



POWERED UP

Viola Grace

Sector Guard 11

Ilsa Kimoni has spent the last three years saving her own people in privacy, locked away in the seizure centre on Pahnnan. When a member of the Sector Guard requests and demands her skills, she has no choice but to say yes. Controlling technology is her talent, but she will need skill and patience to deal with her new partner, Razer.

Born of the warlike mercenary race, Kozue, he is appalled at her lack of physical skills, but captivated by her deep brown eyes. What could Commander have been thinking to pair him with such a soft, golden, sexy female? She would be more distraction than assistance.

When she powers up, she proves her worth and still distracts the hell out of him.

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**POWERED UP
SECTOR GUARD BOOK 11**

BY

VIOLA GRACE

CHAPTER ONE

“Get the walker, the shaft is going to blow!” The shaft supervisor ran toward the equipment storage and frantically punched in the code to release the high-pressure walker, the only way that the shaft would be held open for any hope of the miners inside to escape. Sick horror ran through her as the gates of the unit swung open and there was nothing on the other side.

“Where is it?”

The foreman took the full brunt of her shriek in stride. “It had to go for scheduled repair. There was no way of knowing that this would occur.”

“The damned *other three* are already out for maintenance. Why hasn’t the evacuation order sounded?” She didn’t wait for the answer, but ran for the alarm. The collapse of the shaft threw her off her feet and to the floor. A suffocating cloud of dust and minerals fogged her vision, but after a horrifying minute of her ears ringing, her hearing returned and she heard the unmistakable sound of the walkers powering up.

One walker stopped its thundering steps near her and she felt the peculiar sensation of being lifted off the floor. Through the cloud of particulates, she saw the others that the walker had in its clutches as it made its way into the daylight. The supervisor could only hope that others fared as well as she had.

* * * *

Ilsa jumped as the noise and impact ran through the floor. Getting up, she walked to the window and looked at the tremendous cloud that was forming over the primary mine.

"Ilsa, what are you doing out of bed?"

Her nurse was behind her, the scowl on her face. This one time, Ilsa did not feel like arguing. "I am getting back into bed. Just watch me."

She tucked herself in, let Neela draw the warming blankets around her and the instant that the woman was out of the room, she sent her mind to the mine.

The clouds of debris were still roiling, choking the survivors. Ilsa needed to get them out of there. Taking stock of the available options, she chose the walkers.

Splitting her mind into the four walkers, she kept one finding survivors at the mouth of the mine and delivering them to the safety of the

fields and emergency vehicles outside.

The inner portion of the mine was more difficult. The readouts of the walkers let her know that there was a large gathering of survivors at the other side of the large blockage. She just needed to move the blockage. Their air would not remain breathable for much longer.

Ilsa used the first walker to support the roof, the second to dig and the third to remove the debris. It was hard to control that many bots at the same time, but she needed each and every one of them.

Outside on the lawn, one of the rescue team came running up to the walker as she turned to get her fifth batch of survivors.

"Wait! We can help, you just need to blow out one of the walls." He was looking to the faceplate and it made Ilsa smile to think of what he would say if he knew that there was only empty space within the walker.

She extended the walker's hand, opening and closing the grip. Three men brought a rocket launcher to her. She pointed at the wall she was going to blow and they immediately started moving the rescue vehicles away from that position.

Stomping the walker back into the dim confines of the main hub, she aimed the rocket launcher at the wall, made sure she didn't have it on

backward and used the other limb to trigger it.

The ensuing noise and impact brought a few survivors up and to her attention as they screamed in shock. She discarded the rocket launcher, resuming her rescues in the improved light and visibility of the large hole in the rock wall.

She was running on the instrument displays, so the added light was not an issue or a benefit to her, but the improved air movement bought precious minutes for some of the survivors. Ilsa kept gently scooping up the wounded and releasing those trapped by debris while her other three walkers broke through to the group hidden behind the wall.

She wedged one of the walkers into the opening and supported the walls while the survivors made a run for it. Ilsa left that walker locked in place and finished burrowing through a second hole with one of the other two borrowed mechs.

One of the survivors stopped her, "There are more locked in shaft seventeen. The blast doors came down when the first explosion happened."

She nodded the heads of the walkers and headed down the hall that the fleeing man pointed out. Ilsa powered up the lights and used one of the walkers to light the way out of the darkness while still walking backward toward the blast door.

The first walker did not have a cutting system on it, so the machines traded places as she tried to

fire up the torch. It took precious seconds, but eventually she managed to get the torch set and directed into the control panel for the door. She thanked her parents again for the engineering courses they had insisted she take.

Mine doors were designed to keep blasts in, not out. The locks on her side of the door gave easily and the door yielded to the walker's hydraulics.

Fifty miners were huddled back from the doors, the noise of the walker having warned them that something was coming through. They took some hesitant steps toward the walkers, some carrying the wounded, and when she braced the walker in the door and held it open, they ran for freedom. Several shouted or coughed their thanks, but it was only when all the miners were past her that Ilsa felt it appropriate to leave the walkers.

Calm in the knowledge that she had done all she could, she returned to her body to find her nurse hovering over her. "Ilsa, you over did it and now you had a seizure. I have told you not to leave the bed."

"I am fine, Neela. It wasn't a seizure, I just fell asleep." Of course the sensors wired to her head would give a different story, but she wasn't in the mood to play with the nurse.

"Bullshit. You passed out and your brain went wild. That is a seizure. The doctors will do a full workup in the morning." Neela pounded her

pillows and helped her to sit up in bed. "There has been a disaster at the mine. The doctors do not have time for you today."

Ilsa looked curious, it was hard not to grin. "Was there? Perhaps that is what triggered the episode. The trauma of memory and all that."

Neela immediately looked a little contrite. "You are right. The memory of your parents' death probably made you faint when you heard the explosion. The readouts coincide with the timing. I will write off this episode, but you have to be more careful. One solid fall and who knows what could happen."

Ilsa nodded and sighed in relief as her nurse left to find a cup of tea and a paper. The doctors were never gentle.

She leaned back and recovered from her psychic exertions while she watched the news. Apparently, a ghost had taken over four walkers and used them to assist in evacuating the mine. Officials were baffled, but charges were being laid against the foreman who refused to trigger the alarm that could have saved lives.

Ilsa Kimoni smiled as she slipped into a restful and restorative sleep.

CHAPTER TWO

Kennan cocked his head as he got the order from his commanding officer. "You want me to go on a recruitment?"

"Yes. There is a woman on Pahnann that is showing indications of being a tremendous power." There was a no-nonsense tone in the commander's voice.

Kennan sat up straighter and looked Guardian in the eye. "You are serious."

"Of course, Razer. Have you ever known me to joke?"

Razer blinked. Sector Guard Base Udell was primarily an active force. They specialized in ousting alien races from protected planets and retrieving kidnapped personnel. To date, they were all men.

"Does this have anything to do with Commander and Pilot visiting?"

Guardian sighed. "Yes. Morganti is thriving, Balen is under construction and Teklan is finding

its initial staff to be effective for investigations. We need to expand our ranks and that means women."

"What if she and I don't get along?"

Guardian sighed and rubbed at the ridges of bone that crossed the silver expanse of his skull into his hairline. "You will. Commander knows his business and his business is your business."

Razer shook his head, his own banded braids swinging with the motion. "Fine, I will find her and bring her back to Udell, but I don't have to like her. What's her name?"

"Ilsa Kimoni and she is currently living in a hospice for those with chronic seizures. It seems our lady tends to pass out when she uses her talent." Guardian leaned forward, his black eyes gleaming in the afternoon light as he briefed Razer for his most hazardous duty—obtaining his match.

* * * *

Ilsa was ignoring the nurses' attempt to involve her in the daily art therapy. If they would let her run around and reclaim her physical fitness, she wouldn't still be here in the hospice.

"Ilsa, you have a visitor." Neela was looking a little dazed and slightly flushed.

"Are you insane? I never have visitors." She

turned her chair around to face the door and felt her own cheeks heat with a blush. "Oh."

Framed by the doorway was a man whose deep bronze skin and swinging black braids proclaimed him one of the Kozue. Born to fight with reflexes that left their opponents stunned, the silver eyes that were typical of the species were fixed on her with the light of surprise in their depths. The body suit he wore hugged all of the bulging muscles that had ever haunted her fantasies, the belt holding his blades snaked around a narrow waist, those blades strapped down by bands over each thickly bulging thigh.

"He is one of the Sector Guard and wishes to speak with you." Neela whispered it to her as if his keen hearing couldn't detect it. The slight smile on his face brightened Ilsa's blush.

Straightening in her chair, she steered it toward him. "You wished to speak with me?"

"You are Ilsa Kimoni?"

"I am."

"Then yes, I wish to speak to you."

She nodded. "Come with me." She steered her chair past him and out the door into the hall and down to the gardens. No one was ever in the gardens during art therapy.

She could hear the clash of the beads in his hair as he moved. He was doing it deliberately so that she could know how close he was. He needn't

have bothered. She could smell his warm, masculine scent. It was so distracting she almost steered her chair off the edge of the reflecting pool.

Blinking and blushing once again, she positioned herself near a bench, gesturing for him to sit.

"What brings the Sector Guard to my door, so to speak?" She kept eye contact with him, but it was difficult. Her dark brown gaze was no match for his silver one.

"We have received a report that you are exhibiting symptoms of being a candidate for the Sector Guard."

She blinked. "Who are you?"

His cheeks bronzed even more. "I am sorry, my name is Razer. I am one of the Guardsmen out of Udell Base."

"What report could you possibly have gotten on me?" She was curious. She drummed her fingers on the edge of the chair.

"That you have a talent for animating large pieces of equipment."

Ilsa's lips twitched in an effort to squelch the run of amusement that his statement caused. The double entendre was only in her mind. "I have never declared any such thing. What could have possibly triggered a report?"

He looked at her legs for a moment. "Can I ask

you a question?"

"Certainly."

"What is wrong with your legs?"

She giggled. It was nice that he was direct. "Nothing. Well, they are a little weak, but there is no reason for the chair."

"Then why are you in it?"

"Because they are afraid I will have a seizure when I am standing, so they have alarmed the chair to keep me from falling. It's stupid, but I can't check out under my own steam." She snorted and wiggled her toes, but when she shifted her weight, the chair chirped a warning. "See?"

"So, they are imprisoning you here?" His voice took on a harsh tone that was endearing to her and seemed to surprise him.

"Yes and no. If I go without a *seizure* for six months I will be free to go."

His lips twitched. "Why can't you?"

"Because, for example, if I did have talent, it might read as a seizure and my body might be locked in an unconscious state. Hypothetically."

He smiled outright. "Indeed. Hypothetically." He chuckled, a rusty sound that made her wish she was out of that chair and preening for his attention so that the smile would bathe her in its light.

"What would your talent be, hypothetically?"

He already knew, she could see it in his face.

"Well, if I were to have a seizure, as they call it...I would send my conscious mind into a mobile machine and use it like my own body." She smiled. "Hypothetically."

"What kind of machines?"

"Walkers, transports, boats, anything that can move, but you knew that already." She squinted at him and he grinned again.

"I do. Would you be willing to leave Pahnnan?" It was a formal request and she read it as such.

"I would. There is nothing left for me here." Once her parents had died, there was no one left to miss her.

"Excellent. I will make the arrangements." He rose and bowed to her.

She smiled. "That's it?"

"That is it. You have already been cleared to leave the surface and the training centre at Udell is awaiting a woman's touch." His lips were twitching again.

"Wonderful. I can't wait. I will just go to my room and get changed." She moved her chair past him and into the shade of the building where Neela was watching her with worried eyes. "To my room."

"What did he want?" Neela took charge of the chair and pushed Ilsa back through the centre.

"Why, my dear Neela..." She turned in her chair to look at her nurse with a wink, ignoring

the beeping of the chair. "He wanted me."

"You are joking." Neela turned off the alarm and helped Ilisa into bed. The bed was now alarmed as well, but Ilisa could get around it.

"I am. I am really joking. He wanted to speak to me about his assignment on Pahnnan. Nothing more."

Neela fluffed her pillows to a ridiculous degree. "He is very handsome."

"I noticed, but I am hardly in any condition to take advantage of him. Can I have some time alone?"

Neela hesitated.

Ilisa grinned and added, "He might still be on premises. You might catch another look."

The nurse couldn't get away fast enough.

Ilisa grinned and rolled to her side, reached for the wires and disconnected them with only a mild electric shock. She was then free to swing her legs off the edge of the bed and stand on shaking limbs. Her movements were slow and deliberate as she shucked her hospital robe and gown. Her outer clothing was difficult to tug on, but she was eventually wearing a skirt, shirt and light jacket with some soft shoes. Not exactly battle wear, but it was the best she could do.

He had been watching her dress for three minutes when she finally turned around to face him.

"You can walk."

"I can. But not far. I have been confined to that chair for three years." She walked slowly to him and saw the flicker of impatience in his eyes.

"I will carry you. You are too slow and unsteady." Razer leaned down and lifted her easily, her wasted limbs making her no barrier to his strength.

"As you will." She crossed her arms and merely sat in the cradle of his limbs.

"A good attitude. It will be helpful for you in the field." He looked down. "After we get you fit. I am turning away all assignments until you are fit enough to my way of thinking."

She shuddered. The Kozue were not known for their tolerance of injuries.

The halls of the centre were filled with murmurs and several pointing fingers attached to astonished bodies. Self-conscious, Ilsa made sure that her long skirt was still down around her ankles.

"It is fine. They are staring at me and trying to find out if you are with me willingly or if I have just pillaged the centre with you as my prize."

"Oh."

His face was serious, but there was amusement in his gaze. "I think it is a little of both."

She didn't know what to say to that.

Neela was near the door and panicked to see

her private patient go. "You can't take her, she is ill."

"She will be the next member of the Sector Guard of Udell Base. Your attempts to restrict her have kept her safe but have let her body deteriorate while her talent gained strength."

Neela was running to keep up as Razer kept walking. An administrator ran out to restrain her as she made a grab for Ilsa. Razer was faster. A blade was suddenly between Ilsa and her nurse, her weight shifted entirely to his left arm. Her legs hung down next to his, but his arm around her waist held her tightly against him.

The blade hummed in place and Neela shrank back. "She belongs to the Sector Guard now. You have no claim over her."

Neela went back inside with the Administrator, making sure that she was safely inside before following her.

"That was easier than I thought." Razer resheathed his blade and swung her back up into his arms, this time she wrapped one arm around his neck just to keep herself stable.

"Wonderful. Where are we going?"

The open lawn of the centre was usually inviting. Today there was a shuttle right in the middle of the yard.

"Not too far, and then extremely far. It is a three-day trip to Udell and I am now your partner

and personal trainer. I will not have a partner who can barely lift her head." His stern tone was not to be ignored. She was going to be in for a world of hurt and if she got to stare at Razer the whole time, it might not be all bad.

He carried her in to the shuttle and strapped her in to the passenger seat. He caught her bemusement and asked, "What?"

"I can't believe you parked in the front of the centre."

"The lawn will grow back and I was in a bit of a hurry. Peaceful worlds make me edgy." He grinned, sealed the hatch and ran a pre-flight check.

The tech around her hummed with energy and she fought the urge to touch it with her mind. Who knew what the result would be during a takeoff?

CHAPTER THREE

Ilsa was nervous. She tangled her fingers together in her lap and held her breath as the shuttle left the surface of the only world she had ever walked on. Doubts ran through her mind as she watched the centre she had lived at since the death of her parents shrink. Neela had returned to follow them as they took off and she grew smaller and smaller until Ilsa couldn't make her out anymore.

"You have always lived on Pahnnan?"

"Yes."

"When did your talent manifest?"

The memory hit her suddenly and tears gathered in her eyes. "Three years ago."

"Tell me about it. There is no shame in a memory." His voice was kinder than she would have imagined as the ship rocked in her planet's atmosphere.

"My parent's and I worked in one of the nine great mines of Pahnnan. My mother was a shift supervisor, my father a foreman and I worked in

the offices, doing payroll. Pahnnan is geothermally active and a gas bubble deep in the central shaft ruptured and flooded the surface with suffocating gasses."

"When the pocket started forming, my father hit the evacuation alarm and ran to get my mother. She was seeing to the evacuation of her personnel and they were together when the gas pocket hit."

"Where were you?"

"Evacuating the offices and locking down empty corridors so that any rescue efforts could be focussed easily. When I checked personnel allocations, I saw where my parents were, right in the path of the boiling blast. I ran toward a walker station, but the blast caught me before I could make it. I was trapped under a beam and my parents were suffocating." She sniffed and wiped at her eyes.

"I looked at the walker station and suddenly I was *inside* the walker. I got it and moved it toward the main shaft, freeing survivors as I went. I had to get to my family, but I was too late. They had died together, my father trying to protect my mother from the wave of gas." She laughed, a light hiccup. "The only time he wasn't the cause of the toxic gasses she was exposed to."

Razer's bark of laughter made her smile. "What about you?"

"I took them out of the mine, then returned to rescue those who were still living. The walkers have amazing readouts. I could find those on the edge of survival and get them out."

"What happened when you were finished?"

She grimaced. "They had moved me. Rescuers had pulled me from the wreckage and I was thought to have received an undetectable brain injury. My body showed signs of REM activity and I was sent to the seizure centre. Every time I needed to participate in a rescue, I would leave my body where it fell, so they began to restrict me to the chair for safety purposes."

"You couldn't tell them what was going on?"

"Hells no. There isn't a lot of psi-talent on Pahnnan for a very good reason. They are tested to destruction." She shuddered. "The seizures were the perfect cover."

She closed her eyes as the blackness of space covered the top of the shuttle and the expanse of her planet grew smaller underneath them. Desperate for a distraction, she asked, "And you, why did you join the Sector Guard?"

Razer moved them out of the gravitational pull of Pahnnan. He flicked some switches and pressed some keys on the control panel. "Kozue don't believe in psi-talents. They feel it devalues battle victories. My brother and I were the last children of my parents and when we both exhibited talents,

we were kicked out of the clan. The Alliance was there to catch us and gave us meaningful employment as well as training for our talents."

She had to laugh. "It seems we have something in common. Neither of our people like talents."

He chortled as well. "It does indeed seem that we have one thing in common. We are going to leave the immediate vicinity of the planet and then I will use the autopilot to steer while we get you kitted out for your physical training. Your medical records were sent to the Alliance, so the suits that were sent should be a close fit."

"I have suits? Like yours?"

He snorted. "Not yet. For now it is just something to allow you full movement with no restriction. The suits are also rigged to monitor your bio signs."

"Interesting." Her hand went immediately to her hair and the shaved patches that had recently held the monitor pods.

"Your hair will grow back."

She blushed. She didn't think he was watching her. "I know, but the patches make me feel self-conscious."

"You had surface monitors?"

She almost jumped out of her skin when she felt his hand examining one of the smooth patches. His fingertips were slightly rough and she held very still. Her voice was too high when she said,

"Yeah, they tried sub-dermal but I was able to short them out."

"Interesting. You have a lot of scarring on your scalp. What part of you was trapped beneath that debris?"

"You're good. Yes, it struck my head and pinned me down."

"How long were you trapped there?" His fingers travelled to the next shaved patch and across the long line of the scar.

She shivered a little and answered. "Two hours or so. I was one of the last survivors drawn from the wreckage. Most of my blood was gone and my life hung by a thread for a week."

He shook his head and his braids clashed. "Amazing. That blow should have killed you."

She smiled sadly. "I won't lie. Some days I wished it had."

The shock rippled across his chiselled features. "Never say that. Your survival has saved lives."

He was genuinely concerned by her despair. It was funny coming from someone from a race famous for their brutality.

Razer turned away from her and entered a sequence of codes. Lines around his mouth indicated his displeasure. Ilsa didn't know whether it was aimed at her or himself.

She stayed quiet. She had saved lives, dozens, perhaps hundreds. She had saved daughters from

losing their parents, that should have been enough. Somehow though, she felt hollow.

Ilsa needed more from her life, after all, it wasn't a lot fun to go through life without love.

"Here. Put this on." The package that struck her in the chest was a bundle of clothing. She blinked.

"Now? Here?"

"Here, or in the lav if you need privacy." Razer was rummaging in one of the side bins with his back to her. Their course was set and the shuttle seemed to know what to do.

"Lav it is. Uh, which way is the lav? I haven't been on a shuttle before." It had the square footage of her first apartment.

Razer looked stumped for a moment. "All right. I suppose I will begin with the basics. This is the lav." He flipped open a door to show her a smooth floor, a showerhead with a strange output structure. "This ship uses a sonic and UV cleaning system. This one increases heat and this controls force. The toilet is self-explanatory, the flush mechanism is the button on the left. There is a small sink that folds out for washing your face or brushing your teeth. The mirror is set to clear if there is additional humidity."

She tried all of the controls and when he nodded, they moved on. "This is the galley. You fold the table out and it exposes the dispenser.

You select your rations, press them onto the heater and when they are ready, you eat. Water works the same. Take a cup, use the dispenser and drink. Anytime, anywhere you are hungry or thirsty, help yourself."

"Thank you."

"Now. Get changed and we will start your training. You really are in pathetic shape."

She took her bundle of clothing and stepped into the lav, careful not to trigger any of the sprays. The bodysuit was weird. It hugged every curve and exposed her lack of muscle tone to a frightening degree.

She was nervous stepping out where he could see her, but he didn't make any comments, merely knelt in front of her to lock ankle weights on her legs and matching weights on her wrists.

"Walk from one end of the shuttle to the other. Lift your arms in front of you with every step and lower them on the next."

It took a few tries to get the hang of it, but soon she was walking with her arms moving in time to her legs. She grew tired, but kept going. Her body would never strengthen if she gave in.

Ilsa kept walking until her muscles burned, her mind was blank and limbs were leaden.

"Stop, Ilsa. You will injure yourself." Razer stepped in front of her mindless trudging and she looked up at him blankly.

He removed her wristbands and ankle weights, then led her to a seat next to the galley table. "What do you prefer? Fruits, meats? A loaf of bread?" Razer held out a series of packs.

"Meat, vegetable and bread. I am rather hungry." She used her ridiculously light arms to get herself some water and almost spilled it all as the muscle tremors started.

"Only take a little water at a time. You can't physically hold more. The food will be ready soon." The chime proved him right and a selection of food that made her centre's rations look feeble was placed in front of her.

He started on another set of packs.

"I have to eat all this?"

"We are building muscle, Ilsa. You need all the fuel you can get." He nodded for her to start and watched as her shaking hands pulled each packet open.

He wasn't going to help her, but he did supervise each packet that she consumed to make sure she ate it all.

"I am full."

"Keep eating. You have to build your capacity, and if you throw up, we will start again. Take your time. The last exercise for this evening is to have you sit in that chair for an hour, visit the lav and then pull out the bunk on that side and get to sleep. In the morning, I will give you a rubdown

and we will do more of the work with the weights, adding some abdominal exercises and some moves for additional strength."

"So, I have all day to eat this?" She gestured at the array of packets in front of her.

"Yes. Reheat them as you will, but you won't sleep until they are gone." He left her alone while he attended to his own meal. He was finished in under six minutes and she barely had enough strength to hold her fork.

She came up with a plan, chew, sip, swallow, sip, swallow, chew. The meat went down hard, but the fruit and vegetables were a little easier. She shredded her bread and used it to clean out the packets. By the chronometer on the wall it had taken her two hours, but she had eaten it all.

She used the lav and exited to a lovely sight, Razer was engaged in his own workout, his feet were hooked into a bar on the ceiling and he was curling his torso upward in a rhythmic motion.

"What are you doing?" She was a little hesitant, but it was fascinating to watch.

"Exercising. It is time for you to get to sleep." He pointed to the bunk, ready and waiting for her.

She blinked at how odd it looked that he was behaving as if he hung upside-down all the time. "Where will you sleep?"

"On the floor. It won't be the worst place I have bedded down." He shrugged.

She turned quickly to stifle a snicker. "When will you wake me?"

"I won't, your body will." He resumed his curling and uncurling. "Wake when you are rested. Don't force it."

She blinked and cautiously sat on the edge of the bunk. She had never gone to sleep with another man in the room, not even during her brief flings in college. Well, this was a new life, she had better adjust. Ilisa got the feeling that she was going to be spending a lot of time in shuttlecraft.

She kept her eyes open a little and counted his upside down sit-ups while she got drowsy. The view wasn't bad and she was smiling as she drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ilsa was doing better than she thought she would. She woke, got out of the bunk, tidied and folded the bedding before locking the bunk back in place.

After her morning ablutions, she approached the captain's chair where Razer was sitting. She didn't say a word, merely slid into the navigator's chair and looked out into the vastness of space. It was bigger than she had imagined.

She couldn't feel their movement, but a light humming of the engines reached into her senses. Ilsa kept her senses out of the equipment functions, but assessed the capabilities of the ship. It was quite impressive. There were guns beneath the smooth skin of the hull next to flamethrowers. This small shuttle was meant for battle.

Beside her, Razer suddenly sat up and looked at her in surprise. "You are awake."

"I am." It took her a moment to realize that his fixed staring into space had been his manner of sleeping while sitting up. "I am sorry I woke you."

His lips twisted in a self-depreciating grin. "You didn't. That is why I was surprised. Very few have ever been able to sneak up on me."

"I didn't sneak. I went to the lav, took a shower and had some water." Ilsa smiled tentatively. "How long did I sleep?"

"Ten hours. Not nearly as long as I had anticipated. Well done." He stood and stretched. "Come with me."

She followed him in to the main cabin and watched as he retrieved the weights. This time he faced her after he had cuffed her. "You are feeble, but there is no better time to start training your muscles into battle moves. Strike me."

She had never hit another being in her life. "What?"

"Strike me. I will correct your stance and you will try again. After your form is correct, we will move on to kicks." He waited, his silver eyes patient.

She threw a feeble punch, not intending to strike him.

He flicked her hand back. "Pathetic. Try again, or do you need that chair and a nurse to help you."

The wild swing she threw made him laugh as he stepped to the side and caught her against his body. "That was moderately better, but you should never lose your temper when fighting. It is

a means to an end, whether that end be survival, vengeance or escape. Battle is a tool, not a way of life."

Her heart was pounding in her chest so hard that she could almost see it beneath the bodysuit. "I see. Thank you for that instruction."

"Try again."

This time he demonstrated how she should hold her fist, showed her how to strike a blow and made sure that she practiced with both hands. "An enemy won't wait until you can line up your preferred limb. You strike with what is available."

She struck at him and made contact with his left arm, then his right. He didn't flinch away from her strike, but used it as some kind of a gauge. When she increased the force of her strike, he smiled.

"Excellent. Now on to kicks."

Kicks were a little more painful, for her. She ended up on her butt three times before she mastered the art of balance and strike. Sweat coated her from forehead to toes by the time she was able to follow his direction for a kick on the inside of his knee that brought him down.

"Enough for today. Take a sonic and come back out here for a rubdown." He folded down the bunk and lay a white cloth on top of it.

She shrugged and wandered into the lav, finishing her second shower of the day. She winced as she checked out her hair in the mirror.

The golden brown strands were becoming a mane of an impressive diameter.

Ilsa exited the lav and stood looking at Razer curiously. He had tied the swinging braids behind his head and was waiting for her expectantly.

His lips curved upward in a smile. "You will have to remove your suit for this."

"What will I wear then?"

"Nothing. You will lie flat on the bedding and I will rub this oil into your skin as well as knead your muscles. The atmosphere in the shuttle is very dry and you are showing signs of its effects already."

"Naked?" She knew the whites of her eyes were showing.

"I swear not to take advantage of your vulnerable state. On my honour as a Guardsman." He gestured for her to take up her position on the white cloth.

"Could you turn around?"

He inclined his head regally and turned his back to her.

She admired the line of his spine leading to his tight...she quickly turned her own back and unsealed her suit. She stripped it off as quickly as she could and dove headlong onto the bed. Ilsa tucked her hands next to her breasts and winced as Razer sat on the edge of the bunk and put his hands on her back.

She fought the urge to rear up in complaint as he started a strong massage that crushed the echo of all therapeutic touches she had received in the last few years.

"This is done to restore and encourage circulation in wounded warriors. There is no shame in needing help, only in refusing it when it is offered. Pride makes all warriors foolish and a wounded body is a liability." His hands were not cruel, but no knot of muscular tension escaped him. Her butt was even treated to his strong hands, a massage that made her blush to her toes.

"You needn't blush. Your body is lovely, the scars were earned fighting for your life. There is no shame in wearing them."

His oiled hands were working on her toes and the tugging set off sensations low in her abdomen that were a little surprising. She would never have guessed that her toes were connected to her libido.

She was just relaxing into his treatment of her left arm when she heard words she would not have anticipated.

"Turn over."

"What?"

"There are tension points near your neck and collarbone, the front of your thighs also need to be worked or they will knot later in the day." His voice was reasonable. "On my honour as a Guardsman."

Reluctantly, she rolled over, clenching her eyes shut as she did it. His hands cupped her shoulders and his thumbs worked the joints free of tension. Razer kept his hands impersonal and she had to face that most morbid of facts. She was just not his type.

The tension points under her collarbone relaxed at his touch, as did the knots of tension on either side of her breasts. She had a feeling that her blush was firmly imbedded under her golden skin, and when he finally worked on her thighs and finished, she sighed in relief.

She opened her eyes and was surprised to see him looking down at her with a savage intensity. Sweat was beaded across his brow and his hands were clenched into fists. Ilisa grabbed the edges of the white sheet and wrapped them around her, covering her body.

"You need to drink water, and I need a shower. I will be back and then you can go in to rinse off the oil." He stood abruptly and walked into the lav without a backward glance. He was moving stiffly which she thought was a little funny considering that she was the one who had just gotten a massage.

Wrapped and trailing the sheet, she got herself some water and then drank more. She knew the effect of a hard massage and it was not something she wanted to experience on a shuttle.

On her third cup of water, Razer reappeared. "I will get you a fresh suit."

Her bodysuit was in his hand, which was a little peculiar as she remembered laying it on the edge of the bunk. "Thank you."

His braids were back to swinging freely and it reminded her. "Is there a hairbrush on board?"

"I will check. There was an amenities kit sent for you. I will bring it out after you are refreshed and changed."

She knew a dismissal when she heard one. He handed her a new suit and she headed into the lav, as ordered.

She struggled with the sonic, trying to part her hair with her fingers. Giving up, she tugged on the new suit and folded the sheet. Her body was clean, but her thoughts were heated and centred around the man in the next room. She wished that there was a cold setting for the sonic.

Taking a deep breath, she exited the lav. "I am sorry I was such a sissy about the massage. Thank you, I feel much better."

He inclined his head formally. "You are welcome. As you gain strength, you will require less of them."

She blinked. "You are going to do that again?"

"It is as difficult for me as for you. But as your partner, getting you fit and mobile is my duty and privilege." He grinned. The tension in his face

seemed to have melted away.

"Then I will do my best. What is the assignment for the rest of today?"

"Eat. Rest. Read some of the documents that have been provided for you. And I found a hairbrush."

The hairbrush news was enough to make her squeal in delight and clap her hands. He held it out to her and when she lunged for it, he pulled it back, forcing her into him from breast to knees.

The kiss that he gave her was searing, heated, exploring and brief. When she pulled away, she realized that it was only her own curiosity that kept her there.

In her hand was the hairbrush and on Razer's face was a satisfied grin. "You are welcome."

Flustered, she sat on the bunk, segmented her hair into chunks and got to work. Razer looked over at her and then moved to the captain's chair and took out a data pad while he propped his feet on the console. She watched every move he made with a pathetic sort of fascination.

Her hair fought her, but eventually she smoothed the strands down into a shiny curtain. The kiss replayed itself in her mind endlessly. She tucked her hair behind her ears and went to examine the care packaged that had been left.

A data pad was sitting there, as was a toothbrush and a variety of toiletries that were in

the open box. She chortled with happiness when she found some combs and she worked her hair into a relatively neat assembly within seconds.

With her hair up and out of the way, she heated a few food packs, sat at the table with a glass of water and started reading the Sector Guard manual.

Every now and then Ilsa would look up to find Razer watching her, but she quickly broke eye contact while returning to her data pad, reliving the kiss in her mind, over and over.

CHAPTER FIVE

“I need to watch you in action.” Razer stood in front of her.

Ilsa enjoyed looking slowly up his body until she met his gaze. “I beg your pardon?”

“We have the reports, but I need to take the recordings that will help you get an optimised uniform. We have two more days on the shuttle and anything we can do now will mean more time for training when we land.”

She was bored. “Sure. Why not? What do you want me to take over?”

His brow furrowed.

She helped him out. “Why not the small repair crawler in that cupboard over there?”

“How do you know about it?” He bent over and released the panel to allow the small bot into the main cabin.

“I did a recon when we arrived. Sorry, force of habit.” She shrugged. “Do you want me to do it right now?”

"The sensors in your bodysuit are on, so no time like the present."

It was all the encouragement she needed. She left her body sitting in the chair and entered the bot. She whirled the arms, lifted off the tracks to elevate the camera and moved forward, back, twirled the limbs and picked up pieces of lint from the floor.

"Can you hear me, Ilsa?"

She nodded the camera.

"Would it be possible for you to disarm me?"

She assessed using the screens. She could blast one of the blades, but the recharge time would prohibit a second strike. He had freakishly fast reflexes. She would be better off bringing him to the ground and striking then.

Knees, groin, ankles, all were valuable strike points. She nodded the camera. With his gaze watching her aim, she used the targeting beam at his knees, groin and then this throat. "Good. Now back into your body."

The first thing she felt was the ice of a blade across the skin of her neck. She didn't need to ask what he was doing. He was pointing out how vulnerable she was when she used her talent. "Razer, could you please remove your knife from my throat?"

"Have I made my point?"

"That I am vulnerable when I use my talent,

yes. That I have just taken control of your suit and I am awake and doing it, no." She couldn't believe it, she could feel the sensors in his suit as she pulled his arm away from her throat, aiming the knife at his own thigh.

Ilsa backed away from him now that she was free. There wasn't a lot of space in the shuttle, but she got the navigator's chair between them, her butt parked on the console. Then and only then did she released him.

His knife returned to its sheath in seconds, but he didn't get angry. Instead, he leaned against the bulkhead and gave her a thoughtful look. "Is that the first time you have done that while waking?"

She shrugged. She had manipulated electronics before, but never considered it the same part of her talent as the control over larger objects. "No. I just didn't register that it was what I was doing when I manipulated that tech."

"Ah, so it was my bodysuit that you were controlling, not my body."

"Exactly. Your suit is rife with monitors and body armour. It is easy for me to put myself into the wiring and work from there."

"So, you can control tech of any variety?"

"Yes, but the mobile kind is most useful. Can I come out from behind the chair now?"

"If you think it is safe, feel free." The challenge in his voice was implicit.

She squinted at him and assessed his posture. It was tense but casual. She cautiously came out from behind the chair and made her way back into the main cabin, passing him slowly. She folded out the bunk and sat down. "What would you suggest to keep myself safe?"

"Have you ever meditated?"

"No."

He helped her position her limbs in a comfortable kneeling pose and had her take over the crawler and return. "Hey! I stayed up."

"There are a number of postures that will allow you to remain upright while you are gone. Let's run through a few more, including a standing posture against a wall."

That was easier than she had ever imagined. Her legs locked her in place while her back was flat to the wall, the angle of her feet on the ground provided the support to hold her. If she crossed her arms, no one could tell she wasn't just leaning on the wall. She liked that one.

Her muscles were trembling with strain by the time she had mastered five safe positions.

"Time for dinner. You select the meal and heat it today. I am a strong proponent of equality in partnerships." His grin showed exceptionally white teeth.

Shaking and fumbling, she got the food heated and out for the meal, poured two glasses of water.

He sat next to her and started to eat. Shrugging, she flipped on the data pad and kept reading the Sector Guard situation files.

Razer's talent had become obvious. He was sent in when there was need to knock out more than one hundred fighters at the same time. He had a neural disrupting blast that swept out in a wave and took everyone down as well as some buildings. He completely razed the battle site, hence his name. "So, you have another name?"

"I do. We do not use our natural names unless we are safe on a Guard base." He was eating more slowly today.

"Will I get a code name?"

"You will. I have selected one already that I believe is appropriate."

"Do tell."

"Tech. I believe it suits you." He was devouring his dessert with a relish that made her smile.

"Tech? Does it suit me?"

"It will baffle your enemies." He chuckled.

"I believe that. It baffles me." She looked down to find three quarters of her food gone. Her appetite was improving, she was almost keeping up with him. Ilsa organised the empty food packets and continued her meal. "Are you sure it is appropriate?"

"Positive."

They finished their meal and Ilsa called dibs on

the lav while Razer cleaned up. She was looking at her reflection when the shuttle rocked hard enough to slam her forehead into a mirror.

Dazed, she tried to leave the lav, but the door sealed her in. The shuttle rocked again, this time throwing her back into the shower, cracking the back of her skull. It was the last thing she knew.

* * * *

"What are you doing, Ather?" Razer's fury increased when he recognized the ship that was hauling them in.

"Is that any way to greet your clan leader, brother?" The face that appeared on the screen was familiar.

"You are interfering in Alliance business by pulling us in for a detour."

"Yes, I heard that you were assigned your mate by that Guard base you are so proud of. Really, why not fight for a nice Kozue girl in family tradition?" The hard pewter eyes of Ather Calon bored into him via the connection. "That little thing that they assigned to you has fainted."

Cursing, Razer shot to his feet and ran to the lav, forcing open the door. The sight of Ilsa on the floor wasn't nearly as frightening to him as the blood that was pooling under her skull. He lifted her in his arms, fighting the fury that filled him at

her limp weight.

"See, the feeble thing fainted."

"She cracked her skull, Ather, and I am holding you responsible for anything that happens to her."

The curse that ripped through the com wasn't satisfying. Razer was too busy trying to stop the flow of blood using the small med kit.

"I will have a doctor meet you in the docking bay." Ather didn't apologize, but his offer of medical assistance was meant as a peace making effort.

Razer could only staunch the bleeding and he was heartened by her strong pulse. In the two days that they had been together, he had begun to appreciate her strength of will and knew it would soon be matched by her physical body. If she survived getting to the training facility.

The doctor did indeed meet him at the shuttle door with a gurney that made Ilsa look like a broken doll thrown to the floor.

"She seems to have struck her head at least once, I think I detected an impact on the forehead as well, but with the blood loss there is not bruising yet." He briefed the doctor as they crossed the docking area, breathing deeply to control his anger at the sight of one of his nine brothers in the hall to the medical bay.

"The clan leader wants to see you, brother."

"I don't care."

"It is expected. Your little woman will be safe with the doctor, Ather has given orders to be notified as soon as she is awake. If you are with him, you will get the same message." Tellar smiled and started walking to the command deck.

Razer followed, noting that he now found the armour worn by the Kozue to be bulky and confining. Fixer's customized suits were far superior to that arrangement. With the imbedded metal and technology in it, he had taken a full blast to the body and come out in one piece.

Ather was surrounded by the command staff of the warship. "Brother. So nice to see you in person."

The room froze in shock when Razer lifted the clan leader out of his chair and punched him in the face. "Endanger my partner again and I won't be using my fist." The threat of using his psi talent made the room fall silent. Fights were expected amongst siblings, but using an invisible weapon was a horrifying prospect.

Ather rubbed his jaw as he sat up. "Well, I see you still have a strong right hook, brother."

Grudgingly, Razer leaned forward and extended his hand to help his brother up. Ather took it and just like that, they were siblings again with nothing between them but an error in judgement.

"I have a screen on in medical so we can keep

an eye on your woman. She is a little thing, isn't she?" Ather walked to the monitor station and focused the camera on Ilsa's face.

The doctor had wrapped her head, electrodes were monitoring her pulse.

"She is, but she has a strength of will that would astonish you. She is a fitting match for me." Razer watched the image of Ilsa's face and started to smile. Her eyes were moving rapidly behind their lids. "Ather, is there any missing equipment on the ship?"

His brother looked confused, and no wonder, it was an odd question. "Of course not."

A timid yeoman on one side of the deck raised his hand. "Clan leader? Nine repair bots just started moving on the hull."

"So?"

"Sir, there are no repairs scheduled near the command deck and this is where they are heading."

Nine? He whistled mentally. That was a new record for her if she had told him everything.

"Sir, two repair bots inside one of the bays are also on the move. The big ones."

Ather looked to Razer and the Guardsman knew that his brother was reading the grin that he was keeping off his face.

"Brother, do you know anything about this?"

"Yes, brother. I believe my partner thinks we

are under attack. I would recommend ordering your soldiers to stay out of her way, or the bots' way. Also, it wouldn't hurt to tell her that I am safe on the command deck and we are having a nice visit." Razer walked over to the bulkhead and leaned against it, waiting to see what his brother would do.

Ather was the best choice for clan leader. He was stable, dignified and believed in the Kozue way of life. It unfortunately also meant that he was dedicated to his dignity to a point of stupidity.

On the tiny screen, one of the large repair bots was lifting Ilsa and storing her inside its carapace.

Razer cocked his head to draw attention to Ilsa's empty bed.

Ather finally moved. "Staff and crew, do not fire on the repair bots heading to the command deck."

The order rang through the ship and then they just had to wait.

"What is her name?"

"Tech."

"Ah, you have not consummated your joining." Ather pointed this out with Kozue directness—if Razer had mated with Ilsa, he would have introduced her to family by her name, not her Guard name.

The surprise in the females on the ship had

Razer fighting a blush. His people were not exactly patient when it came to matters of the flesh. The women demanded a trial period in bed before they considered a permanent mating.

"She has been confined for a very long time, she needs to build up basic strength before anything of that nature can be attempted. As I said, her strength of will is amazing, she just needs to have her body match it."

Someone had brought up a schematic of the ship with crewmen in blue and the moving bots in red. They were almost here.

"How does she know where you are?"

Razer laughed. "Honestly, I have no idea. She doesn't understand her talent yet, it is why we are racing to the Guard base Udell." He was lying, he was drawn to her and was fairly sure that her draw to him was pulling her.

When the airlock alarms started going off and the hull repair bots waited for the cycle to complete, delighted laughter ran through him. The two large bots had rolled onto the command deck and everyone was silent.

Welding torches on the bots were sparking with the threat of use. Nine smaller welding bots tracked onto the deck, two aimed out at the crowd in the hall, the other seven to the staff inside the command centre. The bots held position while the case in the chest of the second large bay repair

machine opened to reveal Ilisa.

She moved slowly, dreamily out of the case. Razer took in her entire appearance, the circles under her deep brown eyes, fatigue and pain riding her hard. Specks of blood leaked through the bandage on her skull. Her gaze meeting his and the relief in her eyes made him feel ten feet tall and sent blood pulsing through his loins in a heavy beat.

Ilisa freed herself from the bot and walked slowly toward him. She reached up and whispered, "I found a safe place," an instant before she collapsed in his arms.

"Brother, how fast can you get us to Udell?" He lifted her high against his chest, her weakened pulse frightening him.

Ather looked at the slight woman in Razer's arms, "For my new sister, I can get you there in under two hours. Take her to sickbay, I will visit you there."

Nodding past the lump in his throat, Razer moved with deliberate swiftness back to sickbay. Through the jump, he held her hand and made sure that she knew she was safe. In his more honest moments, he admitted the contact was as much for him as for her.

CHAPTER SIX

Ilsa had dreamed of a ship full of Kozue, but she woke up with the feel of planetary gravity under her. Her head throbbed and she touched it gingerly.

"Don't move too much, Ilsa. You got quite the crack on the head. I am Heslin, your physician here at Udell base."

"I am at the base?"

"You are. The first Guardsman to be delivered by an entire Kozue warship."

Ilsa racked her brain to come up with a race that fit the doctor's body. The red velvet skin and navy blue hair combined with bright gold eyes. She drew a blank. "What are you, Helsin?"

His smile made his eyes and the flaring nose crinkle a little. "Yelth. We are a brother species to the Selna, but without the lascivious reputation."

"I hit my head."

"You did. The machines have repaired most of the scarring and ruptured vessels, but you should

still not bash your head into anything else for a while."

She lifted her arm, "I feel stronger."

"Kennan was concerned about your lack of muscle tone, so I used one of our new reinforcing technologies to increase your muscle mass. It will make you incredibly hungry, so if you grab one of those jumpsuits, I will take you to the commissary and you can start eating."

"Who is Kennan?" She was swinging her legs over the edge of the bed, her thoughts still fuzzy. She grabbed a suit off the stand next to her and forced her feet through the leg holes.

"Ah, you would know him as Razer."

Kennan. His name was Kennan. She smiled as she worked the suit on and fastened the closures. It was a nice name.

When Helsin offered her shoes, she beamed at him, wiggling her toes in the slippers. They walked together down the hall and she took in everything, using her senses to map everything they passed, including the equipment in each room. Little of it was mobile, so she disregarded it. The smells of food that were drifting toward her set her stomach rumbling. She perked up, speeded up and was soon following Helsin's lead through the line of men, making selections and ignoring the comments.

"You would think they had not seen a woman

before." She laughed self-depreciatingly as she sat across from Helsin.

"There are only a handful at this base. As the only Sector Guard Battle Base, Udell has a larger population and many more men than women Guardsmen."

Ilsa nodded and tucked into her selections, enjoying the flavours of fresh fruits and vegetables even though it had only been a few days since she was on Pahnnan.

The snarling of her belly slowed and she was able to taste her meal instead of just stuffing her face. "Where is Kennan?"

"He and his brother are catching up after their clan warship dropped you off."

What he had said before finally sank in to her mind. "There really was a Kozue warship? I thought I dreamed it."

If she hadn't dreamed that, then perhaps she hadn't dreamed Razer holding her hand and murmuring softly to her for hours. It was a nice thought.

She was going to ask where he was when he walked through the door, twice. One smiled at her and the other frowned. When they approached the table, she stood to hug the frowner. "Hello, Kennan. It is nice to see you again."

He looked surprised and his twin laughed. "I didn't believe you, but she did know."

Ilsa smiled up and Kennan and tried to regain her seat. He didn't let her go. "How did you know which one was me?"

"You were frowning. Your body was humming with upset that I was out of bed. Sort of like static." She grinned. "Angry static."

Having made his point to the men in the commissary, he released her, then looked down at her tray. "You ate all that?"

"Yes, and I will eat more. Just wait." She resumed her seat and kept ploughing on through the plates that suddenly didn't seem to empty.

Men were coming by to greet Kennan and his brother—who's name was Vornan—and each brought an offering of food to her while introducing themselves. Kennan watched them all with a narrowed silver gaze that Vornan found hilarious.

Ilsa ignored everything, greeted those that waited and kept eating. There were enough men turned to watch her that she suspected there was money riding on how much she could eat.

She didn't want to disappoint anyone, least of all herself. Her muscles were humming with energy, her body felt alive for the first time in a long time. Before she had been existing, now she wanted to *live*.

Kennan was watching her fork, and when she slowed, he stood up and took her hand in his own.

"Come on. You need to walk to settle some of that. Vornan can clear the table and join us later."

Vornan looked out over the expanse of the dishes and the grinning doctor and frowned. "This will take forever."

Kennan merely tucked Ilsa's hand around his arm and walked out of the commissary, ignoring the settling of bets behind Ilsa's back.

"They should have cut me in for a percentage of that."

"Of what?"

"The bets that they had on how much I could eat."

Kennan looked surprised, then he snorted. "Some of the men here have too much time on their hands."

"Are they all Guardsmen?"

"Most are support staff. You have to have a paranormal ability to be a Guardsman, but when we need to subdue multiple locations, they act as pilots and create a home base wherever we land."

They walked in silence for a few minutes. "You never mentioned a twin."

He chuckled. "The Kozue consider twins to be unlucky. When we both had psi talents manifest, it was discussed and we agreed to leave the warship. Far too much bad luck."

"Ah. What is his talent?"

"A bath of fire that heals what it touches."

"How does that work with the battle tactics of Udell?"

"Well, he is one hell of a medic, but he has the same battle training I do. With the armour in the suits, we are close to invincible on the battlefield. If pressed, he can also alter the flame to burn oxygen and suffocate his enemies, but he doesn't like doing it."

One moment they were in the hallways and the next, they were walking through a doorway into one of the most lush gardens that Ilsa had ever seen. "Wow. This is amazing."

"The avatar of Udell has a green thumb, this garden is his pet project." He led her down paths until she was hopelessly lost. There was no tech here to use to find her way out.

In the silent green of earth and sunlight, Kennan turned to her and took her in his arms. He leaned down to kiss her and she went up on her toes to meet him halfway. She breathed him in as they met, clung, caressed and separated. Ilsa pressed against him, seeking his warmth and the hard feel of his body against hers.

The clearing of a throat made her jump, but Kennan held her tightly against him as he turned to face the intruder. "Nich-Udell, I thought you had a meeting with Guardian."

"I did. It's over, now who is your charming companion and what are you doing in my

garden?"

Ilsa was turned by Kennan's arm around her waist. "I am Ilsa Kimoni, late of Pahnnan. Newest Guardsman in training."

"She is my...partner. We were just looking for a spot of privacy before Helsin comes looking for her or Vornan follows us."

"I am pleased you meet you, Ilsa. Kennan, Guardian is waiting for the debriefing and an explanation of your strange mode of arrival. I will take your partner and show her the rest of the facilities."

Ilsa knew an order when she heard one. Kennan frowned, nodded, kissed her cheek, whispered that he would see her later and stalked off.

"Pardon him, miss, he is a little intense." Nich-Udell came forward and bowed low over her hand, his granite-like body flexing easily.

"He is, but I sort of like it." The feel of his hand on hers was cool, but not the icy contact she had expected.

"Well, based on the gossip flying round the station, you have been to the commissary, let's go to the gym for your next part of the tour. Helsin has ordered you to attend regular workouts, so I will show you around the equipment and introduce you to some of the maintenance personnel."

"That sounds lovely. You are the world's avatar?"

"I am. Udell is a jungle planet, so getting permission to clear space for this base required offering an avatar. My people were once colonists on Udell, so I volunteered for the duty and privilege of a position as avatar." He smiled and tucked her hand in the crook of his arm. His bodysuit wasn't as heavily armoured as Kennan's, but with skin like his it wasn't necessary.

"Pahnnan does not have an avatar, what does it entail?" They talked together as they walked slowly through the plants and grass, re-entering the blue metal and stone halls of the base.

Ilsa smiled. For a few minutes, she had forgotten they were not in the wilds of Udell.

"An avatar allows the planet a body to use for negotiations with other races. The planets themselves are bound together on a sub-frequency, but to make themselves heard, they need a being to speak through. That is how I got the job, actually. Udell spoke with Gant, and through his avatar, Kale, he made the request known."

"That is fascinating. You handed your body over?"

"More or less, this is the exercise centre."

Their slow pace had taken them into a room that was about a third full. Machines lined one

wall, weights another and an open matted space in the centre made Ilisa think that wrestling was a common sport.

Quite a few heads turned to watch her as Nich helped her onto a cycling machine. He showed her how to set the speed, the duration and left her alone for a few minutes. He crossed the room and was speaking to a man straining in a weight machine. Long blond hair was in a tight braid exposing his pointed ears, but his pale skin showed well-defined muscle where his clothing didn't cover it.

She stopped staring and turned her concentration to the machine she was on. Her feet pedaled over and over, her thighs feeling the sting of activity.

Nich returned to her, "This is Fenn, he can be counted on to assist you if you need help." He had brought the blond man with him.

She was breathing a little heavily. "Hello, Fenn. Nich, how do you stop this thing?"

He chuckled and pressed a button that she took careful note of. She got off the cycle on wobbly legs and stood looking up at Fenn. "Nice to meet you." She extended her hand and he ignored it in favour of kissing her on the cheek.

"Pleased to meet you, lady. If I was not sure that Kennan was your mate, I would try to court you myself."

His sparkling eyes were sincerely flattering, but she held onto one word in his compliment.

"Mate? No one said anything about a mate." She could feel her eyes widening in surprise.

"And no one should have." Kennan's voice was a harsh growl as he entered her field of vision.

Fenn winced and turned to accept the impact of Kennan's body.

Ilsa was distracted by the fight in front of her, but she turned to Nich and said, "I was right, it is a wrestling mat."

The fistfight at close range was brutal, blood was flicking from the few blows that the combatants hit fist to face. Turning away from it, she asked Nich, "So, what does that machine over there do?"

He helped her into the frame and adjusted it for her height. She leaned forward and felt the resistance on her abdomen. She kept going, ignoring the grunts and huffing coming from the floor.

When sweat bloomed on her forehead, she switched to a machine that pressed a weight on her shoulders while she squatted and straightened. She was on her tenth one when she had had enough. Sighing, she released the machine and walked over to Kennan and Fenn. They were still fighting. "Stop it, Kennan."

He either didn't hear her or he ignored her. She

used the adrenaline from her workout to spike her talent and used Kennan's suit to freeze him and peel him off his opponent.

Fenn struck him before he realised that Kennan wasn't fighting back, but stopped when he noticed the unnatural position of the Kozue's body.

"Ilsa, dammit, let me go."

She gasped and fell to her knees, but kept his suit moving backward in a crawl. Her head pounded, but she waited until Fenn was upright before letting Kennan go.

A wet feeling on her face had her touching her nose and she wasn't surprised to come away with blood. It had been that kind of day. "Oh, bugger. Nich, which way is the medical office?"

Kennan sighed and lifted her in his arms. "I will take you. You have overworked yourself."

"I am fine. It's just a little nosebleed. You have one, too, if you didn't notice." She crossed her arms and glared at him. He was a little fuzzy in her eyes and she was feeling a number of bruises that she didn't know she had.

"Doctor, come quickly." He laid her on the same medical bed she had just left less than three hours earlier.

"What the hell did you do to her?" Helsin was at her side immediately as she started to cough blood.

"I don't know."

Kennan was holding her hand and she smiled faintly as her thoughts faded into darkness. He was her mate. It sounded nice but it hurt like hell.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ilsa could hear them talking. She felt much better, but didn't want to open her eyes.

The doctor was saying, "So, did you actually research your mate before you claimed her?"

"No, why, what is wrong with her?"

Helsin sighed. "I checked the records, the Pahnnan are symbiotic maters. Based on your face you were fighting. Took a lot of body blows? A few shots to the face maybe?"

"How do you know?"

"Look at her marks. You got hit, she felt it. Her body is too weak to process or ignore anything but the sensation, so she was literally beaten as you were."

"Shit. Will she be all right?"

"Yes, she is healing remarkably quickly." Helsin was fooling with something on the other side of the room.

She struggled and sat up. "Of course I am. My species would have died out long ago if we stayed

wounded. As it stands, this isn't completely unexpected."

"But we haven't..." Kennan had a run of colour under his skin.

"Soul mates are soul mates, Kennan. No matter what you think, I am stuck with you. Whether we have sex or not." Saying it out loud shocked both of them.

Helsin was stifling laughter as he crossed over to her with a hypospray. A shot to her neck made her lips tingle and she grinned when Kennan touched his own mouth. "At least I didn't hit myself in the face to prove the point."

"Kennan, please carry her to her quarters. She needs rest and she can meet Guardian tomorrow. I will let him know the situation." Helsin smiled and waved them out.

Kennan lifted her again and she couldn't help but point out, "I have never been a situation before. A problem, certainly, a pain in the ass, often, but never a situation."

He lifted her so that he could kiss her forehead. "I vote for pain in the ass, but I don't know if you would jab yourself with a pin to prove a point."

"Not after today. I am satisfied with my own muscles burning, without worrying about yours." She sighed and snuggled against him, waving hello to a few men in the hall who were stopping to stare.

"All of the Guardsmen are arranged in dorms around a central hub. We share our hub with Helsin, Fenn, Vornan and Tohw. Each set of rooms has an adjoining room for the mate that will eventually join us."

"What about Nich?"

"He lives off base. The wilds of Udell are his home. Here we are." He stopped in front of an open doorway that led to a common room with ranks of doors lining the walls.

"This is your room. Press your hand to the plate." Kennan held her down so she could reach the plate and the door slid open soundlessly at her touch.

Created in soothing greens and creams, the bedding and pillows were calling to her.

"There is an entertainment screen as well as a data unit and in-house communications terminal." He lay her carefully on the bed and smoothed her hair from her bruised face. "Call me if you need anything."

"How?"

"Poke yourself in the eye?" He laughed as she glared at him. "Kidding. The rooms are soundproof to the hub, but not between adjoining rooms. The lav is to your left, also adjoining, so if you hear noise, you may want to call out before you enter."

She blinked and nodded, watching him

disappear through the adjoining door. It was a relief to have him out of the room—she had been holding back tears of pain for too long.

She sniffled for a few minutes before pressing a pillow over her face to mute the sound. She let the sobs come.

* * * *

Kennan couldn't hear her tears, but he could feel them. An ache started in his soul that he couldn't source until he had the blinding realization that it was Ilsa. He started to turn toward her room to comfort her, but stopped himself. If she had wanted his comfort, she would have loosed her emotions in front of him.

She needed some time alone and despite his misgivings, he had to give it to her. He had removed her from her planet, endangered her life and forced her into a bonding without her consent. Even a Kozue woman would be upset by the rapid-fire turn of events.

The gentle Pahnman in the next room had held up remarkably.

* * * *

The entertainment centre had more than its fair share of adult entertainment, but Ilsa was not

surprised with the population having so few females that the men needed outlets. She watched some documentaries. One on the Kozue, the other on Udell.

The mating rituals of the Kozue were her main concern, and the rough and passionate connections that were made in an effort to find a compatible partner made her eyes widen. Who needed skin flicks, give her a documentary any day. Her body was a little flushed and she was hoping that Kennan wasn't going to sense it. Being aroused and unable to act on it made her uncomfortable enough to switch to the next documentary.

Udell was a world thick with vegetation and life. So thick, in fact, that the Sector Guard base was encapsulated in a large dome to filter the atmosphere to breathable levels. Nich was the first avatar that Udell had ever requested. When interviewed for the archives, Udell confessed that it was Gant's appreciation of the company that the Guard base provided that had driven him to ask for an avatar, and Nich was the best match for his environment.

After the informative vid, she got up, listened for activity in the lav and entered.

Inside was a large shower designed to look like a waterfall, a tub large enough for four and two privacy separators for personal bodily functions.

Sinks and mirrors were on one wall, and after she had attended to her personal needs, she splashed her face and looked in the mirror. The healing was working well, her face was only vaguely green around her eyes. The nosebleeds were over, her ribs were not so sore anymore and the stiffness in her left thigh had faded.

In the future, when Kennan picked a fight, she would put up her shields like her mother had instructed her. He could bear his own wounds. She just hadn't been expecting the bonding to go this quickly and had been caught unprepared.

With her mind relaxed and her body recovering, she left her room for the dubious social activity of the common room. It was occupied by one man who seemed fixated on the screen with a series of animated creatures cavorting on it in a playful, if slightly violent, manner.

He didn't look up when he spoke, "Hello, Ilsa. Are you feeling better?"

"Yes, much. Helsin is a very competent doctor. Were we introduced?"

He smiled, his silvery grey skin highlighting his kind eyes and softening the effect of the ridges of what seemed to be bone on his skull, "I am Martuas. Commander of this facility. Most call me Guardian."

He gestured for her to sit across from him. She

obliged, taking in the rank marking on his neckline and cuffs, and trying to pinpoint his planet of origin.

"So, how have you been adapting to the base?"

"Well, there have been a few surprises." She shrugged, leaning back a little while folding her hands on her abdomen.

"The symbiotic bonding. Yes, I was informed of that. It is why I decided to speak with you today. I was going to wait until tomorrow, but a situation has come up." He leaned forward and rested his arms on his knees, waves of his blue-black hair sliding over his shoulders.

She mimicked him. "What is it?"

"We have just gotten intelligence that a raider attack is about to be deployed on Armarant. I am sending a full team out into the field to assist the inhabitants."

"I haven't been cleared for duty yet, so what does that mean for me?"

"I am sending Razer. He has been locked into his room until I could speak to you and is awaiting you after we finish our conversation. Now, what I want to know is, if Razer is killed in action, will you survive it?"

Tears welled in her eyes at the thought. "Yes, but I won't take another mate in my lifetime. Is it likely?"

He snorted. "No, his talent makes him very

hard to get close to on the battlefield. Flame is going with him."

She sniffled. "I see. When?" Out of instinct, she sought Kennan's emotions with her own. He was angry and sexually frustrated. The last one made her smile weakly.

"As soon as he boards the ship. The battle team is assembling now."

"So, I have to say goodbye and he will be on his way?" She looked over at the door and felt the wave of frustration from Kennan.

"Yes. There will still be a few team members here, including the doctor, and they will assist your recovery." Martuas stood and held out his hand to her. "When I leave, that door will open and he will come out. He won't be happy."

"He is irritated, but nothing that will injure me. I will speak with you later about your horrible timing." She smiled graciously and allowed him to assist her to her feet.

"I look forward to it." He bowed and left the common room.

The moment that he disappeared around the corner, Kennan's door flew open. "You have no idea how much I want to break his arm right now."

Ilisa smiled and walked up to him, running her hand across his clenched jaw and tapping his skin. "Oh, I have a very good idea. Do you know how

long you will be gone?"

"Weeks." He lifted a hand to mimic hers. She sighed and leaned into the touch.

They spent a moment together, gazes locked and senses burning. Ilsa leaned up and pressed her lips to his throat, chin and finally his lips. Their kiss burned between them, Kennan's hands holding her so tightly against him that she could feel his arousal in every nerve of her body.

"Razer! We are waiting, stop kissing her and let's go." Vornan's voice broke into their heady contact, but they both ignored it.

Ilsa felt a flickering on her skin and she yelped in surprise to see acid green flames on her body, burning without pain. She shoved away from Kennan with a curse and fell onto the floor.

Vornan rushed over to grip her hand and kept her from rolling to put the flame out.

Kennan took her other side. "Why didn't you do this earlier?"

"I wanted to see if you or she would insist on it. The least I could do is make sure that my new sister is in good health before we leave. Hold still, Ilsa. You are being healed by the flames, they are simply the expression of the repair to your cells."

She hissed and twisted as her body tingled. It was over in seconds. Gasping, she tried to sit up and they eventually let her, "You could have warned me."

"Where would the fun have been in that? Kennan, back away from her and get your bag. We are going. Now."

Ilsa stood and waited for Kennan to return, then gave him a short kiss on the lips. "Take care, I want you back in one piece."

Shocking his twin, she went up on her toes and gave Vornan a peck on the cheek. "Thanks for the healing, do it again without warning and I will shave off your braids while you sleep."

She waited in the common room as they left, waving weakly until they were out of view and then she crumpled into a heap on the floor, keeping her shields up as Kennan's life force got farther and farther away.

Hands lifted her off the floor and she was pulled against a chest where she sobbed and wailed while wishing that it was Kennan she was leaning against.

"Sorry, it's just me, Tech." Fenn's voice was low and soothing, the musical tone of his words relaxing her.

"Fenn. Why are you here?"

"Guardian assigned me as your companion and trainer until Kennan gets back." He smiled at her. "The first thing we need to do is get you cleaned up, then next is to have dinner and give you the complete tour of the base."

"So you are planning to be with me the whole

time?"

"When I am not with you, Udell has volunteered Nich for the duty. He is looking forward to showing you the surrounding jungles once we can get you the appropriate safety gear." Fenn was still rubbing her back to relax her, but there was no sexual overtone.

She looked up into his sincere and exceedingly pretty face. "Shall we get started?"

"Excellent. First, we need to get your face washed and do something with your hair." He chortled and led her through the open door of Kennan's room and into the bathroom.

He wasn't kidding. He waited for her to wash her face and wrapped her hair into a smooth and even ponytail in less than a minute. "Now. Let's start your basic training."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Three weeks of exercise, sit-ups, conversing with a strange woman with rainbow hair named Fixer about her talent and its manifestations and Ilsa was going stir crazy.

She knew that Kennan was alive and well, he was frustrated and impatient, but he was physically fine. The men on base were polite and encouraging, and today was the day she was going to get out.

Yesterday, a shipment from Morganti arrived with her name on it. Inside were three new bodysuits, armoured and wired with tech, and a large silver cube. Ilsa's body hummed the moment it saw that cube. Fixer had mentioned the possibility of this manifestation of protection, but Ilsa hadn't really believed it could be done.

That morning, Helsin cleared her for a trip outside with Nich. Her body was finally strong enough to manage the life support systems. If the box worked like she thought it would, she

wouldn't need life support.

Whistling to herself, she pushed the cube down the hall, loving its tiny rollers. She met Nich at the outer airlock and grinned at him.

"How is that going to protect you?" Nich's eyes were intensely curious.

"If it works, something like this." She concentrated, leaving her eyes open as she sent her talent into the box. It unfolded along invisible seams and soon was wide open, like a compact walker without a front cage. "Now for the tricky part."

She stepped into the body shaped cavity in the metal and concentrated on sealing herself in. A breathing mask with a com system fastened over her mouth, goggles over her eyes and the remainder of the suit sealed tight so that she was comfortable but supported.

"Shall we go out for a walk?" Her voice came through clearly, and the grin on Nich's face let her know that she was impressive.

"By all means, lady, into the airlock with you."

He opened the seal and escorted her into the airlock. The pressure changed and she caught a glimpse of herself in the thick tempered glass of the outer door. She did look wonderful. Silvery and with intense curves the suit added an inch to her height and was very striking. Her first steps in the heat and thick air of Udell were tentative.

Nich said, "Run if you wish to. Nothing here will harm you while I am on duty."

She took a few stumbling steps before she moved confidently. It was weird both controlling and being alert at the same time, but Fenn had helped her focus her mind and body. He really was smarter than he looked.

The jungle folded in around her, but she kept the base in her focus. It was easy, it was the glowing beacon of technology on the whole darned planet. She picked up speed, the greenery blurring as she reached speeds that she had never even driven at, let alone run.

Her breather was working on a scrubber principle and she reminded herself to send a thank you note to Fixer. Walking back to the glowing spot of tech in the jungle that had to be Nich, she revelled in the freedom provided by the suit.

Nich was waiting for her, eating fruit off a nearby tree. "That is one helluva suit. Even Udell is impressed and he isn't easily impressed."

She twirled in a girlish manner. "Isn't it great? I finally feel like being a Guardsman isn't a horrible idea."

"Guardian hoped that you would get to this point and I know that Razer will be overjoyed when he returns."

She inclined her head, knowing that her features were not visible. The thought of Razer

made her smile and she did what she always did when she thought of him, she let the barrier down and reached out for him. "He's here."

Nich straightened, "What?"

"The ship is landing. It is in the upper atmosphere." She turned and looked up at the sky, her scanners finding the tiny speck that had her mate in it.

"They weren't supposed to be back yet. Good call." Nich smiled and held out his arm to direct her back to the base.

"Nice try, Nich, the base is that way." She turned her body and started an easy lope. The suit was soundless, moving and flexing with her like a silvery second skin. Nich was at her side, running along with her as they returned to the base. Ilsa aimed for the maintenance portal near the landing area, the shrouded tunnel was already extending in preparation for linking to the ship.

Nich and Ilsa waited in the airlock until the cycle completed, then he left her while she paced in the warehouse area.

When the first footfalls reached her sensors, she froze against the wall. Vornan passed her with only a short curious glance while eighteen of the other members of the battle squad went past her without a second glance. Razer came out of the tunnel with an exhausted look on his face, but he stopped to look at her for a long moment,

dawning pleasure in his eyes. "Ilsa?"

Unable to keep still a moment longer, she opened the suit and fell into Razer's arms. "I missed you."

He lifted her in his arms and their kiss remained unbroken as he wore her through the halls with her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck. She absently folded the suit back into a box and summoned it to follow them.

In his room, he peeled his own battle suit off before working on hers. She admired his body, the hard planes and the warm intensity of his muscles as he removed her new suit. When he used his mouth to test the textures of her flesh, she moaned as her body readied itself for him with embarrassing speed.

When Kennan finally helped her onto the bed, instead of the Kozue position of woman on her knees, he turned her to her back so he could watch her as they became partners in truth. Together they rocked and slid until pleasure rippled through every nerve and they waited until they could start all over again.

She was curled against his side, tracing the marks she had made with her nails. "How was Armarant?"

"The raiders were surprised, but it took us a week to flush them all out of the system. If I had

known that this was waiting for me, I would have razed them all and let the Alliance sort them out."

"And then you would have been arrested and we would not have been able to enjoy this moment." She dropped a kiss on his chest, then followed with her teeth.

"So, Tech. Do you feel up to accompanying me on the next mission?" He rolled her under him and nibbled his way down her neck.

"Just try and take off without me. That ship won't move." She laughed and used her hand to explore his length and girth before he used it most pleausurably once again.

Vornan's voice came to them as Kennan worked his way down her body. "Would you two close the damned door this time?"

Shocked, but giggling, Tech closed the door from the comfort of Razer's embrace. "Do you think he will let us forget that?"

Razer chuckled. "No."

Tech started laughing and as Razer continued his detailed caresses, she decided that a little embarrassment was well worth it. The laughter soon turned to moans and she was blinded by the joining of body, soul and soul mate.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Several folks have asked if I am continuing this series and the short answer is yes, I am. I love the Sector Guard, my superheroes in space.

This book features Udell, the battle base. Other bases are Morganti, the first base, Teklan the investigation base, and of course, Balen the newest base and current orbital home to Station 13.

Books that highlight these bases are, Freak Factor, Star Breaker, Dragon Summons and Tears of the Star. And of course, Station 13 from Extasy Books.

Thanks for tuning in.

Viola Grace

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

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

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

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

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

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