and the possessive hand that Isabi wrapped around her waist. "It is understandable under the circumstances. Congratulations."

Isabi nodded and Mala felt a bemused expression cross her face. Men. Full of strange rituals that only another of their kind would understand.

"Your hair looks very nice, Mala. Your father was a royal?"

"Some kind of noble, yeah. He gave it all up for my mom and me." Tears welled in her eyes and she drew a deep breath, "Now, on to the mess I made of the Arion."

"I would like you to be wearing monitors while you work. Isabi, would you help her apply them? Hands, neck, heart, lungs, abdomen, temples and anywhere else you think she may have measurable power output."

Together they wired her up, his dark glances as she opened her jumpsuit was enough to cause a spike on her heart monitor the instant it was placed.

"Playtime is later, kids. This is business."

They giggled through the rest of the applications and then she was all fully dressed

and ready.

"Sheet metal?"

"Does it have to be metal?" Hyder was curious, it showed in every line of his face.

"Did I miss it?" Helen came running up to them and Hyder grabbed her waist as she skidded to a halt in front of Mala.

Mala snorted. "No, you didn't miss it. I was just about to start. And in answer to your question, Hyder, it doesn't have to be metal, but the closer that the repair substance is to the item I am repairing, the less tiring it is. Technically, I have repaired broken wiring using a sandwich."

Isabi let out a low whistle. "So that is why you have an obsession with sandwiches."

"Well, I was caught in a storm at the time so it was all I had."

Helen frowned at her. "I can't believe that you would have let your wiring get into disrepair."

"I didn't. It was cut." She put enough firmness in her tone to let them know that the subject was closed. "Now. On to poor Arion. Where is that sheet metal?"

It was anticlimactic. They watched her repair the ship. She watched the ship become solid and beautiful again. Quietly she made a few improvements on the hull structure, but since they couldn't see what she was doing to the metal, it simply became a blip on the monitors.

She stepped back after examining her work and bumped into Helen. She grabbed the pilot's arm for balance and her talent surged to the fore. There was something wrong with Helen's wiring and her talent wanted to fix it. She released her hand from the jack with an effort. "I am sorry. Are you having problems with your jacks?"

Hyder looked at his partner, concerned. "Helen, are you? Why haven't you said something?"

"It is just some discomfort. Nothing that will stop me from doing my job. The implants have never felt right. You know that." Helen flexed her arm where Mala had grabbed her. "This one is suddenly pain free. What did you do?"

"I think, I am not sure, but I think that I changed the composition of the implant to something you weren't allergic to. If it works, I can do the same to the others."

"I am *allergic* to my pilot implants?"

"Of course. It is a common problem, but I have never gotten to touch a pilot before so I didn't know why." Her stomach rumbled in protest. "Now, we get to the fun part. Anyone want to follow me to the dining hall? The feeding frenzy is about to start."

Isabi chuckled and the others looked a little bewildered, but they followed her to the dining hall. Isabi ran shuttle for her as she ate, and ate, and ate. Hyder was looking at his data pad in

confusion and Helen was just watching wide-eyed, sipping her tea.

When she finally ceased to eat and dabbed at her lips with a napkin, a group of support staff stood at one end of the cafeteria and applauded. Grinning, she stood and bowed. "Thank you, thank you."

Hyder was glued to his readout and eventually he blinked and looked up at her. "You didn't digest any of it. It simply broke down when it touched your stomach. It's amazing. Your body ate it, absorbed it, there is nothing left."

Mala was fascinated. Because she didn't get sick, she had never been to a physician before Hyder. No one had even thought to examine her talent before today. "Whoa. I need a nap."

Hyder was on his feet, but Isabi picked her up before he could touch her. "Your body has gone into a dormant state. It seems to be processing the new material. You need to rest."

"Duh, what did I just say? I need a nap." She curled up and dozed off, trusting Isabi to take her somewhere safe.

"All right, sleeping beauty. It is time to wake up."

It wasn't Isabi's voice, it was Helen's. Mala glared at the woman through slitted eyes.

"We need to get you something to wear."

That perked her up. "Shopping?"

"Yeah, shopping. And then we can discuss the improvement you made to my implant." Helen threw the covers back to expose Mala's jumpsuit. "You have got to improve your style. That hair of yours demands a little more...oomph." Helen grabbed her hands and dragged her out of bed.

Mala stomped into boots and followed the pilot out to a skimmer. "Where are we going?"

"Into town. There are a few shops in there that I think you will love."

"Isn't there a supply station at the base?"

"Not for the kind of clothing I think you need." Helen sighed as she steered around traffic. "Mala, we are women who have dirty jobs to do. We put our lives and bodies on the line with every working day. We need to be women on our time off, with all the fripperies that we can manage."

"I used to dress in a more feminine manner before I had to start earning my way in the world. In our house, we dressed for dinner, attended local events and were a social family. That all stopped when my father died. With everything in his name, my mom was left with nothing when his family came to claim the body. We weren't even allowed to bury him."

Helen looked shocked. "You are can't be serious."

"I am, very. I had to find a way to make enough

money to support my mother. She had never needed to support herself. So I took a job at the Kaddaka station and tried out for the Repair Specialist position as soon as it became available."

"And now you are here."

"And now I am here." Mala took a deep breath. "My mother is safe and stable and now my life can begin." She was no longer fighting tears. Her mercurial moods were courtesy of her father, pieces of him were still left in the world. "So where did you want me to shop first?"

"Zalbeeliyah's. They have some fantastic gowns as well as daily wear." She set the skimmer down in a small lot and thumbed the lock. "I think we also need some footwear along the way."

"Perhaps shoes first?" She eyed her service boots and smiled grimly. "Definitely shoes first."

"Tal's then. They can do wonderful things with leather and laces." She steered Mala down the street, waving at a few people that they passed. "The people here are so friendly. Over seventeen races are represented in the shopkeepers alone."

"Interesting." She dug her heels in and looked through some of the shop windows. "When we come back, I want *that*." She was pointing at a gown for display in one of the windows.

"Well, it's a good thing that it is on our list. That is Zalbeeliyah's." Helen continued on her way and soon they were in the doorway of a shoe

shop. "Tal! I have a job for you. She needs something for every occasion."

"I will do my best, but based on those hefty ship boots, I don't know if she will be amenable to my suggestions." He was rather snotty for an Ontex, but he was right about her boots.

"I will be amenable if you get your silver butt in gear and get my size, we will get along so much better." She flipped her hair and his large black eyes were immediately drawn to it as she knew he would be. She looked like Moreski royalty even if she wasn't.

"Yes, my Lady. What would you like to see first?"

Helen was standing back and just watching Tal fall all over himself to get the shoes as Mala selected them. She almost laughed at the pilot's face as the boxes piled up. It took more than an hour, but finally she had to ask. "Do you have something more stylish in a work boot?"

Tal's eyes lit from within. "I have just the thing." He brought out a long box and laid it at her feet. "Impervious to weight and pressure, heat resistant to six hundred degrees."

"Oh, they are lovely." She took one of the boots out and slipped it on. It hugged every inch of her leg, literally. "Masuo?" The leather caressed her and closed into a seamless fit. It was beautiful, it was alive.

"You are very discerning, Lady. It is indeed Masuo, generated by forced growth. Lab grown."

"You are lying. The striations here cannot be given in a lab. They are wild, the marks occurred in nature as a result of weather interference in the growth pattern, but as we are on Morganti, it is legal for you to sell them so why the subterfuge?"

Tal laughed. He chuckled and howled. "I have been waiting for someone like you to walk into my shop. Take the Masuo, with my compliments. We grow them out back."

It took her a second and then Mala chuckled as well. "And because you grow them, and it isn't legal to ship them, you sell them as cloned. Very smart. And, considering the custom that I have given you today, I will take them with thanks." She chuckled and gave him the formal bow that she had been trained in since she was a child.

He bowed back and they took care of the little matter of paying her bill.

"Wow. That was a load off. Can you have the rest of the shoes shipped to the base? Except for those lovely casual slippers. I will break those in with the rest of my shopping." She gave him a brilliant grin, showing teeth.

"Yes, Lady. The Masuo and *these* as well?" He was gesturing to her work boots.

"Yup. All. Send them all to the base to the Sector Guard quarters, please." He looked up,

startled and she sailed out wearing the new slippers, Helen giggling in her wake.

"How did you know all that?" Helen trotted to keep up with her. "About the boots, I mean."

"Masuo are highly prized on many worlds, but only grow wild on a few. You can't trade in the wild creatures, but can sell the clones."

"I mean, how did you know what they were? What are they?"

"A fungus and vegetable combination that grows wild. You can train them to take on a shape and then once you have them in that shape, you can coax them free of their mooring. The only down side is that you have to find them a host to live on within a few months or they die."

"A host?"

"Yup. They feed off of the auras of sentient beings. It is a painless process and they provide protection to their wearer." The new slippers were a good fit, they left no hotspots or other types of irritation on her feet.

"Oh. Neat." Helen took the lead and opened the door for her at the dress shop. "Now for my favourite part of our trip. The true experience of shopping."

Gowns of every colour and shape were all over the shop. It obviously catered to a large variety of species. When the l'nal came out of the back room to serve them, Mala suddenly understood the

variety of the clothing.

"Zabby! This is my friend, Mala. Mala, this is Zalbeeliyah. Our resident l'nal and fashion maven."

"Oh my dear, is that what you wear with that hair and that skin? It cannot be!" The seven-foot spider scuttled toward her and measured her with a scanner. "I have just the thing."

"I would like to try on the gown in the window, if I may?" It was best to be polite with the carnivorous creatures. They were as quick to anger as they were talented.

"Excellent choice." She scuttled over to the window and had the mannequin stripped in seconds. "Come with me to the fitting area and take off that horrid jumpsuit." Her true voice emanated in a series of clicks and squeaks, the translator around her thorax did the speaking in Alliance Common.

It was an orgy of fabric, snacks and beverages. They spent hours laughing, twirling and even Zabby tried on some gowns. The result caused more hilarity. The gown from the window was a perfect fit after a few minor alterations and she was going to wear it home. The light rainbow effect of the fabric contrasted with the dark rainbow of her hair. It was so perfect that Zabby just stood looking at her for a long moment.

"You are giving me ideas. Come back in a few

weeks, I may have something new for you to look at."

The financial matter was settled and she put in an order for some more suitable jumpsuits. Again, ordering the clothing to be delivered to the Sector Guard, she swept out of the shop wearing the rainbow gown and a matching shawl. Helen trailed behind her, shaking her head at the amount of money that Mala had spent. "I haven't shopped since before my father died, Helen. It was time."

Helen immediately brightened at that. "So this kind of binge isn't normal for you?"

"Hell no! I just needed to get everything from the skin out. The rest of my clothes are on Cadith." She saw a floating shadow near her and stepped into it. It moved away. "All right, Isabi. You can come out now."

His laugh appeared before he did. He was wearing a deep blue shirt tucked into black trousers that clung to him in a sinful manner.

Now that she knew the body behind the clothing, she was all in favour of voting for him to run around naked. His boots went from silent to gentle clicks on the paving stones.

"I had never imagined that you would look so elegant and so pissed off at the same time."

"I am a woman of many talents. See what Helen helped me pick out?" She twirled happily and he laughed again.

"Would you ladies do me the honour of accompanying me to dinner?"

Helen piped up, "Of course."

Mala met her lover's gaze with a solemn, "Of course."

He extended his elbows to them and together they walked a few blocks to a very classic dining establishment.

She sat next to Helen and across from Isabi. He watched her carefully as she made her selections. "What are you staring at?" It was curious, he was looking at her as if some mystery was about to be uncovered.

"I just realized that aside from that light repast for the sake of manners on the station, I have never seen you eat when you were not ravenous. This will be an education."

The eating sticks and prongs were all on the table. Each used for a different food. He was testing her. Fine. If he wanted to play. She could play.

The sheer variety of food that was ordered, including appetizers, had them using prongs, sticks and fingers. They discussed the variety of foods on their home worlds and Helen regaled them with tales of something called a cheeseburger and fries. Isabi seemed pleased by her table manners and only threw food at her once when she asked him about the most disgusting

thing he had ever eaten. That was not dinner table discussion, she was informed.

The only thing that kept her from launching herself at him was that he didn't hit her new gown. The food glanced harmlessly off the hand she held up to deflect it.

To distract them both, Helen smiled at her. "So, when do you feel you will be up to working on me? The port that you repaired is feeling fantastic. I have no idea what you did, but the connection is faster than normal."

"We can do it when we get back to the base. I don't want to do it here." She grinned wickedly. "I wouldn't want to bankrupt Isabi, after all, he is getting the cheque."

Helen joined her in the laugh and Isabi simply thumbed the payment slip, shaking his head. They made their way back to the skimmer and found a one-man sled parked right behind it. He handed them up the steps into the skimmer and took up his position on the sled. He rode escort the entire way back to the base, then took their hands as they exited the skimmer on the landing pad.

Helen merely nodded to him with a smile.

Mala had to make a comment, "You are so getting lucky tonight."

He leaned down so that his lips were in the crook of her neck. "I already am."

Author's Note

Welcome to the first book in the Sector Guard Series. The next few instalments will complete the guard and send them off on a few weird assignments. And then things will get interesting.

Some of you may note that there are Terrans in this series, please feel free to research them in the Champions series or any books of the Terran Times. Available from Extasy books.
www.extasybooks.com

For a complete list, check out my website at
www.violagrace.com

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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