

Viola Grace

Sector Guard 10



PSYCHE'S CARESSES

Roha Excelter—code named Psyche—is on assignment on Marketh. She had a simple investigation planned until someone tried to kill her. Twice.

The simple problem turned out to be a conspiracy to keep volunteers imprisoned and the population in general, ignorant. Working with the Marketh council, she has to uncover the seedy details of the confinement and find a way to bring the prisoners back to dignity.

Once a third attempt on her life is made and she is saved by the same man for a second time...she begins to realize that Ruar might be a good candidate for the Sector Guard.

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**PSYCHE'S CARESS
SECTOR GUARD BOOK 10**

BY

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CHAPTER ONE

Roha Excelter was bored, her shuttle was silent and there was no ship within chatting range. This was her least favourite part of being one of the Sector Guard. The solitary travelling.

Being honest with herself, she had only gone on two assignments alone. Before this, her brother Rolland/Sovereign was her partner, but now he was engaged to the avatar of Balen and in line to be an avatar for the star, Saru. Roha was now on her own.

She hated being on her own.

A few checks of the chronometer showed her that she was an hour from the jump ship. Roha sighed and grabbed the cards that Haunt had taught her to play. Time for some Solitaire.

"This is the Sector Guard ship Archer requesting jump-ship access on the Eklin Norse." Roha was braiding her hair as she waited for the response.

"This is the Eklin Norse. Where have you been,

Psyche?" The pilot's voice was familiar.

"Alma? Is that you?" One of the few Terran pilots wired into a ship, Alma was always a fun conversationalist.

"'Tis. How is Kaylee?"

Beacons lit up on the outside of the ship, leading her to the bay she would put her shuttle in and the locking mechanism that would hold the Archer in place.

"Still wild as ever. She peeped in on my brother and his fiancée last week and found out what gravity can do to the disembodied."

The chuckle from the pilot came through the speakers of the com unit. "I had heard that he was going after an avatar. It seems the grapevine was right."

Terran euphemisms were par for the course in the Sector Guard, so the phrasing didn't confuse her, much. "He has caught her already. She just has to get used to her new powers and they might be able to consummate their union."

A whistled made her wince. "That new, huh?"

Roha buckled in and flipped toggles as she locked the Archer in place within the ship. Other small ships lined the interior of the Eklin Norse. "Yup. Alma, you look like you are running with a full belly."

"I am. You were the last straggler. Prepare for jump."

Claxons went off, lights flashed in the interior of the ship as the shifting light on the inside of the hull marked the approach to jump.

Roha slipped in her mouth guard. No sense biting her tongue during the jump.

The shuddering of the Eklin Norse gave her enough warning to close her eyes. Seeing both locations at the same time was not her favourite part of jumping. If she had been with someone else, she could have sedated herself for the jump, but having to pilot the ship immediately afterward meant she had to endure the pain.

The Sector Guard physicians were working on her problem—the agony caused during jumps—but they had yet to find a workable solution that would let her stay alert and aware.

Pain screamed through her mind and body as they shifted position in space. The relief when the jump was complete was so intense that the cessation of pain almost made her faint.

"Psyche? Are you still with us?"

Feeling rung out, she spit the mouth guard out. "Yeah."

"Good. I thought I lost you on that one."

"Was that longer than usual?" She scrubbed at her forehead.

"You caught that, did you? Yeah. We popped out into a bit of a solar event. Had to recalculate and adjust for it." Alma's cheerful tone didn't

make Roha feel much better.

"Wonderful. Do you need me out of here right away?" She was desperate to throw some cold water on her face.

"No, we can haul you to Marketh. You just recuperate and keep the idea that the Sector Guard is impervious to space travel going."

"Fine. I am going silent then. Call me when you need me." Struggling out of the buckles and straps, Roha headed for the lav. She splashed some water on her face, stripped off, set the shower to sonic and stepped in.

After she felt clean, she set the fans to blowing and the lamps to warm her. Her uniform was in a sad little heap but kept the warmth of her skin as she pulled it on. Her boots were Masuo, living organisms that could not be sold, only given. They hugged her comfortably as she pulled them up to just below her knee.

Her hair had been blown a little in the fans, but the white coronet that she had woven was still mostly in place. Her violet skin was a little paler than usual, but no one who hadn't seen her before would know it.

It was her eyes that echoed her pain, the red irises tight and the pupils' small dots of black. She stared into the mirror, trying to work her thoughts into a more positive mood. As Psyche, her talent was to read souls and since it was a matter of

marriage that had brought her to Marketh, a positive soul for herself would help matters tremendously.

"Come on, Roha. Concentrate. There are people who need your help." She slapped her cheeks lightly and bit her lips so they turned a darker purple.

She tidied her suit's placement so that the markings smoothed into straight lines. It wouldn't do to be scruffy when she arrived. She checked her away bag to make sure she had everything she needed, including a change of uniform and her formal uniform with the skirt attached to it.

They would be housing and feeding her while she was on this assignment. It was scheduled to last weeks.

Roha stretched and prepared to resume the helm control. "Where are we, Alma?"

"Feeling better?"

"Much. ETA?"

"About an hour. I can release you here if you like."

Roha looked around her and noted that over half of the ships inside the jump-ship hull were gone. "I think I need the time to clear my head. I will catch you next time."

"Next time you are going to have to come out of your shuttle for a proper visit." Alma had a nonsense tone in her voice.

"If there is no problem that needs my immediate attention, I would be happy to. Now, based on the amount of ships in here, you need to get back to the jump point for your next port of call. See you next time, Alma."

The chuckle was rich even coming through the com unit. "Take care, Psyche. Enjoy healing the hearts of those who need you."

"Have fun piloting those who cannot take themselves." She resumed the controls and flipped the switches to prepare the engines.

"Shuttle released. Have a good flight, Psyche."

With her hands on the controls, she could only give off a parting shot, "I wish," before steering out into the blackness of space.

CHAPTER TWO

“**T**his is the Sector Guard shuttle Archer requesting landing clearance from Marketh ground control.”

“This is ground control in Asher Prime. Please identify.”

“Sector Guard Psyche out of Station 13. Relationship specialist.” Asher Prime was the capital city. At least she had the right planet.

“Please follow the beacon and you will be decontaminated before you can land.”

That was new. “Confirmed. Setting course on the beacon.”

The shuttle rocked under her, shaking as the entry into the atmosphere rattled the hull. The beacon was leading her to a mountain range, so she slowed down to minimum speed while she looked for her destination.

Laughter shook her as she took in the structure ahead of her. A suspended platform with treads

for moving a shuttle forward and an arc that had a series of pipes leading to it. She circled it twice before she could figure out which way to enter.

"Please land your shuttle on the platform and remain inside." The voice was different from that of Asher Prime's ground control.

"Affirmative." As delicately as she could, she landed the Archer. A sluice of liquid immediately began on the nose of the shuttle and the arch passed her field of view as it moved over the hull.

"Exterior decontamination commencing."

"No kidding." She listened to the liquid running over the shuttle and jetted up into the undercarriage.

"Interior decontamination commencing." A hissing noise ran through the vents and a grey mist filled the cabin.

"What the hell?" She inhaled some of the mist and coughed. It wasn't going to kill her, but it had the harsh tang of an antiseptic. *Who gave them the codes for the intake vents?*

"Interior decontamination complete." The misty air swirled and evacuated the shuttle.

She was wheezing when the voice from Asher Prime came back on the com. "Follow the next beacon at three thousand feet and you will be met by a guard to insure your safety."

She coughed a few times. "Fine. Proceeding now." The decontamination mist was making her

a little lightheaded, even after it cleared. Her biology must be a little different from the standard recipients of that treatment.

This was ridiculous. She set the controls to follow the beacon at three thousand feet and went to the emergency supplies. She hooked the mask on and felt immediate relief as her preferred atmosphere blend came into her lungs.

Her ship rocked as something struck the side and she staggered back to the helm as quickly as she could.

"You are not authorized to enter this airspace. Please drop to fifteen hundred feet and wait for additional escort."

She pulled the breather from her face. "I am authorized to be in this airspace, I am a representative of the Sector Guard and you have just assaulted my ship."

A small craft was on her left side bearing the marks of impact with her ship.

"I don't have any record of your clearance. Where are you going?"

"Asher Prime. Please contact the ground control for the authorization specs." She snapped the mask back into place.

He was quiet for a moment and then he said, "Land. Land now! The Asher Prime signal was hijacked and your shuttle has been coated with acid. I don't even want to know if they got

something into your ship.”

She did a hull integrity check as she started to lose altitude. He was right. She had been coated with acid. A quick check of the interior of the shuttle showed more than a tolerable share of toxins. If she had been a Terran or Azon, she would have been dead. Her placement of the breather had probably saved her life.

She dropped out of the sky as fast as she could. Alarms sounded on every instrument she had and it was a controlled crash that skidded her hundreds of yards before her ship rocked to a halt.

The Archer was dead.

Moving as quickly as she could, she stuffed all of her equipment into a duffel, grabbed her away bag and blew the emergency exit. She took a few steps back, then sprinted through the hole, tumbled on the ground and ran as far away from the hulk of her ship as she could.

The small craft was landing nearby and she approached slowly, her hands out at her sides, carrying her bags.

A man exited the ship and held an object toward her. “Kneel.”

She knelt and waited as he approached. The object he was holding was a palm scanner. “You have ingested quite a bit of toxic gasses. I am amazed you are still up and functioning. Nice landing, by the way.”

She kept her mask on and watched him as he reached for her wrist. She jerked her arm back.

"Don't worry. This is just to flush your system. It's saline based and shouldn't have too great an effect on you, even with your physiology."

"You're a doctor?" She kept her arm against her chest and glared at him.

"What?"

Oh, her mask. Right. She pulled it away from her face and his eyes widened in surprise. "You're a doctor?"

"I have some medical training. Enough to tell that you aren't from around here." His golden eyes in his smoke grey face were smiling.

She extended her arm and waited for the rush of his emotions and thoughts. She was surprised when his warm, strong fingers made contact. He was calm, relaxed and concerned for her. With this man, instead of drowning in the ocean of emotion, she was standing on the shore and wanted to wade further in.

His black hair waved off his forehead and a lock slipped across his face, making him blow it upward as he tried to clear it. He was holding her wrist with one hand and administering a hypo to her skin with the other.

"What is your name?" Her voice was husky and soft to her own ears. She cleared her throat self-consciously.

"Ruar. Ruar Asher." His lips were curved in a charming smile as he looked into her eyes.

"I am Sector Guardsman Psyche out of Station 13."

"We have been expecting you."

"Why did you strike my shuttle?"

"To get your attention, there wasn't anyone at the helm." He released her hand slowly and sat back on his haunches.

"I was getting the emergency breather. Why would anyone hijack the signal? I am a counsellor and matchmaker for pities sake." She groaned as she felt the impact of the saline. It burned slightly in her bloodstream, but the greater danger was what was going on in her stomach. "Pardon me."

She jumped to her feet and staggered a few steps, vomiting a solution of saline and the toxin it had removed.

She moved away from her ejection site and sat heavily on the ground, mopping sweat from her brow. A hand with a water bottle appeared in front of her and she knew that her skin was darkening with embarrassment.

Ruar chuckled. "That is effective. Does it work with all toxins?"

"Only if I get fluid before it gathers in my lungs and solidifies. Then I cough it out." She poured water into her hand and rinsed her mouth out,

spitting the remains of the saline out. She had already puked in front of him, no sense standing on false modesty.

"Nice. Are you feeling better?"

"Much. Can you take me where I am supposed to be, as well as get me to a long-range communications terminal?"

"I can and I will. I will store your gear in the ship. Come along when you are up to it." Ruar stood and left her to collect herself while he stowed her clothing and equipment.

Psyche sat admiring the flex of his buttocks as he placed the duffels in the back of the ship. He was wonderfully put together and her response to him made her blush again. She knew that he was her match—she had never found a better one. What he thought of her was carefully concealed behind those golden eyes.

Feeling much steadier, she crossed to his ship and took up the navigator position, the water bottle still clutched in her hand.

"Let's get you to Asher Prime. They are very nervous about the reception you received." He sealed the hull and lifted off smoothly.

"Why would someone want me dead?"

"You have been asked to attend Marketh, because we have a problem." He steered the ship calmly, keeping low to the ground as they flew.

"It has something to do with marriages."

"It has more to do with suicides after marriage. To find out why, you will have to learn about the war with Olsim."

"Your neighbouring planet." It was in the same system, but there had been enough of a cultural divide to cause hostilities.

"We were at war for generations and when the smoke cleared, the women of Marketh were only five percent fertile. Radiation and toxins in the air and soil caused miscarriages and soon our population had fallen to dangerous levels. The after effect of the war killed more than the war itself."

Psyche didn't say anything. She had heard about this.

"Five years ago, the Alliance demanded that Olsim provide women to Marketh. Since we are of the same base species, all signs were favourable to rebuild our people."

"And then?"

"There have only been nine children born out of four hundred unions and the women have begun to kill themselves."

Psyche shuddered. It was good to know what kinds of minds she was facing. "What are the authorities willing to do?"

"Whatever it takes to start population growth and keep the women whole and healthy."

"What about happy?"

"It is definitely preferable." His tone was wry.

She snorted and thought about the connotations. "How many women have killed themselves?"

"Thirty-four."

"Did any of them have children?"

He looked at her with a new respect in his eyes. "Nine of them."

They were over a city now. Psyche noticed that the majority of the city was dark. They approached a rooftop and set down with the same light touch that he had used taking off.

A row of guards stood at attention as she left the ship, snapping to attention as she turned to wait for Ruar.

With a grin and a graceful leap, he left the ship and went to the storage bins. Pulling her duffels free, he offered her his arm.

As they walked past the guards, they snapped salutes one by one.

It was surreal to Psyche to go from fresh air to dim hallways, but with her arm linked with Ruar's, it was too easy to give up control of her path.

Through a set of double doors, a council chamber suddenly bloomed in front of them. Worried and angry faces turned to them as they entered.

"Ruar! Thank the heavens you found her." A

man, who had the same brilliant gold eyes as her escort, stood at the head of the central table.

"I did indeed, Father, but she needs to communicate with her station. Her shuttlecraft was destroyed and she was almost killed."

An angry mutter ran through the crowd with the word *Olsim* whispered often.

"How did she survive?"

Psyche didn't see who spoke, but a dark mist of hostility was unmistakable to one of her talents. "I am a freak, even by my own standards."

That quieted them. Flickers of fear were now in the room. It wasn't great, but it was a start.

"I am Psyche of the Sector Guard. I am a councillor and relationship specialist. I was asked to come here to assist you with a problem you are having with the newly imported women. I am here and someone has tried to kill me. There are two reasons possible for that."

She released Ruar's arm and went to stand in the centre of the arc made by the tables. "The first reason could be that you hate off-worlders that much. The thought of a stranger on your soil makes you sick to your stomach."

The men looked at each other as she sent her gaze over them.

"The second is that there is a person or persons amongst you that profits by having the population shrink and the planet left barren. Or, they profit

by the death of the women of Olsim."

The dark flicker of hate was coming from her left side. It was one of three men in that corner.

"I hate to jump in here, but circumstances lead me to want to start and get the hell away from this nuthouse. I need to know what you are willing to do to make these women happy here on Marketh."

Ruar's father was smiling. "What do you want?"

"I need to speak to each husband of the women who killed themselves, including the men who had children by their Olsim wife." She paced, it was a bad habit, but she couldn't stop it. "I need to speak to all the women who were brought here, no more than thirty per day, and priority given to anyone who requests an interview. Each woman *must* be accompanied by their husband."

The men looked at each other and murmured wildly. "Psyche, I don't think you understand the situation. I am Ured Asher by the way."

"What am I missing here?"

"The women aren't tied to one man. They are being passed along from man to man until they get pregnant."

To say that those words made her sick was a gross understatement. Psyche reeled at the stress that those women must have been under. "Mighty stars and seventeen hells." She really wanted to sit

to absorb that, but she had to ask, "Is that a tradition here?"

Ured shook his head. "No. It was a necessity."

"Have the Olsim refused to send any more women?"

He grimaced. "After the suicides, yes."

It suddenly came clear, "So that is why you sent for me."

"If you confirm to the Olsim that we are able to care for their women, they will resume the requesting of volunteers."

"What kind of mating arrangements do the Olsim have?"

Ruar spoke up from behind her. "Monogamy, polygamy, polyandry, but all procreation is within an enclosed bond."

She was back to pacing in front of a room of warriors who were looking angry and sheepish. "So, you have taken young women from a bonded society, forced them to take on serial partners without protection or the option of choice. And if they get pregnant, what then?"

"The father is determined and the woman moves in with him."

"So, they don't even have property."

The men were looking alarmed.

"I have to ask, are *all* the men of Marketh idiots?"

CHAPTER THREE

The riot that her words began had Ured calling for a recess. They would reconvene the next day.

Ruar couldn't stop laughing and that ticked Psyche off almost as much as the situation for those poor women.

"Come, Psyche, you look like you could use a meal and some rest." Ured came around the table and gestured for Ruar to follow them. He offered her his arm and she took it.

"You and your son have such nice manners, why do you allow the men of Marketh to use these women so badly?"

"I will discuss it when we have some privacy. My wife has a meal and a room for you."

"I am going to stay with you?"

"Well, given your arrival, I don't expect less hostility to break out when you start creating edicts. You need to be safe and I am assigning Ruar as your bodyguard."

She looked back over her shoulder to see the man in question wink at her. She suddenly felt hot and cold all over and it was good. It was also unusual. Perhaps this was similar to what her brother felt when he looked at his woman.

It was too bad that she was a member of the Sector Guard and he was the member of an endangered species. It would never work.

Guards snapped to attention as they approached and escorted them down the street to a lovely house that bore a woman's touch. Flowers and herbs bloomed in boxes near the windows and Psyche saw a garden through slats in the gate.

"Ured, don't let the flies get in. Close the door." The voice was admonishing, but had a tone of humour in it that Psyche found charming.

She kept her smile on when the small woman rounded the corner and her scarred face grinned up at her.

"Aren't you lovely? I am so happy that you made it here in one piece."

"As am I, madam. Thank you for your hospitality." Psyche bowed low from the waist and took the woman's hands in her own, pressing her forehead to the woman's hands.

Tears pricked her eyes as the goodness and stern core of this woman came through the contact. She loved with her whole heart and she lived with it, too.

"It is nothing. We are just happy to have you here." The woman reached up to put an arm around her shoulders and steered her toward the kitchen. "My name is Hallo, by the way."

"I am Psyche."

The woman smiled, the vertical lines slashing her face, pulling at her lips. "That isn't your real name."

Psyche grinned back. "Hallo isn't yours either."

Her host hooted in amusement. "You are a bright one. Come and sit while I get some dinner on the table."

Psyche sat at one side of the table, watching Ured setting out the plates, cups and cutlery. He brought her a bowl with warm water and a towel to wash her hands. "Hallo, where are you from?"

Her pale-skinned hostess grinned. "You noticed that, too? I am from Tyvol. If you are wondering, my father marked my face when I decided to marry Ured."

"It marks you as a free woman." Psyche had seen it before, when she was a child.

Ured and Hallo stopped and stared at her. Hallo responded, "You are one of the first not to look at me with pity. I wear these marks with pride. Each day it shows Ured how much I value him."

Tyvol were one of the travelling races. They wandered from planet to planet and if they found

one of their own left behind by another ship, they were under obligation to take them. Hallo's marks gave her freedom from reclamation by a new enclave.

Ured went to his wife and kissed the side of her face marked by the deepest gouges. It was touching.

"All right you two, break it up, we have company." Ruar sat next to her and took his turn washing his hands.

"You are lucky to have parents so much in love." She said it quietly so that Ured and Hallo could share their moment.

"Aren't your parents?"

"No. I don't remember much of them. They died when I was young and my brother raised me."

"I see. That must have been difficult."

"When you add our talents to the mix, it was hair raising." She chuckled at a few memories that flickered through her mind.

When she was a teen, her urge to touch to understand had gotten her into trouble and Rolland had to use his voice to stop the slavers that she had been getting close to. She had wanted to understand why they profited from the pain of other sentient beings and she had been caught. He had come to her rescue, like he always did.

Those times were over and it was bittersweet.

She was happy he had found a woman to spend his life with, but saddened that his life as a stellar avatar would take him far beyond her own lifespan.

"I can only imagine. I am an only child." His grin made his parents exchange a telling glance.

Hallo put the salad on the table while Ured pulled a roast from the oven. "After you, more children scared the hell out of me."

He smiled at his mother and she kissed him on the cheek. The affection in the room was almost palpable and Psyche found it very refreshing.

The meat and some vegetables made it to the table. "You are the guest, Psyche, please, go first."

She served herself and it was the signal for everyone to dive in. A few slivers of meat, some vegetables and a large helping of salad made up her meal. The freshness of all the ingredients made her smile.

"The food is wonderful, Hallo."

The hostess blushed in response. "How did the council meeting go?"

Ruar laughed. "Psyche asked if all Marketh men were idiots. After that, it was adjourned for the day."

Ured looked at his wife and nodded in confirmation.

Hallo was covering her mouth and laughing. "You didn't."

"I most certainly did." She took a mouthful of greens and ate gratefully. She loved living on Station 13, but there was just something about freshly grown vegetables.

"How can women grow ties to a planet, to their children, if they have no choice in the father of those children? I can understand the desperation that follows restriction of sexual outlets..."

Ruar grinned and gave her a look out of the corner of his eyes. "Oh, you can, can you?"

Her skin darkened and she continued. "Yes, I can. Deprivation causes all kinds of problems. But they have had women here for five years and no settling has occurred. Are the women seasonal or stimulated ovulators?" Everyone at the table looked blankly at her. "You don't know?"

"There were not enough gynaecologists left after the war. We didn't need them and so the doctors we have are more general practitioners and bone specialists."

She buried her face in her hands, scrubbed her face and then continued eating. "That explains a lot."

"We are the same species, there couldn't be a difference in ovulation, could there?" Ured suddenly looked very tired.

"After a few generations in a different environment, there definitely could. They could also select the fathers of their children. We won't

know until we speak to them and examine them. Of course, I will also want to contact the Olsim."

"Why?"

"Because I have questions about these women and I need them answered by the source."

Hallo nodded her agreement. "It makes sense. Even the Tyval have doctors that specialize in women. Here, we don't even have dedicated midwives anymore."

"I am definitely going to need to contact the Sector Guard. I don't think I can do this on my own."

Ruar turned and looked directly at her, "You don't think you can manage this?"

"I could manage fifty, easily, not four hundred. How many men are involved in this?"

"Nine thousand."

Psyche almost lost her dinner. "When can I make that call?"

"After dessert." Hallo stood and removed the plates from the table, returning with bowls of fruit sprinkled with a sweetener and a pitcher of cream.

Psyche ate more than she should, but her belly was happy and settled when she finished.

Ured led her to his study with Ruar helping his mother with the dishes.

The sight of a com unit was welcome and a relief. She sat down and once a link was established, punched in the code that would

connect her to Relay.

"Morganti Station, Relay speaking."

Psyche smiled. Relay wasn't speaking, it was her voice as filtered through the connection of her mind to the communication network. "This is Psyche on assignment on Marketh, requesting assistance."

"Hello, Psyche, how are you?"

"Well, upon landing I was poisoned and the Archer was destroyed."

"Are you all right?"

"I received immediate attention and purged the toxins."

"You are requesting an extraction?"

"No. Backup. I need Commander and Pilot. There is a situation here and I really think that they can be of assistance."

There was a pause while Relay processed the request.

"They will be there in two days. Do you require anything else?"

"No. I will call for extraction once the situation here is under control. That may take some doing."

"Do what you can, but don't hesitate to call if you need anything."

"Thanks, Relay. Oh. Have Pilot aim directly for the origin of this signal. There is a false communication station and it is what got me into trouble."

"The warning has been relayed. Pilot looks forward to seeing you again."

"Excellent. Psyche out." She disconnected the link and sighed in relief. Help was on the way and it was bringing the best matchmaker of the age.

Thank the stars.

CHAPTER FOUR

Synching up with a new planet was hard, but waking up to smell breakfast cooking made it easier. Psyche rolled out of bed, slipped on her uniform and boots and walked into the bathroom.

The door was wide open and she wasn't expecting to see Ruar leaning over the sink, shaving.

"Oh. Pardon me. I didn't mean to interrupt you." She kept watching though. His highly muscled torso was fun to watch, the line of hair arrowing down his chest disappeared into his matte black trousers in an invitation she fought accepting. What a way to wake up.

"Not a problem. I am almost done. The bathing room will be yours in a moment. Did you sleep well?" He kept up his chatter while he finished shaving and rinsed the soap away.

"I did. It was nice sleeping in a bed with sheets for a change."

"Where do you usually sleep?"

"Bunks in shuttles. You can sleep on them, but you don't really enjoy it." She leaned against the door, her early-morning fatigue unmistakable. She suspected her yawn gave it away.

"Still sleepy?"

"Yeah, I don't suppose you drink stimulants with breakfast?" She knew there was a hopeful tone in her voice.

"No, just fruit juices and herbal teas. You freshen up and I will have a talk with my mother."

She yawned again, nodding. "What time is it?"

"An hour past dawn. The council will reconvene in two hours." He was blotting at his face with a towel.

"Wonderful. They are not going to like what I have come up with. I will need to talk to you and your father before we go anywhere though." She slid past him without touching and closed the door in his face for privacy while she attended the call of nature and other morning ablutions.

Five minutes later, she emerged, ready for the day. Her hair was in a white curtain down her back, ripples from yesterday's braid still in place.

Her body didn't produce topical oils, so her hair stayed clean as long as she didn't drag it through her breakfast or a dust storm.

Thanks to Fixer, her suit always looked wonderful. It had filters inside it to stop any bodily scents from emerging, including

pheromones or sweat. It was like wearing a sonic shower. It cleaned her while she wore it, perfect for someone who spent a lot of time in space.

With her appearance in order, she tidied her bed and went downstairs for breakfast.

Ured and Hallo were seated, Ruar was loading a plate near the stove. "Here you are, Psyche."

Hallo smiled. "Did you sleep well?"

"Eventually. I spent most of the night with a data pad, trying to find ways out of this mess." She blinked at the plate that she was holding. "This should fortify me for the day."

"What did you come up with?" Ured seemed eager for anything she could offer.

Psyche held up a hand while she finished consuming her mouthful. "I will need to send another message this morning. I need Commander and Pilot to bring some specialized equipment."

Ruar smiled and sat with his own plate, "What do you have in mind?"

"Taking the choice from the men and giving it to the women."

"Wow. That will certainly be a bit of change." Hallo was sipping at her tea, smiling at the thought.

"Well, how were Marketh women treated before the war?"

"They had a freedom of choice, with limits regarding family and station."

"So, the class system is very much a concern?"

Ruar and Ured looked at each other. Ured answered, "I suppose. The army and the farmers are the largest of the surviving ranks."

"What about the council?"

Ruar shrugged. "They are all married to Marketh women for the most part, so they are not concerned with the plight of the Olsim women, beyond the obvious."

"How many Marketh women are left?"

"Nine hundred, they are all married to officers of the Marketh army."

"How about the farmers, civil servants, any one else?"

"They are not deemed worthy of having wives because they did not fight for the planet." Hallo's voice dripped with disdain for the authorities.

"Aw hells." Rubbing her forehead again, Psyche tried to fit that into her mind. "This is going to be harder than I thought and I thought it was going to be a nightmare."

"Eat. You will need your strength." Hallo slid a jar of jam down the table and gestured for her to use it.

"I am afraid that I will." She wished that she was kidding, but with the sombre faces of the Ashers at the table, she knew that she had a fight ahead of her and she wasn't equipped to win it on her own. As she finished her food and sipped at

her tea, she made a few requests that made Ured's eyes widen in surprise.

The council was calmer than she had left them, but they were still not happy. Ured had spoken to some of the armed forces on the way in, so Psyche was stalling for time.

She had her data pad in front of her and the table she had requested was situated in the centre of the room. The silence that fell was filled with fear and frustration. Psyche was irritated just being in the room.

Ured called the room to order. "We are here to find solutions to our problem, not to make new ones. Please, be calm and answer the questions that the Guardsman puts to you as honestly as you are able."

The murmur of discussion subsided when Psyche stood. "Gentlemen. I have been sent here for one purpose only. My skills and talents are suited to solving your problem."

She started to pace as she began a recap of the Olsim-Marketh war. "Your people were approaching genetic manipulation and the Olsim objected to dealing with creatures that were not as their creator made them. Is this correct?"

"Those idiots were blinded by their own prejudices." One of the men from the dark corner spoke.

She was waiting for one of them to speak—it allowed her to approach for a more detailed assessment. “So, when they offered you genetically pure women after the war, what did you do with them?”

“What they deserved.” The room at large was shocked by that statement.

“Women, none older than twenty-five, all of whom had grown up during the war, who volunteered to be here, have been treated worse than whores on a space station. How is that what they deserved?”

The grey of the man’s skin flushed with a bluish tinge while shock rippled through the room.

“Sorvel, you were put in charge of the women. What is going on? Can you tell us why there is no increase in breeding and a marked increase in suicide?” A man from the other end of the room with beautiful lavender eyes spoke.

“The women are all infertile, they are faulty.” Sorvel was spluttering.

Psyche held up her data pad. “Based on the scans that *your* medical personnel enacted when the women landed, that is an untruth. There is only one way that women who were forced to service that many men could be infertile. There is a chemical component.”

The room roared in disbelief. Sorvel tried to

shout down the crowd, but accusations were flying. Finally, he screamed, "There is no way to determine it!"

Ured nodded to someone behind her and Psyche turned to see a military man salute before leaving the council room.

Ured stood and the room fell silent. "At Psyche's direction, all of the women have been removed from the houses where they have been kept. Men who are willing to take on a monogamous relationship with one of the Olsim women have been asked to report and file a request, regardless of status. They are going to be interviewed so that these women will be able to have the partners that we were to have given them when they landed."

Psyche chimed in. "The women who are unwilling to consider a mating due to the abuse they have suffered will be given a location of their own on this world. The Olsim will not have them back, I asked."

"You have no right to make these decisions." Sorvel wasn't the only one who was up in arms.

"Actually, I do. In the Sector Guard charter, it states that the decisions of all Alliance personnel summoned to a situation will be followed in all manners pertaining to that situation, as long as the long-term benefit outweighs the initial dissent." She shrugged. "You agreed to this when you

summoned me."

Watching a series of middle-aged men open and close their mouths like gaffed fish was amusing on a certain level, but she was far too nervous to enjoy it really. It was a serious moment and she needed to keep that in mind.

"The women are here to help you and they have been under more restrictions than prisoners of war. When was the last time you saw them outside, shopping, in the marketplaces, laughing?"

The men looked to each other. Ured frowned, "Actually, I don't remember seeing them after they landed. I don't frequent that area and was not interested in breeding, so I never thought to check on them."

"Let me guess. There were reports on them and that was enough." The look she gave to Ured made him blush, but he nodded.

Ruar merely looked as if he was relieved by these proceedings until he told her, "Ask about the user fees."

Sorvel tried to run. Ruar stopped him, holding him firmly in his seat.

Ured turned a harsh shade of blue, "What user fees?"

Sorvel was spluttering and the room was silent, waiting for the answer.

"Ruar, we are not going to get anything

coherent out of him this way. Stand back and keep him from running." Psyche walked forward and placed her hand on Sorvel's. He tried to pull away, but she dug in her nails. She drew upon her normal talent, the one that she and Sovereign shared. "Sorvel, tell me about the user fees." Her voice resonated in his ears, reaching his basic brain and stroking it. She could use the voice over a larger group, but she preferred to use it sparingly.

"Why not profit from the cows?"

She waved the excited councillors quiet, "Explain."

"The men all wanted the women and I was put in charge of them. Why not impose a user fee to line my own pocket?"

"How much?"

"Thirty credits."

A month's wages, she had to wave the room silent again. "What about the fertility?"

"I was one of the only gynaecologists left. It was easy to make up a chemical cocktail and have it added to their food. Pregnant women had to be removed from the houses and that meant less money." He was dazed, his eyes unfocussed.

She shuddered with fury and released his hand. Then she started to whisper to him, shifting from his pleasure centre to his pain centre.

He started to scream, writhing in agony,

clutching his balls.

It wasn't nice, it wasn't fair, but neither was what he had done to those women. She kept up her whisper until he passed out and stopped writhing.

Breathing heavily, she straightened. "That is one question answered. Now, we are going to have to find a way to deal with the after effects. I have summoned specialists to assist."

The councillors were subdued. Even Ruar was looking at her with a little bit of caution in his eyes.

She started pacing again. "Nine of these women had children. Those children were taken from them so that they could resume their duties on their backs. They couldn't handle the loss of their children and deal with endless days servicing your men. I don't blame them—it is enough to drive any woman insane."

"We had no way of knowing what was going on." It was the man with the lavender eyes.

"All you had to do was ask your sons, your men, go and see any of the women. Ask your wives to see them, anything. You chose to blind yourselves and now you are paying the price."

"Our wives would never associate with..."

That raised Psyche's white eyebrow, "Women who volunteered to heal the wound their species had made? If you were going to say whores that

would mean that you knew."

More of the men had known than were admitting it. Their auras and emotions were flaring wildly.

Ured stood and pounded his fist on the table. "We know what the problem was. Now, we need to work on the solution. When this council convened, we wanted to know why these women were not breeding a new generation and now I am stunned to realise that our species could have had a toehold on recovery if we had just asked about the women instead of handing them over to Sorvel and trusting him. We owe the Olsim women more than just a home, we owe them lives and today is the day we start moving forward. Psyche is assisting us in identifying our difficulties, but it is up to us to fix them. We have a responsibility to our grandchildren to make sure they grow up in a world where their parents both had a say in crafting a new society."

"You will never have grandchildren, Ured. You know this." Lavender eyes was blunt to rudeness.

Psyche blinked and turned to Ruar. "You're gay?" The room erupted into snorts and laughter, but she kept her gaze on him.

He laughed. "No. I am of mixed blood and I have a psi talent, I am not allowed to create more Markeths."

So, that was why he knew about the women but

had not visited. His friends probably kept him in the loop. She looked at Ured, "Isn't that a little narrow minded?"

"It is tradition."

"Tradition has to change sometime." The look that she and Ruar shared was more intimate than she had intended, but the warmth in his gaze made it worth the chuckles from the council.

Ured looked from one of them to the other. "It does indeed."

CHAPTER FIVE

The sick fear and confusion that greeted Psyche when she walked into the gymnasium of the old university made her pause on the threshold.

Guards were posted outside the building, but none were allowed inside.

Psyche used her *voice* to calm them. "Ladies. You are not in trouble, you are not in danger, you are being freed."

Tears were a common response and she let the ladies have their moment while she stood silently. They were on the bleachers, fitted hip to hip for comfort and support. Each woman wore a simple tunic and some slippers. Nothing else.

From the view that Psyche had, she could tell that the women had not been issued underwear. She made a quick note on her data pad to have casual clothing given to the women and sent it to Ured. Food was being delivered and left in an unused hallway so that the women had some time without men.

"Ladies. Today is a day of new starts. I know that you have been confined and used against your will, but those responsible are being made examples of."

A woman in the front laughed. "Pardon me, woman, if we don't believe you."

Sighing, Psyche pressed a few buttons on her suit and turned her back on the women to allow the projection to be seen by all. Sorvel's screaming was still piercing, even in a 3D projection. Her suit was really a marvel of technology. The speakers gave the women the feeling of being there. She showed them Sorvel being hauled off between two guards and a few women applauded, spreading quickly through the group.

She finished the display and turned to see a number of women with tears running down their smoky grey cheeks. Their gazes focussed on her and she held her hands out at her sides, palms up. "I am Psyche of the Sector Guard and while I can't send you home, I am here to help you restart your lives on Marketh."

"Why can't we go home?"

She took a deep breath. She had known this would come up. "The short answer is that your planet doesn't want you anymore. You have lain with the enemy and you are no longer valuable to your planet."

A few gasped in shock, but most of them

nodded in acceptance.

"Tomorrow, there will be two other Guardsmen here. Commander, who is an infallible matchmaker as well as a fantastic physician, and his wife, Pilot. She was in a similar situation to yours. When she left her planet, she was not allowed back because of the alterations to her body."

"It isn't the same. She wasn't violated and didn't volunteer for it."

Psyche turned and showed them a picture of Helen before she was Pilot, wired into a battle ship. "Pilot was a pilot, wired into the warship for years. She volunteered to come into the Alliance and signed her body's rights away. Pilots are trained to keep their minds active while their bodies are immobile, so she knows about confinement. Since being released from her duty, she has become the first woman in the Sector Guard, married Commander and lives her life helping others wherever the need arises. You can speak with her tomorrow. She has tremendous insight."

The ladies murmured.

"Now. I am arranging for clothing for you and then you need to decide a few things for yourselves."

The woman in the front laughed.

"What is your name?"

"Alune."

"Why did you come here?"

"To heal a need for a new population. I thought I was getting a husband and children. Instead, I got five years of confinement and an endless stream of men."

The women murmured in confirmation.

"I want you to think about a few things, ladies. I want you to think about what you really want from the rest of your lives. Don't tell me, don't tell anyone. This is between you and your thoughts alone. Do you want a husband, children, a life that is yours again? Do you want to live apart from men? Do you want to live as an equal, working to rebuild Marketh but bonded to no one?"

She paced, "Your choices will take you down different paths, but only your own path is under your control. The council of Marketh is giving your choice back. Men are volunteering for the roll as husband. Each of those men will be weeded out for suitability. No one will hurt you or take advantage of you again."

Alune spoke. "What if we grow apart from the men you choose for us?"

Psyche smiled. "I will not be the one doing the choosing. I will just keep violent or selfish candidates from entering the roster. The men must be as committed to building a new world as the women who choose them. A meeting of equals is

the only solid start we can offer."

A timid woman raised her hand. "We are all barren. Sorvel said so."

"He lied. He has been dosing you with birth control in your food. It is an inexact way to administer it and that is probably why the few pregnancies that did occur happened. You will be tested tomorrow and if you are uncomfortable with Commander, you can ask for either one of your own or Pilot or me to accompany you. It won't be invasive though. The scanners will be installed in the medical centre here."

"What are we to do in the meantime?"

"There is a library available. The entire campus is man-free, but guarded to stop anyone who tries to come in to...try anything. Prepared food will be delivered three times a day and you can use the rooms in the dorms for your own purposes."

She kept a straight face—no pity had to show. "No one blames you for anything that occurred and anyone who mentions it in a derogatory way will be dealt with. Arrangements are being made for counsellors for you and any man you wish to bind yourself to."

"What about the women of Marketh? They have known about us all this time and never said a thing." Outrage spread quickly.

Psyche held up her hands. "Enough."

"It is all right, Psyche. We can field that one."

Hallo was standing with a number of uncomfortable Marketh women behind her. "I am Hallo Asher." She stopped for a moment, "Yes, of the Asher Prime Ashers. The women of Marketh were told that you were taken care of and recovering from the war. We wanted to believe them."

She sighed. "Frankly, after a while, we forgot about you. Assumed you had returned to Olsim or concentrated on running our own homes. We are here tonight to take an interest in you that is long overdue. We will show you the plants and animals of our planet, traditional dishes and anything else you can think of. Our sons and husbands have ill-used you, but if you will have us, we will take on the roll of champions for you."

Twenty-four women walked into the room, tears in their eyes, and there was a rush of young women to the older, seeking comfort and a motherly touch.

Twenty women looked at the hugging and weeping with a distinct lack of emotion. One by one, they gravitated to Psyche.

"I wish to work, but not have to make a decision immediately. Is that acceptable?" Alune spoke and the others nodded.

"I will make arrangements with Ured. He and his son are assisting me with all of the details. What are your skills?"

She spent the next two hours taking down the skills and interests of the women who didn't want to find mates immediately. The other three hundred plus wanted to jump right in to finding their own husbands.

Their soon-to-be mothers-in-law were delighted. The women of Marketh decided to give themselves a new designation. The Matrons. It set them apart from the women who refused to participate in the integration of the Olsim women.

Psyche spent the rest of the day speaking to the Olsim women, finding out what they wanted from life on Marketh and what kind of man they really were looking for.

Some of the Matrons offered to stay over night and help with the rooms, bedding and clothing.

Psyche was relieved, because she really wanted some alone time.

She stretched and groaned when she left the university, heading back to the Ashers' home with Hallo at her side. They were talking quietly when a blast from an energy gun missed Psyche by inches.

"Down." She shoved Hallo off to one side and whirled to face her attacker. The second pulse caught her squarely in the abdomen and threw her off her feet. Stunned, she shook her head as she heard a shout of denial coming from ahead of her.

Ruar ran toward her and when she nodded that

she was all right, he stood and faced her attacker. He held his hands out and generated a biological pulse that flew through the air until it struck the man who had fired on her.

Sitting up was painful, but when she saw the large smoking hole in her suit, she realized how lucky she was. "Ow."

Ruar turned and gestured to two guards who had apparently been with him. They picked up the groaning man and hauled him off.

Hallo was leaning over her, helping her to her feet. "Sorvel's son?"

"Yes. Apparently family honour was at stake."

"Remind me to whisper to him. He needs to be neutered from the inside out." She was muttering as the smaller woman helped her stand, then yelped as Ruar lifted her off her feet.

"We will get to the medical centre faster if I carry you."

"We are going to your family's home and that is it. I am fine, just stunned. My own doctor is arriving tomorrow and frankly, I don't have any faith in Marketh doctors' abilities to diagnose anything on a woman."

He laughed, it was strained, but he thought it was funny. "You may have a point. How is it that you are not in two pieces?"

"I have an excellent tailor."

Hallo was rushing ahead of them, opening

doors and fluffing the pillows of Psyche's bed.

"This is great, but I need to have a shower and get into a clean suit. I will heal better inside it."

Hallo nodded. "I will help you."

"Mother, you can't carry her if she falls, I will do it."

Psyche crooked her brow at him. "I beg your pardon?"

"Pick your suit. We are heading in to the bathroom." He lifted her again and carried her to her duffel bag.

She picked up the bag and rifled through it while he held her as if she weighed nothing. She pulled out a charcoal grey and silver suit, then dropped the bag on the floor. "Let's go."

CHAPTER SIX

The burned suit looked sad and worn on the floor. Tiny fibres and filaments of wire were visible through the hole.

Ruar was heating the shower and she was waiting as naked as the day she was born. He turned and his golden eyes widened as he took in her nudity before he removed his shirt and helped her under the spray. A fluffy puff was soaped and he started scrubbing her back, shoulders and buttocks before she could complain.

When he started on her front, she had to ask, "Is the puff yours?"

"Yup. No one should ignore exfoliation." He worked carefully on her abdomen.

She winced as he worked at the blast mark.

"You have second degree burns, but since there should be a hole here, you got away very lightly." He brusquely finished her shower, but there were beads of sweat on his forehead and a distinct misshapen effect in his trousers when he finished.

"You seem...distressed, Ruar."

"You are very funny, Psyche. I just think you have seen enough of the worst of the Marketh men for one day."

She smiled and towelled herself dry while he kept his back to her. She couldn't help but admire the planes of muscle in his back. Before she knew it, she was reaching out to touch and the surge of lust that came with her caress almost drove her to action. It was hers, it was his, it was theirs.

Shuddering, she pulled her hand back while he looked at her curiously. "Something wrong?"

"Just a little water."

His eyes twinkled as he took in her lie. She was a horrible liar and she knew it.

With the majority of water off her skin, she tugged on the bodysuit and sighed in relief as it hugged her softly. She felt protected in it and as the blasted suit showed, she was.

"That colour does wonderful things for your eyes." It was the same charcoal as Ruar's skin.

She blushed, but hoped he couldn't tell. "Thank you. Another of Fixer's designs. I just have to synch the suits and I will be ready for anything."

"I am glad to hear it. I think Dad did the cooking." He grinned.

She scooped up the destroyed suit and set the synch as she walked back to her bedroom. When the suit chirped, she was ready.

Ruar held her hand as they walked down the stairs, making his mother grin from her position at the table. "You look better, Psyche."

Ruar helped her sit and she grinned at his mother. "It is amazing what a suit without a gaping hole in it will do. That one had taken quite the beating before this though. It's amazing how many times I have been shot with energy weapons."

Ured looked impressed. "What would happen if it was a projectile?"

"Oh, I would be bruised but intact. The suit is designed to distribute the force of any impact." The low whistle made her smile. "I will pass your appreciation on to Fixer."

"He must be quite the Guardsman. I have seen images of your shuttles and some of your tech, it is impressive."

"Fixer is a woman and almost to term. She used to fix...anything really and now, she and her husband, Shade, are both Guardsmen." It was close enough to the full truth, that Shade had been Fixer's enticement.

"The Guardsmen are all pairs?"

"Most of them. Pairing up is encouraged. We are more stable in pairs. Usually there is one active and one protective partner, or two elemental partners. It seems to work well."

Ruar and Ured served dinner. It was brown,

hot and had little else to recommend it. Psyche ate because she was hungry and not out of stimulated appetite.

"Have you met any avatars?" Ruar was curious.

She could feel his eagerness for information.

"Yes. Stellar and planetary. There is even an existing Guardsman who is taking on the role of stellar avatar soon."

He looked wistful. "It sounds wonderful, travelling the stars, seeing new and horrible things in equal measure."

"You haven't..."

"No. None of my generation has."

Ured grimaced. "In return for the women, we agreed to avoid space travel for the interim."

"So, if Sorvel had succeeded in declaring the women useless?"

"We would have had another reason for war."

Hallo closed her eyes and opened them again, focussing on Psyche. "Thank you for coming. This was all getting out of control."

"I was sent. Send your thanks to Haunt and Relay. They are responsible for me being here." She drummed her fingers on the table and turned down second helpings with a smile. "Is there a possibility for Ruar leaving Marketh?" Everyone in the room stared at her. "I mean. He has that power burst and if he chose to apply to the Sector Guard, I am sure that he would be welcomed."

She finished in a rush.

Hallo and Ured blinked at each other.

Ruar looked surprised. "Are you kidding?"

"No. I am not. Part of our jobs in the Sector Guard involves identifying remarkable individuals with talents outside their species specifications." She shrugged. "You do qualify."

"I need to think about this." He stood and walked out of the room.

It was the rudest he had been in the two days that she had known him. "Was it something I said?"

Ured and Hallo sat close together and he spoke. "Ruar is used to being selected last, even with his skills. He has wished to leave Marketh his whole life, but to have it casually offered to him is more than he can bear." The couple held hands. The support that flowed through them was obvious.

"How would you feel if he left?"

"We would miss him, but it would be good for us and him. Marketh will go on without him and since he is not a legal citizen, it will be best if he paved his own path."

She nodded. "Why isn't he a citizen?"

Hallo grimaced. "That is my fault. I wished to keep my ties to the Tyval and he suffered the effect of my arrogance."

Psyche tilted her head. "Do you still keep in touch with the Tyval?"

"No. With the war, they have blocked off this system for the standard one hundred years."

"Can't you just apply for citizenship as a landed immigrant?"

Hallo blinked and laughed. "I suppose I could. They have already declared all women who are imported will be full citizens when they bear a child. I have already borne one."

Ured and Hallo laughed together and swore to fill out the paperwork the following day.

Grinning, Psyche went to the communications room and called Pilot.

"Hey, Psyche. How are things?"

"Wear full shielding. Someone shot me today. They weren't kidding when they said that change can hurt. It stung like hell." She leaned back in the chair and put her feet up on the desk.

"Someone shot you? Sovereign will be pissed."

"He can blow it out his exhaust port. Anyway, what I wanted to say was that I found a potential candidate for the Guard."

"Really? What is the talent?"

"He has an energy burst that disables his target. I don't know how, but it is quite impressive."

"Interesting. If he will agree to head to Morganti, we can run some tests."

"Oh. I thought I could..."

"You are needed where you are. You have set things in motion and you need to see things

through to the end."

Disappointment spiralled through Psyche. "If that is best. Then he can head out there for testing as soon as he can get a ride. If he wants to go, that is."

"Excellent. I am sure you will convince him. You have a certain psychotic charm."

"Thanks for that. Have you heard from Sovereign?"

"He is well. His preparation for becoming an avatar is coming along. Balen and Saru are both assisting."

"Good. I hope to be there when he assumes the power."

"I am sure they will wait for you." Pilot's tone was soft, motherly.

"I am not, but if they don't, it isn't the end of the world. It isn't like I don't know where to find him." She smiled and cleared her throat. "Now. About Marketh. I am sending you the reports of today's events. Tack an attempted assassination onto the bottom and you will have rounded out the day."

"Okay."

"I want you to come in hot and heavily armed. I know that Commander doesn't like the guns, but the buggers dissolved my shuttlecraft because I was dumb enough to fall for their ploy. When you come in, lock on my active suit, the one with my

body in it, just in case these guys play any more tricks."

"Done."

"You also might want to call in Seer and Order on this one. It is a very tangled web."

"It's your call. Sending the message."

Psyche yawned. "Send the response to my suit, I am heading to bed."

"Getting shot will do that to you, rest up. Tomorrow, we arrive near dawn."

"See you then. Psyche out." She disconnected the call and put her feet on the floor. She stood slowly and turned to see Ruar watching her.

He came forward and put his hands on her waist, pressing her back against the desk. His golden gaze locked with hers before his lids dropped to half-mast and he kissed her.

The taste of him was intoxicating and she tangled her fingers in his hair to hold him to her. She used her tongue lightly on his bottom lip and sighed when he echoed her.

His hands were stroking up and down her spine, pressing her against him from breast to hips. He broke from her suddenly and she caught herself on the desk.

"Whoa. What was that?"

"It wasn't good?" For a soldier who looked like he ate rocks for breakfast, he was insecure.

She suddenly realized why. He didn't have any

experience with women. He was a virgin. "It was great. Just a little sudden." She could feel the swelling in her lips and not just her mouth.

"I heard you talking about someone named Sovereign and I got jealous."

She reached out and stroked his face, trailing her thumb over his lips. "Sovereign is my brother. He and I used to be a Guard team and then he was asked to become the avatar to a star. His match is the avatar of the planet Balen." She smiled.

He took her thumb into his mouth.

She shivered at the reaction that ran through her system. Getting herself under control, she removed her hand from his face, clearing her throat. "If you want to join the Sector Guard, you have clearance to go to Morganti for testing."

He trembled with excitement. "You are serious?"

"Yes, and I have spoken with Hallo and she is applying for citizenship of Marketh, which will make you a full citizen."

She had the feeling that if she was naked, she would be on her back right now. The only thing holding him back was her uniform. The closures were tricky and invisible.

"I am heading to bed. It has been a very long day and being shot makes me tired." She leaned forward quickly and gave him a solid kiss that made him step back a little. "Let me know about

your decision and you can be on the next passing Alliance ship to Morganti.”

He was stunned.

She left him in the study while she went to bed. Meditation helped her sleep, but her dreams were full of violet hands on planes of muscle. She didn't wake up rested.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Her suit beeped incessantly. She groped around and found her com switch. "Psyche here."

"We are on our final descent and locking on your signal."

"Great. How far away are you?"

"I can see your house from here."

"Aw hells." Grabbing her boots, she bolted down the steps and out the front door in time to hear the sonic boom as the shuttle slowed for final approach.

Running at full tilt, Psyche headed for the university.

"Wow, Psyche, you are really booking."

Pilot had a warped sense of humour, but it was understandable.

Psyche sprinted past the guards and into the sports field beyond. Gasping for air, she waited for the touchdown.

It wasn't long in coming.

Manoeuvring thrusters fired and blasts of air

moved Psyche's hair around. She felt a presence behind her and wasn't surprised when she turned and saw Ruar.

"What is wrong?"

"I needed to get them a landing zone and with the previous interception, I didn't want them to be detoured." She was gasping for breath and waiting for the other Guardsmen. Ruar's arm came around her waist and she couldn't help but lean against him.

When Commander and Pilot emerged from the oddly arranged shuttle, they looked around and when they saw her, their mouths opened in surprise.

It was instinct to move out of his grip, grab his hand and pull Ruar to the Guardsmen. "Pilot, Commander!" She let go of Ruar's hand to hug the other Guardsmen and introduced them. "Pilot, Commander, this is Ruar Asher. The candidate I mentioned."

Commander looked from Psyche to Ruar and back, a stunned look on his face. "Ruar, pleased to meet you."

The men shook hands and Commander started to smile. "Ruar, I have some equipment that I would like to unpack, would you give me a hand?"

Ruar blinked, then grinned. "Certainly. You can explain that weaponry that you are wearing and

how you open and close those uniforms."

Pilot looked Psyche over and, as soon as the men were out of earshot, said, "So, that is the guy? He's cute."

"Thanks, Helen. I hadn't noticed."

Pilot snickered. "No wonder you didn't want him going to Morganti alone."

"That wasn't why. He has never left Marketh. He wants to go, but he is afraid to go alone. I don't want him to feel alone."

"You bonded to him."

"Sort of. I guess. Yes." She groaned and pressed her hand to her forehead.

Pilot handed her a belt with a blaster. It was basically a numbing shot to whatever she aimed it at. Psyche strapped it around her hips and fastened the restricting strap around her thigh.

"It looks wonderful with that uniform. Did you pick it because it matches his skin?"

"No. My black uniform has a large hole in the abdomen and the only other one I have with me is the formal one."

Pilot chuckled. "Fine. I will take your word for it."

Commander and Ruar were hauling large chunks of equipment out of the shuttle. They were in earnest discussion and when Commander yelled for them to come over, Psyche knew what was happening.

"Come on, Helen, this you have got to see."

Ruar looked a little self-conscious. "I don't normally do this on request."

She smiled at him. "None of us are good at our talents until we practice. They work fine on impulse or emotional overload, but pulling them out for controlled use is the hardest thing we do."

"A kiss for luck?" He was grinning and hopeful.

Psyche glared at Commander. It was one of Pilot's sayings. Shrugging, she walked over to Ruar, placed her hands on his shoulders and leaned up to kiss him, starting with laving her tongue across his lower lip. Their tongues met, tangled and they separated with both of them gasping for air.

* * * *

Ured and Hallo entered the field as Psyche and Ruar kissed. Tears sparked in Hallo's eyes. "Finally. I was getting worried."

"So was I. It is not good for a man like him to be alone. He has a lot to give a woman and I am glad that Psyche seems to realize it."

"What about when she goes?" Hallo got more tears in her eyes, imagining her life if she and Ured parted.

"If I am reading the body language correctly,

they will be together, no matter where they are." He smiled. "Little purple grandbabies. Can you imagine?"

Hallo leaned against her husband and smiled. "Yes, I can."

* * * *

Psyche watched as Ruar focussed, concentrated and blew a hole seven feet wide in the stadium. "Holy hells." She smiled and watched as he staggered and righted himself.

Another kiss was in order and she smelled the distinct odour of ozone as she locked lips with the newest Guardsmen candidate.

His arms locked around her and he bent her backward as he deepened the kiss. She was dazed, stunned and grinning foolishly when he righted her.

"I had better help Commander get his equipment set up in the old medical centre on campus."

"Yes. And I had better get the log books and recorders for interviewing the men."

They separated reluctantly and went in opposite directions.

Psyche and Pilot gathered the units that she needed and hauled them to the main administration building. It seemed appropriate to

set up facilities for interviews in an administration building and it was far enough away from the dorms to keep the men and women from interacting.

Ured had done a good job the day before and men were beginning to line up at eleven in the morning.

They had ten pads for the men to record their stats on and each man had to fill out the questionnaire before they could be interviewed. It was really a stalling tactic, as Commander would be getting the images of the ideal match from the women as he did their medical exams and matching the faces to the names when Psyche gave him the day's recordings.

The interviews were just to weed out unsuitable candidates, those with violent predispositions or contempt for the Olsim.

With a desk, some officers to keep order and Ruar standing by, she let in the first candidate.

"So, Mothwik, why do you want a wife?" It was her fifteenth interview and she had her senses open wide while she did it.

"Because I want a family."

He was reading a very neutral emotional state. That wasn't right.

She held out her hand for his data pad and let her finger brush his as she took it. Hate, strong

and thick, ran through him.

"You do. You want a Marketh family. That isn't possible right now, so I am afraid you will have to leave this facility."

With no warning, he lunged at her, snarling with hate and vicious intent. Her stunner came out and she pulled the trigger before he could clear the desk.

He was numb from head to foot and flopping on the floor.

Psyche looked over at Ruar who was stunned by the speed of her response. "That makes two for me and one for you."

She sat down and waited until the guards had cleared the hostile and insane Marketh out of the room. Psyche took a deep breath and called, "Next."

In between applicants, Ruar informed her that Commander and Pilot were invited for dinner and Hallo was cooking. Psyche passed the information through her suit's com system and got an update on the women's medical situation.

The extra hormones would be out of their systems in a few weeks which was good news for any and all.

The interview process surprised her. The men who had frequented the houses were concerned about the women. Initially, they had been told if they women got pregnant and they were the

fathers, they would have a wife to go with their babies. The men grew despondent when none of the encounters bore any fruit. Many stopped going and that relieved Psyche somewhat.

Of course, for every one who wanted a wife, there was another who wanted a sex toy and those men went to the bottom of the list. The only ones completely removed from the process were the Olsim haters and misogynists, a thankfully small segment of the applicants.

Dinner was polite, fun and followed by hours of matchmaking. Pilot enjoyed talking with the Ashers while Commander and Psyche haggled over the top candidates for each woman.

Pilot interrupted their little rants. "How are we going to introduce them? On Terra, there is usually food involved. A restaurant and a first date is traditional."

Psyche blinked. "Ured, how did Marketh women meet the men before the war? And once they had met, what did they do?"

Ured was surprised to suddenly be involved again. "Dances were common, but I don't know if the men have been taught to dance. It is a skill many lack. The first time alone there was usually a chaperone nearby. Food could be involved."

Pilot clapped her hands. "A picnic!"

"What?"

"Eating outside, on a green space and on a blanket. It allows for them to be watched but be casual and it can be in full daylight, so no sneaking off or weirdness. If we move the Class One, the sports field is ideal."

Psyche nodded. It sounded good. "Oh, did the clothing arrive?"

Ured nodded. "Yes. It was well received and the women have an improved attitude. More confidence, less fear."

"Hallo was talking with them."

Ured grinned. "Yes. They seem to take to the Matrons. It echoes an Olsim tradition."

Commander nodded. "Good. Then I will speak to the Matrons and tomorrow, the first introductions can commence. I recommend no more than twenty introductions per day."

They all nodded. Everyone was now focussed on the names and matches that had been formed. Ruar nodded and joined in. "All right. Who is going to go first?"

Ruar and Ured spoke on behalf of their choices from the matches that had been made and why they made their selections. These were men who would not be shy about defending their new women and budding families.

The discussions continued on into the wee hours of the morning before everyone decided to call it a night. It was too late for Commander and

Pilot to return to their shuttle, so Ruar offered his room.

Psyche was going to ask where he would sleep, but she knew, he was going to sleep with her.

Snug in her suit, she climbed on the bed and when he crawled in behind her, she relaxed into his embrace. He was fully clothed as well, but the contact of their bodies sparked a reaction she could feel in her own flesh and his.

Sleep should have been the last thing on her mind, but with his warmth against her, she slept.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Psyche was delighted. The first picnics involved the selected women being escorted from the secure area by Matrons to meet the men who had blankets and food. After the picnic, they were instructed to let the Matrons know if they found the man appealing.

Commander confirmed that the matches were solid, but these women needed control and so it was given to them.

The men were polite, on their best behaviour and nineteen out of twenty made an immediate positive impression. The hold out made up her mind within six hours. Twenty solid matches and delighted couples who signed their bond papers within two days.

It followed a pattern that Psyche felt good about and a week later, Commander and Pilot were preparing to leave. They would take Ruar with them to Morganti if he wanted to go.

Psyche was tied to the facility and the process,

so she could not go with them.

"We have a present for you." Pilot was almost dancing with glee.

Psyche was walking to their shuttle on top of a nearby parkade. "You kept it a secret for this long? I am impressed."

"I have been working on it. Check this out." Pilot struck the Class One, activated a toggle and a sheet of fabric shattered, showing the smaller shuttle perched on top.

"The Micron? I didn't know Fixer had gotten to work on it." She leaned up and tried to see all of the angles to the smaller ship. It was larger than the Archer had been, but not by much.

"That and one little thing, Ured is taking over the project for a week so that you can take Ruar to Morganti for testing. Seer and Order are there and they will come back with you in a week."

"Why am I going to Morganti?"

"Because Seer is calling us home for Fixer. Her time is almost here."

The excitement that Psyche felt was out of bounds. "The baby?"

"It will be with us within the week. Even Kale-Gant is excited. The first baby born in a very long time. The first natural citizen of Morganti."

Psyche wanted to ask Ruar what he thought, but he was standing next to Commander with her bags and his at his feet.

"Access the Micron through the Class One and we can be on our way." Pilot was grinning. It was nice to see on the usually grim face. Time linked to computers tended to make expressing emotion the last thing the body did.

Psyche scampered up the ladder and received the bags as Ruar handed them up. When he was in next to her, also vibrating with excitement, they drew up the ladder and sealed the hatch.

"This is your first extra-orbital?" Psyche asked Ruar.

"It is."

"Then strap in and hold on. It is going to get a little bit wild. Flying isn't my first skill." She released the magnetic clamps, attached the jump halo to her head and lifted off the Class One.

"It handles very well." Ruar wasn't clenching his hands—he was staring avidly at the countryside as they flew up and up.

"It is a prototype. One of Fixer's creations." She flipped open the communications core. "This is the shuttle Micron, requesting Relay on Morganti Base."

"This is Relay, go ahead, Psyche."

"Confirming authorization to leave Marketh for a leave to deliver a candidate for assessment."

"Confirmed, Psyche. You and your mate are invited to stay for a few days."

"My mate?" She looked over at Ruar who was

grinning at her. "I don't have a mate."

"Commander says Ruar Asher is your mate, so he is your mate. Don't second guess our best matchmaker."

"Confirmed, Relay. Will see you in a few hours. Going to see what the Micron can do."

"Fixer built in an automatic return to Morganti, so feel free to use it once you clear gravity." As Relay spoke, a bright green button that said *home* flashed.

"Confirmed and will do." Grinning, she pulled the controls back and they climbed out of the atmosphere with minimal turbulence.

The moment that they were out of the atmosphere, she hit the thrusters and they shot through the nothingness of space.

Ruar was excited. He was still leaning forward and watching everything that she did on the controls. She explained what she was doing as she checked the readings for the gravitational effects and prepared to hit the button.

"You are out of Station 13."

"Yes."

"So why is your ship set to travel to Morganti?"

"Station 13 is a mobile station. It travels. It wouldn't be practical to aim for a moving target with a jump ship. Bad things could happen."

"A jump..."

"Hold on." Everything was reading zero, so she

leaned forward and hit the home button. Everything went dark.

Someone was running a scanner over her. "Hey, Effin. Long time no see."

He sighed and sat back, his Wyoran features relaxing from their concerned contortion. "You scared your passenger half to death. He thought your association was done before it was begun."

Ruar was hovering to Dr. Nywyn's left and he sighed as she sat up. "Sorry, I should have warned you, I don't jump well."

"I don't understand, is it because of your race?"

"No, it is more because of her outreaching psi senses. She anchors herself in space so when the jump happens, it is like tearing open a wound." Effin reached out to help her rise, but Ruar beat him to it.

She leaned against his chest as he lifted her off the exam bed. "When I have a partner, I usually sedate myself for a jump. Just for a few minutes is usually enough."

"And because it was my first jump..."

"I forgot I might pass out. Sometimes I just puke."

He sighed.

"Have you and Effin introduced yourselves?"

"We have. You have been out for over two hours."

She winced. "Sorry. Help me up."

Ruar levered her to her feet, but kept one arm around her waist.

Effin noted it and smiled. "Roha, I am glad to see that you have found a partner."

"Roha?"

"My given name, I can't use it when on duty." She smiled up at him. "My full name is Roha Excelter. Roha Morilyn Excelter if it matters." She looked around. They were in Morganti Base Medical. "How did the Micron land?"

"It came down light as a feather. It looked like Pilot was at the helm. Helen and Hyder are having dinner in the commissary if you want to join them."

"Are their guest quarters for us?"

"Room four. Relay assigned it when you were still at Marketh." He chuckled.

She and her Marketh were on their way out the door when she remembered, "When will you need Ruar for testing?"

"We went through that while you were out. He selected the designation Bore."

Ruar chuckled. "I need to practice, so we will be visiting my family lands a bit while on Marketh. Dr. Nywyn assures me that once I am properly outfitted, I will have much more control."

They walked through the halls and Roha gave him the basic tour. When they came to the

commissary, she asked, "Are you hungry?"

"Starved."

"Good. This place has some of the best cooks around and Fixer makes sure that they get a workout." She chuckled and walked toward a long table in the centre of the room. Fixer, Shade, Seer, Order, Commander and Pilot were all sitting and sharing an evening meal. They waved her over as they came in.

She made the introductions around the table, using the given names of the Guardsmen at the table. Mala, Isabi, Thalik, Reva, Hyder and Helen. Ruar blinked. "That is a lot to keep straight."

"You have no idea." Hyder chuckled. "Get some food and join us."

They got in line, loaded trays and returned to the table.

"Mala, you are the one called Fixer?" Ruar's admiration for the pale-skinned, rainbow-haired women was obvious.

"I am."

"I would like to thank you for the body armour design. It saved Roha from a very messy death."

She inclined her head and her husband beamed. "You are welcome. My techniques improve daily, but I do know that Roha tends to antagonize folks. She needs all the armour she can get."

Isabi smiled. "Mala tailors each suit to the talent

of the owner. What is your particular skill?"

"Radiating energy blast. It is still developing." He inclined his head as the others made impressed noises.

Roha was watching Mala, her pupils were dilating every three minutes. "Is Isaro on Morganti?"

"Yes. She and Alomar are out for dinner with Haaro and Agreha." Isabi tilted his head. "Why do you ask?"

Roha munched a few more bites before answering. "Mala, how long have you been in labour?"

It was impossible for the black velvet skin of the Selna to change colour, but Isabi tried anyway.

"You just had to tell him. He was perfectly calm until you mentioned that." Mala huffed. She continued eating her dessert as her pupils flexed again.

"Sorry. I just thought I would mention it."

"Yeah, well, just see if you can get out of your next bodysuit without help." She looked as grim as the good-natured Mala could be.

Thalik was calm and grinning, so was Reva. Thalik had probably seen this exact moment, with all of them around and Mala in labour.

"How long do you think it will be?" Roha was asking carefully.

"Another hour or so. This baby is very in tune

with my own body, so I will know the moment it starts to separate. Distract me. Tell me about your ongoing assignment, Roha."

Eager to distract her, "There were two planets at war..."

She talked for twenty minutes while Ruar interspersed the occasional comment.

Thalik disappeared at one point and when the four Guardsmen who had been in town appeared, it was obvious what he had been up to.

"...and I hit the button and passed out." They all laughed at the conclusion to her tale, and Dr. Nywyn and Relay arrived with a hovering stretcher.

"Come along, Mala. I know you spend all your time here, but having a child in the commissary isn't sanitary." Laughter didn't just come from their table but from the entire staff and clientele.

Careful hands lifted Mala onto the stretcher, her enormous belly contracting until the light fabric that covered it flexed and rippled. Sitting up, she waved to her people as she headed for Medical.

The rest of the Guardsmen stayed where they were until Isaro belted out, "What the hell are we doing? That's our baby in there."

She led the troupe down the hall and they took turns visiting the couple as the contractions progressed.

Roha was just stepping in with Isaro when Dr.

Nywyn announced. "It's on its way."

Isabi held the hand of his wife, not willing to catch the fruit of his loins. It was better left to the doctor and he had made no secret of it.

The child made its way into the world, squalling like a banshee with its mother's rainbow hair and its father's black-as-midnight skin. Effin handed the child to its mother and she cuddled the bundle close. Together, Isabi and Mala peeled back the blanket to announce, "It's a girl."

Isaro stuck her head out the door and yelled, "It's a girl!"

The word spread through the building with the speed only gossip can attain.

Roha hung back until Mala gestured her forward. "Touch her and tell me what she feels."

Ordered to perform, she reached out and took the squirming, warm bundle into her arms. She caressed the tiny arm and blinked at the feedback she got. "She wants to get to work."

"What?" Isabi and Mala were laughing.

Roha smiled and gave them the baby back. "Look at the edge of the blanket. She wants to get to work."

The edge of the blanket had been bonded into a small mitten to keep the little one's hand warm.

"Isala will have her mother's talent. This is a good and scary thing. We had better warn the kitchens." Mala was chuckling tiredly, so she held

her baby to her breast and sighed an instant before she grimaced.

Effin was still on the business end of the delivery, "Mala, what are you doing?"

"I have no idea."

Roha shifted to watch the recently used exit stretch to form a perfect O. When Effin's hands made contact, a beautiful baby girl with her mother's creamy skin, black hair and rainbow eyes that squinted at the world, appeared.

"Another girl." Effin wrapped the baby and handed her to her stunned mother.

"Another..." Mala looked from Isabi to her babies and back again. "No wonder I was so hungry. I was making two whole people."

Isabi, ex-Companion, master of shadows, looked weak in the knees. "Two girls. Isala and Mabi. Our new additions."

Roha left the birthing room after finishing her congratulations. Isaro was enjoying her nieces and Helen and Reva were waiting to pounce on the new bundles of Sector Guard joy.

Ruar was waiting with the other Guardsmen. "That was...amazing. Isabi will have his hands full. Two girls. Mabi can turn invisible."

The men outside the med centre winced.

Roha took Ruar's hand. "I am sure that everyone wants to see the new arrivals, but I need to show this new arrival to our rooms before I

pass out."

Thalik chuckled. "You tried to stay awake through a jump, didn't you?"

"I did. Now I have to sleep it off."

Ruar said his goodbyes and let Roha lead him off into the base.

She was actually exhausted. "The guest quarters are this way. I will key them to your biometrics and you can explore the base while I crash."

Ruar smiled and put an arm around her. "While I appreciate the sentiment, I have been through a lot today and am more than willing to keep you company while you rest."

She sighed. "That would be nice."

Guest quarters four was a lovely set of rooms. Ruar whistled appreciatively. Roha stripped out of her bodysuit and headed to the shower, leaving Ruar in her wake.

"You're...naked." He was following her into the bathing chamber.

"I am. I am safe at a Guard Base. I can relax and get out of uniform." She shook her hair out as she went. "Why are you so shocked, you have seen it all before."

He didn't make any noises that she could consider as speech, but she was whirled and pinned against a body that was as unclothed as she was.

He slid against her, his body stroking hers in a primal way. When he bore her to the warmed floor of the bathing chamber, she welcomed him with a stifled grin. It was about time.

With her thighs around him and his body inside hers, she held him, stroked him and caressed him on physical and psychic levels as he moved within her.

His shout was part satisfaction and part surprise when his body reached its peak. He slumped against her with a groan.

She held him tightly to her, stroking her fingers through his hair and down the muscled groove of his back.

He pushed back, lifting off, her but staying inside her. "You didn't..."

"I didn't. I was too busy watching you. We can try again whenever you want." She stroked his face, tracing his lips with her thumb.

"That won't do." He started to move inside her again, he was still rigid and his earlier emanation made for a frictionless slide.

"You are still..."

"The Marketh aren't childless for lack of trying." He leaned down and kissed her as he stroked into her until she shivered in an endless release that climbed in intensity with every single thrust.

She was limp, exhausted and had a foolish

smile on her face when he held her up in the shower and treated her to a thorough cleansing.

They stood together under the drying lamps and held each other until the only parts of them not dry were the ones pressed together.

Chuckling, they separated and left the bathing room for the bed. Ruar stretched out on his back while Roha curled against him. "It was a good day," she observed.

He kissed her forehead and sighed deeply. "It was a very good day."

CHAPTER NINE

Ruar was out with Thalik and Alomar, practicing his blasting technique in a rock quarry. Roha was happy to be with Mala, Isabi and the babies.

Mala was back in her hangar workshop and a bodysuit with a new armour tech was on the dummy in front of her. "So, this suit is a little stiffer than the standard, but since you currently have the greatest record for being shot, you are the perfect wearer for it."

"If you weren't so sincere, I would be offended." Roha was rocking Mabi and smiling down into the rainbow eyes. "I am amazed at your quick recovery though."

Mala snorted. "That was Isala. She fixed me and then almost turned my breast inside out when she fed. She is going to be a bottle baby."

Roha giggled. Fixer's appetite after her work was famous. She replaced lost energy with food and her body used the mass to replenish the

energy stores. Apparently, the little one took after Mommy.

Roha blinked as the infant in her arms disappeared. The weight was still there, but the little face and body were invisible.

"Don't get me started with that one. I am terrified I am going to roll over on her." Mala grinned and kept working on the suit, applying panel after panel of metal and wiring, sinking them into the fabric of the new suit. "Helen says this looks like a corset. You have a small enough waist as it is, this should make you look like a fembot."

"Wonderful. I am sure that Ruar will be appreciative." She chuckled. "I have orders for a few things that I would like to take back with me to Marketh."

Mabi was back, smiling up at her as if she had done something impressive. True invisibility was indeed impressive. The little cherub had a right to be proud.

"What's on your list?" Mala kept working and Isabi slapped a protein bar into her hand.

"A clothing extruder to provide wardrobes for over three hundred women. Fifty palm stunners with the shortest regeneration time you can manage." She reached for the data pad she brought with her. Rattling off another dozen items. "And, of course, Bore needs some

uniforms."

"What is his talent again?" Mala had finished with the armoured uniform and was looking at the data pad.

"Energy burst. Hyder, Thalik and Alomar are watching and taking scans of his talent today."

"I am envious. There are few Guardsmen with energy-projection talents." Isabi smiled.

"He's a lucky one." She grinned. "By the way, nice work on the Micron."

Mala smiled and ate another protein bar while her husband juggled his offspring. "Thank you. He is adorable, isn't he? Where is he by the way?"

"The boys have taken him out while they test Ruar's power and control. I think he just wants to try to fly the thing."

"Better for you. At least he didn't pass out while piloting through a jump." Isabi was laughing at her.

"Yes. Fine. I suck at jumps." She was going to continue when her chronometer beeped. "Oh, hells, I am late to meet Allie. Has she seen the babies?"

Mala smiled. "Yes, she came in late last night while she thought I was sleeping and kissed the little ones and me before she left. There were two l'nal receiving blankets on me when I opened my eyes."

"Well, I have to share the needs of the women

of Marketh, so I had better be going."

Mala stood. "I am prepping four suits with the reinforcement and will see you for dinner. There is a party happening in the commissary. The staff wants to meet the babies."

Roha waved goodbye, took her data pad and skittered through the halls to Alessandra Wyt's office.

"You were playing with the babies." Relay's voice was amused as she turned in her chair and removed the connection halo that she wore for rifling through data streams.

"Did she get me?"

"No, you just have a look on your face that renders it all soft and maternal. Now, enough with the pleasantries. What do they need?"

Roha sat and went through her list with Alessandra. Councillors, OB/GYN's, clothing extruders, the palm stunners.

"What do they need stunners for?"

"There is an underground movement that does not want the Olsim to integrate with the population. They attacked me, but I don't know if they will attack the women. I want the ones living in the city to be safe."

"You can't keep them safe forever. Eventually, that world is going to have to defend its own." Relay smiled and patted her hand. "In the meantime, I will make arrangements for staff and

include some instructors for domestic skills. Not all women have been taught to cook."

"Excellent."

"How are you holding up? It sounds like a brutal situation."

"I am getting better. Most of the men were merely using any excuse to get close to the women."

"I know. I have been devouring your reports. By the way, I have spoken with the Olsim high command. If there is a marked improvement and even half a dozen pregnancies in six months, they will resume finding female volunteers for life on Marketh."

"Why are the Olsim so eager to part with their women?"

Allie chuckled. "Two reasons. One, after the war, a matriarchy was put in place and the second is that their population numbers are skewed. There are three times as many females as males being born and multiple births are common. They are rapidly approaching over population."

Blinking in surprise, Roha absorbed the information. She nodded in acknowledgement and hashed out the rest of the details with Relay's headpiece in place. Arrangements for personnel were being made as they spoke. It was the creepiest thing about Allie. She could go pro with the multitasking.

“Ruar is back from his day out. He is in with Mala and the little ones right now.”

Smiling at the skewed dismissal, Roha gathered her data pad and wandered back to the hangar.

Watching Ruar get a fitting was going to be the highlight of her day.

She snuck into the room and stifled a laugh. Ruar’s suit was the same violet as her skin. Only fair seeing as how all of her new suits would be in the charcoal of his.

Mala was working on installing panels that turned the planes of his chest into sharply sculpted relief. “You look wonderful.”

“Thank you. Mala assures me that this synthetic composite will assist in the focus of my talent.”

Some blocks were being pushed into place by Hyder and the others.

Mala leaned back after making sure that all of the seams were straight. “Give it a shot. Arm and body shots, please.”

As Ruar was lining up for his shots, Roha smiled to see kitchen staff delivering a trolley full of plates and baby bottles in warmer trays.

She winked at Isabi and picked up Isala, slipping a bottle into the little rosebud mouth. He did the same with Mabi and they watched as Ruar powered up to throw a ball of power.

It took him a few tries, but finally, he knocked over one of the targets. The second firing was

faster, the third a second after that.

Grinning with triumph, he turned and his pride was blazing out of him. Roha rocked Isala and reached for the second bottle. "Well done, Bore. Your parents will be very proud."

His skin blued a little as he blushed. Mala kept him on the other side of the hangar as she made final adjustments on the suit, but he kept his gaze on her, warmth flaring in his eyes.

Roha sent a communication to Ured and Hallo—the recording of Ruar at his third target practice. He hit every target and created a pathway large enough for an escape tunnel with ease and the assist of his suit.

She smiled as she watched Ruar emerge from the shower and closed up the communications terminal before joining him in bed.

They had one more day on Morganti before they returned to Marketh. They had left as a hated woman and an outcast, and they were returning as a Sector Guard team. Psyche and Bore, masters of mind and body.

For this evening, she didn't mind him mastering her body, over and over again.

Life as a Guardsman was looking up.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Roha's brother, Rolland, is in training to become the avatar of Saru (*Tears of the Star*). His match is already the avatar of Balen, so he has to catch up. I was worried about Roha, but she found her match in the last place she thought to look. Right in front of her.

I am pleased to have finally brought the twins into the picture. Mala has been pregnant since *Imperial Guard* and it has been quite the wait for her.

This concludes this arc of the Sector Guard. The next series will begin with Powered Up. The first of the mech talents. When you need to wade through magma or out of control storms...send in the mech.

Thanks for Reading

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

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

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

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

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

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