

Viola Grace

Sector Guard 9



TEARS OF THE STAR

When the planet Balen finished his mourning for his lost avatar, he contacted the Sector Guard to get the miners out of his territory so that he could replenish the frozen surface.

Zenina Sin Ar is the one to get the message and when she tries to inform the powers that be, they set a price on her head. With no other place to turn, she runs for the museum and the rocks that landed on the surface when she did. Completing a circuit, her powers activate and she can finally become what she was meant to be, Tears of the Star.

Sovereign is the Sector Guard officer sent to evacuate the planet, the surprise he feels at seeing a woman flying around the surface is matched only by the knowledge that this is the one his sister said he would meet. The child of two avatars with a destiny irrevocably tied to the planet below.

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TEARS OF THE STAR SECTOR GUARD BOOK 9

BY

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PROLOGUE

There was a hole in the world and the stars were weeping. Nasha Sin Ar was close to one of the points at which the stars' tears were landing.

She and her husband had prayed for a sign that their desires for a child would be granted. Tonight was that night.

As the balls of bright energy fell to Balen, Nasha prayed hard to all deities listening to grant her a child to call her own. When the sky went dark, a wail broke the sudden silence.

"Dorn, that is a baby."

"It can't be. The weather is too cold. Nothing would survive out there in this."

Nasha wrapped herself in her outdoor gear. "I am going."

Her husband sighed. He knew that tone she put into her voice. She wasn't going to stay home until she had an answer. "Wait. I will warm the transporter. No sense you getting lost out there looking for a sound."

"But you are hearing it, too, darling, so I am not

completely insane.”

“No, my dear, not completely.”

Nasha waited while he prepared to join her. The hum of the transporter warming, a comfort in the night. Death awaited anyone stupid enough to brave the winter of Balen without precautions.

The wail sounded again and they moved as one through the air lock to board the transporter.

Strapped into their seats, they turned on the scanners and moved forward, looking for the source of the bright and blazing readings on their screens. “Something landed in that storm of stars.”

“I would have to agree with you there. The nearest one is...there.” He entered the coordinates to the site and their transporter rolled over the terrain on wide tracks. They rumbled and rolled forward until they were within fifteen feet of the bright reading on their scans. Nasha leaped through the door and was waist deep in the snow before Dorn could even loosen his harness. He kept the transporter running but followed his wife into the snow.

The wail sounded again, much closer this time. With mittens digging wildly through the newly fallen snow, Nasha found the source in the centre of a huge impact crater. “Dorn, it’s a baby. Look at her. A perfect little baby girl.”

“You are kidding. It can’t be. That is a meteor crater.”

Nasha turned to face him with the meteor in her

arms. A perfect meteor with a thick head of black curls, a chubby face with eyes so dark it was like looking into space and skin that fought the snow for paleness.

When the baby waved her fists and giggled, Dorn knew he was sunk.

"Well, we prayed for a baby. I just never thought one would fall from the sky. Is she glowing?"

"She is. A lovely healthy glow, but how can she be fine in the cold? We had better get her inside."

Together, they returned to their small cabin near the mining colony of Tirn. The baby was checked from head to toe and merely giggled the whole time.

"What will we call her?" Dorn was amazed as the tiny creature latched onto his deep grey finger with one little chalky hand.

"Zenina. It was my grandmother's name. Zenina Sin Ar." Nasha stroked the hair of the little one and smiled at her tiny face.

Dorn smiled at his wife, enjoying the look of bliss on her face. "A good name. Zenina. Our brand new daughter, Tears from the Star."

CHAPTER ONE

The mine was in full production, but that was going to come to a sudden halt. Zenina scowled at the message that was scrolling across her screen.

By order of the sentient force of Balen, the Sargo mining colony has been ordered to cease and desist all operations. A new avatar is being requested and the planet will no longer be allowing any mining operations until there is a supervising avatar in place.

She grimaced as she continued reading the message and turned around to notify the supervisor. "Bad news, Grim. We have just gotten a priority message from the Sector Guard."

"What do they want?" He grunted and moved to read her screen over her shoulder. "Aw, hells."

He scrubbed his hands over his face. "You know what management is going to do?"

"Pretend that they never got the message?"

"Or kill us both for seeing it."

"Wow, you jumped right to the bad place, didn't you?"

"You know what will happen as well as I do. They just hit a vein of crystal. They aren't going to stop just because a message arrives."

Zen had her black hair in a tight braid down her back. She flicked it out of the way as she went to the sending station and sent back a quick message. *Acknowledged. Urgent! Send representative ASAP.*

"Okay, now we can go tell management."

"What did you do?" Grim was next to her, his hulking grey body a comfort.

"I sent for the cavalry. I hope. Either that or I put in the wrong address and I ordered shoes."

They were walking through the well-lit underground halls and passing very few other workers. It was the beginning of the day shift and the staff was slowly trickling in from the underground city.

Zen kept her face straight as they approached the management office. She had gone to school with Marcor and he had not improved with age. His constant teasing about her being a surface-crawler, a top-sider and a sky-sucker had not gotten more palatable over the years. Marcor's undisguised lust for her was also one of his more repulsive traits.

Grim took point, asking the receptionist, "Is he in yet?"

His receptionist was looking at them with undisguised reluctance to admit them to Marcor's office.

"He is, but he is in a foul mood this morning."

"We received an urgent message from the Sector Guard. He needs to know about it." Zen was used to the look of contempt that the other woman shot her way. The majority of the staffers considered her beyond trash. She transported herself to and from the surface everyday, living in the elements of Balen. It was considered the ultimate in poverty and depravity to live away from the underground cities.

The receptionist used the intercom, "Mr. Alson? Miss Sin Ar and Mr. Garymor are here to see you."

"Send them in."

With a glance at Grim, Zenina took point. They entered the door of the highest member of management and stood before his desk.

"Well, Zen. What can I do for you today? I know what I would like to do *to* you, but that is a matter for a different time."

If Marcor wasn't so obnoxious, he may even be considered handsome. His skin was a soft charcoal with brilliant blue eyes framed by midnight eyebrows and hair. His body was fit as well, looking more like that of a labourer rather than upper management.

"Charming, as always, Marcor. There is an urgent message from the Sector Guard that you need to hear."

"What is it?" Marcor considered answering his own mail beneath him, so he left it to the communications officers, Zen and Grim.

"There is a cease and desist order by the Sector Guard. They order the mine to cease operations until a new avatar is in place."

"Balén doesn't have an avatar. Hasn't had one for a century." Marcor's colouring was starting to fluctuate. A chalky tone was now underlying the charcoal.

"Apparently, one is being assigned."

"I see. Does anyone else know of this message?"

Grim gave her a look and elbowed her in the side. "No. Only Grim and I were at the com station when it came through."

"Excellent. You are dismissed."

Zen and Grim both nodded and walked out of the office and back to the com station. The screens flashed red when she entered her access code and a message popped up. "Yup, you called it. We have been fired."

"I would suggest that we both go underground until the matter is resolved." Grim wasn't wasting any time. He grabbed his jacket and collected his small bag of personal effects. Zen did the same.

They met for a small hug and then parted ways, Grim running for the commuter tunnels and Zen for her transport. Security wasn't after them yet, but it would be soon and they had to move.

Being fired wasn't the end of the world. She had enough money to move her and her family down to the city whenever she wanted. Something or someone had been depositing money in her private account

since her parents opened one for her as a child. The Sin Ars enjoyed their life above. The icy surface of the world had a cold beauty and it was Zenina's personal haven when she wanted to hide from the harsh realities of life on a mining planet.

That reminded her—she dialled her parents' code and waited until her mother picked up. "Hiya, Mom."

"Hello, sweetie. Why are you calling so early?"

"Oh, I am just out for a flight and then heading to the museum. Got dismissed from work early and need some time to unwind."

"Oh. Oh."

"Yup. So, you and Dad should relax today, enjoy your retirement. Go skiing."

"Excellent idea. Call us when you finish at the museum. You can join us if you wish." Nasha's voice was cheerful, but the motherly worry was not far beneath the chipper tone.

"Will do. Have a nice time." The conversation was one that any mother and daughter could have. Hopefully, if someone was listening in, they wouldn't think it was odd.

Zenina smiled as she disconnected the call and steered her transporter down the service tunnels. No one who had any ounce of self-esteem would use the tunnels. Security didn't even have a vehicle to drive through them. If they were waiting for her, they would be on the other side.

Mentioning the museum had been her tip off to her

mother that she was about to claim her heritage.

She wasn't the only thing that fell out of the sky almost thirty years ago. Five large stones had fallen around the globe, all being collected and transported to the Museum of Sargo. On a school trip as a child, she had seen them for the first time and had known that they were hers to claim.

The pull she felt was unmistakable. The rocks wanted to be with her and she with them, her chubby hands pressed against the glass and she relaxed into their song.

"Zenina, get away from the glass. You are not to touch it." Her teacher grabbed her shoulder and none was more surprised than little Zenina when the teacher was blasted back across the room.

The other students looked at Zen with fear in their little faces.

"I didn't do anything. The rocks are humming to me. Can't you hear it?" Her little mind didn't even register her teacher on the ground, clutching her hand.

"There is no sound, Zenina. Get away from that window." Nasha Sin Ar was next to her, pulling her daughter away from the rocks.

"But..."

"I will explain it all to you later, dear heart."

That was the night that Zenina learned of her strange appearance on Balen. She had always known her parents were not her birth parents. There was no way that two Ikath would be able to create a child

with her chalky skin.

She smiled as she remembered her mother and father's care and concern as they told her that she was a foundling. They had registered her as a crash victim and the mine didn't really care.

As soon as she was of age, she entered into the service of the planet's largest employer and lived life above ground while working below.

If she could touch a rough wall, she was fine, but entering the maze of the city, she got dizzy and disoriented. She craved contact with the planet.

The mystery of the stones was one she was about to solve. No one would be at the museum at this time of day. She had no compunction about working her way through the doors by any means necessary.

It was a good thing she had a battering bar on her transporter.

CHAPTER TWO

It took two strikes with her transporter to get through the museum doors. Once inside, she updated her memory with the new displays and made her way to the meteorites.

They were there, just as she remembered, but this time there was no teacher to stop her from touching the glass.

There was no obvious access and the alarms she tripped while battering the door were not giving her a lot of time.

Looking around, she found a crowd-control barrier and unhooked the chain from it. Swinging as hard as she could, she slammed the glass until it shattered.

Cutting her hands was a nuisance but did not stop her as she approached the stones. While kneeling in the centre of the stones, she heard the arrival of the security detachment.

With the five stones around her, she took a deep breath and touched the first. The electricity that flowed into her was warm, loving and exceptionally

familiar.

The second stone gave her the same rush and then she heard the remark, "Come out of there with your hands on your head, Sin Ar."

They knew who she was. That meant that Marcor was not hesitating in notifying all and any officers for her arrest.

"I am not coming out until I get what's mine." She touched the third stone, wincing as the noise of a stunner tore the air.

It struck her, but she simply didn't register anything more than the impact.

The fourth stone gave her a rush. The fifth gave her a feeling of invulnerability. Impacts from additional stunners were hitting her work suit. When the stones were no longer humming to her, she stood and walked out to the waiting security guards.

"Yes?"

"We have been ordered to detain you for industrial espionage."

"That is fascinating, but I believe that I am putting out quite a bit of energy at this time. It would be best if I worked off some of this power above ground."

They looked confused, but as her feet left the ground, they shouted and pulled back.

Her body heat was creating an updraft and it took her a bit of trial and error, but she managed to leave the museum, heading for the air ducts.

Zenina was rippling with joy. For the first time in

her life, she was whole. There was none of the hollowness that had marked her soul until this moment—she was complete. A few bumps on the surface of the shaft and she was out on the surface of Balen, rising into the sky.

It all looked so different to her now. Her eyes saw heat points, cold spots and the small flyer that was coming her way. When it opened fire, she had to laugh. The projectiles didn't hurt. Nothing penetrated her flesh. Not energy, not bullets.

Still snickering, she flew up, higher and higher until her clothing became stiff with frost. Spinning delightedly, she dropped back to the surface. Waving at the shuttle that came toward her out of the sky seemed like the thing to do.

* * * *

"She seems to have activated on her own." Rolland smiled at the cavorting creature ahead of him.

The voice from the other end of the com seemed eager, "Is she well?"

"She's flying. It looks like she has picked up her birthright. You may be able to visit sooner than you thought, Olaris."

"You don't know how much this means to me, Sovereign."

"Yes, I do. Your loss was one that most would not have been able to bear, but she is alive, alert and

rippling with power. Despite the physician's assessments, she has both of your characteristics."

"Balén will be pleased. He has been alone for so long."

"The same amount of time as you since the day your wife passed into the next world."

"We knew it would happen. She was at the end of her duty as avatar for Balén and could not withstand the rigors of the pregnancy."

"Enough. You can explain this all to your daughter as soon as I catch her."

While they had been talking, Sovereign had been following his soon-to-be partner through the skies. Eventually, she noted his attention and slowed to let him draw even.

She cuddled up to the side of the shuttle and her deep black eyes bored into his soul as she watched him through the window.

He mouthed two words to her, *Sector Guard*, and her face immediately brightened. He flicked the controls to open the side door and grinned when she took the hint.

She seemed remarkably cheerful for someone who was radiating enough power to rip him and his shuttle apart.

"Did you say you were with the Sector Guard?" She walked slowly and carefully up to the cockpit and her gaze met his.

He knew what she was looking at. His dark violet

skin had given more than one person pause in his lifetime. That, coupled with his white hair and scarlet eyes, made him a striking example of his species.

"I am. I am here to assist in the cessation of operations of the mine. Balen has begun to wake again and as he comes out of mourning, he is rather upset with what the colonists have been doing in his absence."

"I can imagine it would be rather distressing. I had no idea that Balen was sentient."

Sovereign took in the view that was available to him. She was wearing a work suit that would be more suited to a miner than someone with her grace and style.

"He is, but he has been mourning his avatar. She died fifty years ago."

"No offence, but who is flying the shuttle?"

She looked worried. It was rather funny, as she could fly away from any crash. "Autopilot. It is circling back along your route to the mine offices. I intend to shut this down today."

"Good. It is about time that someone ceased the strip mining. There are far less aggressive methods of extracting the minerals."

That was interesting. She may seem to be an open-faced girl of this quiet colony, but there was a sparkling intelligence in her midnight eyes.

"You are aware of these methods?"

"Of course. I did a school project on them as a

child. It simply means more labour and less mechanised methods. Less harm to the planet if manual work is done."

"You are correct, of course. May I get your name?" The polite phrase came out under duress. It would remind her of the reason they were having this conversation.

"Zenina Sin Ar. Child of Nasha and Darn Sin Ar of the Sargo mining colony."

The bow that she gave him was graceful and did not befit a woman of her status.

He stood away from the controls and gave her a bow in return. "I am called Sovereign."

The bright grin on her delightfully curved lips made him weak in the knees. "Really? As in ruler?"

"More or less. I have a grasp of logic that makes people want to follow me. It is rather flattering and embarrassing at the same time." He could feel his cheeks heating, but thankfully, it was hard to detect on his face.

"Excellent. Do you know what I am, because I have no idea beyond my emitting radiation and flying?" She crossed her arms, showing him that she did indeed have ample breasts beneath the unflattering suit. Her waist he knew about from the moment she had stood looking at him, her hands on her hips.

His interest was firmly on her and her body, barely registering her accusation and question. "Ah. Yes, I am aware of your heritage, Tears of the Star. Soon

you will be aware as well, but not until everything has calmed down. The mining vehicles that are coming out to greet us look a little hostile. Take a seat or hang onto something. We will be coming in for a riotous landing. I mean to dodge those ships."

He knew his voice sounded grim, but he locked the doors just in case she wanted to take flight again. They would shoot to kill if given the opportunity and while their rounds would have no effect, she didn't know that. It was the trauma that he was trying to spare her.

Being shot out of the sky might be distracting enough to make her impact the ground. It wouldn't kill her, but it would not be fun.

CHAPTER THREE

He had called her Tears of the Star. It was a name that sang in her blood the moment that he voiced it. The same name that her mother and father gave her when they talked of the day she came to them.

Sovereign knew who she was and something was telling her he knew where she had come from. A slight tremor ran through her at the pity and understanding in his gaze.

Zenina straightened as the first blast rocked his shuttle. Blinking in surprise as the ship swayed and she didn't, she was forced to look down to see her feet inches off the floor. "Whoa."

"Hold tight. It looks like they want to do this the hard way."

Sovereign swivelled around in his seat and gripped the controls with focussed intensity. They rocked, swung and hurtled their way through the sky, approaching the main entrance to the mineshaft at what she could only describe as breakneck speed.

Her hovering inside the ship kept her stable as her mind absently catalogued the outcroppings and

landmarks. She knew the entire surface of the planet like the back of her hand, her family having moved from the Tirn mine to the Sargo colony. Zenina had needed to be near the meteorites and her parents had made the shift to the other side of the world when she was three.

Deep inside the colony gates, Sovereign announced. "Landing gear down, prepare for touchdown."

The landing was as smooth as any that Zen had ever felt. That meant it was one out of three. She and her parents preferred to travel by transporter.

"Well done, Sovereign. They are surrounding the shuttle. What now?"

His teeth flashed white in the dark violet of his skin. "Now I do what I do best. Take control." He unlatched the harness that had kept him in the seat and rose to his feet.

Surprisingly, they were eye to eye, but it was with a light blush that she realized she was still hovering. Breathing deeply, she lowered her feet to the deck. Her hovering slowly ceased and she found her gaze even with Sovereign's chin.

"Stand aside, Tears. The Ikath at this mine are about to fall under my control." He gripped her shoulders lightly and she shivered as the contact sent ripples through her body. The touch that moved her aside was more lingering than it should have been. She was grappling with her reaction as he opened the

doors and stepped out to greet the incoming security team.

She couldn't hear what he was saying, but the reaction of the security team was amazing. They saluted and stood at attention, creating an honour guard tunnel that lead from the shuttle into the main offices of the mine.

Zen was standing in the doorway of the shuttle, bemused until the moment one of the security team noticed her. When the guns trained on her, she saw Sovereign's mouth move, but she heard nothing. The guards, however, fell to their knees.

His gesture for her to join him and the calm look in his crimson eyes was enough to make her follow him. Together, they walked from the shuttle hangar to the corporate offices, only a few comments to new security officers necessary to keep them safe and the crowd at bay.

Marcor was in his office, his secretary no match for Sovereign's low order. The woman was smiling blissfully as they passed.

When they entered the office and Zen saw the position that Marcor had taken, she stepped in front of Sovereign on instinct. The blast from the magnetic rifle struck her in the chest and threw her back against Sovereign.

She lay on the ground, fighting for breath. She wasn't hurt, just stunned. Sovereign's face was over hers for an instant, a light brush of his lips on hers

and he was standing to face their attacker.

It took less than a minute for Marcor to begin screaming.

Disturbed by the noise more than the implication, Zenina sat up and glared at the man making the sounds. The once-powerful bane of her existence was in a foetal curl on the ground, Sovereign's mouth moving in a whisper that she couldn't hear. *What was up with that?*

"Enough. He is done. Stop whatever it is that you are doing." Zen had no idea why she felt she had the right to order him around, but it seemed right.

"He tried to kill you."

"This is not the first time. Not even the first time today. The majority of the Ikath need to leave if the mining is going to be shut down. He is not capable of finding homes for others. His greed drives him. Let him be the first to leave and we will deal with what is left."

"We?" His grin was infectious, but she kept a straight face.

"We. Though I was not born to them, these are my people. Good people for the most part. If Balen wants them gone, I will help find them homes."

"Excellent. They were right about you." He crossed his arms over his chest and smiled. The writhing, whimpering male at his feet completely ignored.

"Who?"

"The Sector Guard assessment team, Balen. They

spoke very highly of you."

"Balén? Balén is aware of me?"

Of course I am. You are my most beloved daughter.

The voice in her mind almost knocked her to the floor. "Balén?"

One in the same daughter. I am glad you have finally come into your power.

"The planet is talking in my head." She could feel her eyes widen as she looked to Sovereign for explanation.

"It is earlier than expected, but not surprising." He rounded the desk and entered in a series of commands to cease operations.

"Why isn't it surprising?" She watched the commands closely. He was simply shutting down the rigs and withdrawing any exploratory teams. All staff were ordered to attend a meeting later that day, the topic of which would be disclosed at the meeting.

"Because Balén has a vested interest in your being alive and healthy. He knew your parents very well."

"Nasha and Dorn?"

"No, your birth parents. He is aware of the Sin Ars and has kept a close eye on your family your entire life."

She wanted to continue questioning him, but Marcor was stirring. "What will he remember?"

"Pain. The memory of pain anyway. My talent is not the physical, but the psychical. I tap directly into it with the power in my voice."

Marcor stood, glaring at Zenina and looking at Sovereign with confusion. "What is the meaning of this? Zenina, I ordered you to be taken into custody."

"Marcor, this is Sovereign of the Sector Guard and you ordered me killed not captured. He is here to insure the dissolution of the mining operations."

"That is ridiculous. I won't hear of it. Nothing can take control of this facility from me." The whites of his eyes were showing as he tried to enter his pass codes and the computer denied him access.

"What is going on here?"

Sovereign took point, "You are hereby relieved of duty and required to leave Balen within the next twenty-six hours. After that point, your accounts will be frozen and you will be charged with assault on a sentient planet."

The horror in his face was not feigned. "What? Balen isn't sentient."

"Yes, he is. He is also waking after his term of mourning and the surface of the planet will be resuming a normal seasonal cycle."

"How can you know this? There is no way of communicating with a planet outside of its avatar."

"The sun of this system has an avatar and has been in communication with Balen and the Sector Guard. Balen is ready to take another avatar and is not enjoying the current mining situation."

It almost looked as if her former boss would swallow his tongue, but instead, he reached into his

desk and before Sovereign could stop him, he had taken a small pulser to his head and scrambled his brain. He was dead before he hit the floor.

"Oh, Marcor. No."

Before she could do more than exclaim, Sovereign was on his knees next to the body. The ripple of power that flowed around him spread in a wave around Zen and continued on into the far expanse. She knew in that moment that something was happening beyond her standard knowledge.

She watched Sovereign stand and Marcor's eyes go from blank to fear to fury. As she watched, he replaced the pulser in the desk and stood glaring at her. The bright wave faded and Sovereign lunged to tackle Marcor before he could shoot himself in the head again.

Time had just reversed and reset in a ten-second increment. Sovereign had more going for him than a voice that could stroke a living mind. He could shift time. It left Zen wondering why she had not been affected.

"You are under arrest, Marcor Alson, for disobeying a directive issued by the sentient world you are mining. This act brings you under Alliance jurisdiction and you will face a trial."

Marcor looked shocked and nauseous. "You are only one man. How will you enforce this edict as well as remove me to face the judiciary?"

"I am one man today. An Alliance warship will

arrive tomorrow to assist with evacuation of the planet."

"What has happened to Grim?" Zen asked the question that was burning in her mind.

"He was shot while trying to escape the confines of the city. He is being held in the infirmary until he can be transferred to the dark mines. No one is allowed in." The smug look on his face told her that her worry was far too transparent.

"I will persuade them." She straightened her shoulders and turned on her heel. Her feet picked up speed as she moved into the outer halls and only the echoing shout from Sovereign followed her.

She took flight without her willing it, her body moving much more quickly when friction wasn't an issue. The rush of air past her face was far less exhilarating than the breezes outside, but it kept her aware of her location, the tastes of each area specific to the mineral content.

The infirmary was on the far side of the colony, but she made it there in less than a minute. The guards stepped aside when she approached, one or two lowering their weapons to aim them at her. None dared to fire and when she looked at the glowing white of her hands, she could guess why. She had the characteristics of an Ikath demon. Pale and fiery at the same time.

Her appearance explained the look of terror in Grim's eyes when she found his room.

CHAPTER FOUR

“**G**rim, it’s me, Zen. I am here to get you out.” She floated forward and touched the cuffs that bound him to the hospital bed.

Zenina floated back toward the open doors and called out, “Unlock him or I will haunt you in this life and beyond.”

You are doing well, child. Saru is impressed with your adaptation to your parents’ skills.

Balen, is that you?

Yes, child. I have finished grieving. It is time to live again.

The snow?

The snow will melt, oceans will fill and wildlife will be returned to the surface. The Alliance will see to it.

What will the result be?

The mines will fill with water. It is why they must stop drilling immediately. The warming process has begun and the water will take its rightful place. Even I cannot stop it now.

Oh shit.

Language, child.

His chiding was the last that she heard. She felt him leave her and sighed. It was a lot of power that she felt when Balen spoke.

“What were you just thinking of, Zen?”

“I was speaking to Balen.” She supervised the unlocking of his shackles and informed the guard, “Marcor has been arrested and is being held on charges. You may want to check in with the Sector Guard representative before you follow anyone else’s orders.” She flexed her hands, relieved when the glow subsided.

The guard and his co-worker ran for the exit while she shook her hair over her shoulders and turned back to her friend.

“Grim. They shot you?”

“Yeah. I am doing better now though. Say what you will about the mines, we have excellent health care.” He chuckled and groaned as he sat up and gingerly swung his legs out of the bed.

She held out her hand, but he waved her back.

“You look different, Zen. I am guessing that you found the part of you that was missing?” They had discussed her lack of cohesion before. It seemed that only he and her parents had ever noticed.

“I did. Right where I left it. Do you still have your family’s shuttle available?”

Like many of the colonists, Grim’s family had come to Balen to start a new life and hopefully get a good piece of property for their labours. They had been

relatively wealthy before they arrived and had their own shuttle to transport family.

"Sure. We just did the regular maintenance on it last month."

"There is an evacuation coming to Balen. If you want to live, you will want to be first off the planet." She was walking next to him as he shuffled out of the hospital room and toward the exit.

"Is that what the message was about?"

"Yup. Balen is waking and the surface will warm. That means that the mines we have been working in are going to flood. Even this city might fill with water."

"How do you know this?"

"Balen has been speaking to me."

At her friend's look of scepticism, she shrugged. "I can't explain it. It simply is. Balen is talking to me and calls me *child*. He knows me, knows who and what I am. Which is more than I do." She rubbed at her forehead with one hand.

He groaned and she stepped under his uninjured side to support him. "You always were an odd one, Zen. Did I hear you mention the Sector Guard?"

"Yes. There is a representative here. His name is Sovereign. He knows more about me than I do as well. I have to say that it sort of ticks me off."

His chuckle was harsh but genuine. "That sounds like the Zen I know. Even if you look like a demon from the temple."

"You should see the Guard. He is a deep violet with white hair and red eyes. Truly striking."

He made a humming noise in his chest. "You like him."

"Yes. I think I do. But keep my secret for a while, will you? I am not sure he is interested."

The laugh that Grim let out cost him some pain, but seemed to relieve him a little. "You have always been oblivious to that sort of thing. You could have been wed with a dozen little pale babies if you had simply gone along with any of your suitors."

"Where would the fun have been in that? If I had wed, I would never have been partnered with you and then you would have been stuck in middle management flirting with secretaries."

"Yeah, that life would have been so much more horrible than being shot by my own kind."

"Shut up and keep walking. Sovereign has withdrawn the guards, but we need to get you somewhere safe so you can contact your family and get them ready to move."

"You are sure that Balen wants us off?"

"No, but he wants us out. The thought of drowning this many people is causing him stress, but there is no stopping the thaw." The tenuous connection between her and the planet was growing by the minute.

Waves of sensation and knowledge of the planet beyond what she already possessed was spreading

through her. The urgency was the underlying tone for any and all creatures on the surface.

A light skimmer came into her field of vision, Sovereign at the controls. He took in their close proximity and scowled at her companion. The skimmer dropped to the ground in their path, bringing them to a sudden stop.

"Your companion looks as if he needs assistance, Tears." Sovereign's voice was calmer than he looked.

If she wasn't sure that it was impossible, she would guess he was jealous.

"Yes, please. He wasn't a lightweight when he was in good health. Now he is just a brick with feet."

"Hey, wounded co-worker here. A little respect would be nice."

"You didn't get respect from me before you were wounded...why would now be different?" She chuckled as Sovereign took her place and easily walked Grim to the skimmer.

"Heartless. You are a heartless woman. You know that they were going to send me to the dark mine?"

That silenced her. "I know. If it makes you feel better, they had orders just to kill me outright."

He shuddered as Sovereign helped him to a seat in the circular skimmer. "Aren't you coming, Zen?"

"Yeah, but I am going under my own power. I will just follow along." As the skimmer lifted off, so did she. The instinct to fly was overpowering, so she was taking any and every excuse to exert herself.

"Zen. You are flying!"

"No, I am not. You were also struck in the head when you were shot. It is horrible, but you will be having to deal with your brain damage for the rest of your life."

Sovereign was chuckling quietly as they nagged at each other like perturbed siblings. She was slightly embarrassed, but Zen just couldn't let the relief she felt about Grim's survival turn into anything but sarcastic remarks.

Her friend couldn't stop looking at her, so she started to do loop-de-loops and figures in the air to keep him entertained.

"How are you doing that?"

"I went to the museum and molested the meteor exhibit. I finally feel whole, Grim. And just for the record, I am not insane—I can really hear the planet's voice."

He snorted and winced at the tug on his wound. "Only avatars can hear the planet. Isn't that correct, Sovereign?"

"You are correct. Zenina is to be the next avatar of Balen." His words should have surprised her, but they didn't. It explained the comfort that she felt when Balen touched her mind.

Wait a minute. "I am the next avatar? Balen is going to move into my brain? Was I going to be consulted?"

Sovereign sighed and flew back to the spot where he had landed his shuttle. "This requires a little more

privacy than can be afforded at this time. There is an abandoned city that will be a suitable refuge for this discussion. Grim, will you join us?"

The question was pure politeness. Grim was unable to go anywhere under his own power and he wasn't safe until the guards were all firmly in hand.

"I will go wherever Zen does. She seems to tend to land on her feet." His white teeth flashed in his charcoal face. "Besides, if she is the new avatar, it would be nice to be at her side at the moment of combination. I might get a nice house out of it."

The image that sprang to her mind of Grim in her mother's apron sweeping a home on the surface of the planet kept her snickering as Sovereign lifted off and flew them out of the colony and into the sky of the planet beyond.

Zenina breathed easier as they entered the light of the afternoon sun. Had it only been a few hours since she had gone to work? It seemed as if so much had happened.

"Sovereign, how far back can you wind time? I have been meaning to ask you."

His red gaze flicked over to her in resignation. "I noticed that you did not become part of the rewind."

"Excellent. Answer the question please."

"Two minutes for one person is the furthest back I have been able to rewind time. It usually takes on the form of a bubble that expands around thirty feet. Your connections to the planet must have restricted

your susceptibility."

"So you really do rewind time?"

"I command time to flow backward. It obliges and I can undo the worst of people's actions if I am fast enough." He shrugged, the heavy flex of his shoulders keeping her attention for a moment too long. He noticed her staring and grinned.

"Tears, there is a flight suit for you in the rear compartment under the bench where Grim is reclining. It may be a little large, but it will contain any residual radiation that you are emanating."

New clothing was always a treat and anything was better than her company work suit. "Shift it, Grim. I need to get underneath you."

Her buddy groaned, but stood aside as she went scrambling for the promised flight suit. "Oh. Pretty." Beaded inverted vees progressed down the suit to the base of her rib cage. The studs flowed from her waist to the ankle of the leggings in lovely waves. The whole uniform was in white, silver and the same charcoal as Grim's skin.

Chortling with pleasure, she hauled out matching boots and nipped into the lav to change her clothing. The suit almost fit perfectly. It was simply a little loose around the knees and tight around the thighs and hips.

It had been designed for someone taller, with less curves. She smiled as she tugged on the boots. The story of her life, everything just didn't quite fit.

CHAPTER FIVE

“The city here has been abandoned since Balen’s avatar passed away a century ago.” Sovereign circled the city once before landing in a courtyard.

“Why isn’t it covered with ice?” It was bizarre. All the mountains around were covered with ice and snow, but this city was green and stone in the centre of the white.

“Balen opened the thermal vents to the surface five years ago in an effort to prepare a suitable home for you.”

She strode around in her new boots and clothing, warmer than if she had been wearing full winter gear.

Grim was in that very puffy winter gear as he looked at the city with astonishment and the sky with distrust.

“It’s the surface, Grim. Get over it.” She had no such qualms. Her body craved the light from their one sun, Saru.

She sprinted to the tallest rock that she could find and flung her arms wide, revelling in the sun and

wind on her body through the suit.

Sovereign was staring at her as she rejoined them next to the shuttle. "I have sent a message to the avatar of Saru. He will be here momentarily."

"The sun has an avatar? He has never been to Balen."

"He has not been here since his wife passed. Alriel was the avatar of Balen and wife of Olaris." There was something in his voice. He was trying to tell her something, but she couldn't figure out what it was.

"That is sad. Were they together long?"

"Five hundred years. She had been Balen's avatar for fifteen hundred years when she finally passed." He was giving her an intent look from his crimson eyes. "She was pregnant and they put the baby into an incubator so that it would survive. It took seventy years for it to slowly grow into a child that could survive on its own, when the child was ready, Olaris sent it to Balen."

Oh. That is what he was getting at. "So, Olaris is..."

"Your father, avatar of Saru. Alriel was your mother, avatar of Balen." With the words out in the air, Grim was looking shocked with his hand over his mouth and Sovereign was looking sombre.

"And Olaris is on his way?"

Sovereign pointed to the bright light in the sky that was getting more vivid with every second. A pulsing gold and purple light approached and as it got closer,

she saw the man inside the aura.

For the first time in her life, she saw someone who looked just like her. The pale skin and midnight hair were definitely the same race as she was and when she looked at his eyes, the black orbs reminded her of her own in every way.

He stopped in front of her and bowed. She nodded in return, an inclination of her head that neither of her parents had taught her.

A wistful grin flowed over his features. "You have her face."

"And your eyes."

Recognition rippled through him. "You know?"

"Just now. I have always known I fell from the stars, but didn't know my point of origin until just now. You loved her very much. I can see it in your eyes." She had the urge to offer comfort to him, even though they had just met. His grief was palpable.

"She wanted a child more than anything. I am glad that we were able to bring you into the world. Ariel was strong willed, even as her body weakened. She would be proud that you have grown into such a determined woman."

She couldn't ignore the hand that he extended. The moment that their hands touched, she felt the resonance between them. Zenina had confirmation in that strange harmony, she had indeed come from this tall stranger radiating strength and power.

He felt something as well. His eyes widened and a

glistening tear tracked down his cheek. "You look so much like her. You even tilt your head the same way when you are holding back your emotions."

"I don't—"

Grim let out a laugh. "Yes, you do. Sorry to eavesdrop, but you do twist your head to one side when you are trying to hold in your emotions, Zen."

She turned to glare at her friend where he was sitting beside Sovereign. Both men were looking terribly innocent.

"Quiet, you. No one asked you, Grim."

Olaris turned, "May I meet your companions, Zenina Sin Ar?"

She blushed. "Of course. This is my partner, Grim Garymor. Grim, this is my...birth father, I suppose, Olaris. Olaris, this is Sovereign of the Sector Guard."

Zen thought about it for a moment. "Come to think of it, Olaris, you and Sovereign have probably already met."

"We have communicated, but it is difficult for me to restrain my radiation for any length of time, so I avoid visiting."

As she smiled into his dark eyes, a swirling gold took over, "Greetings, Zenina, daughter of Ariel by Olaris. I am Saru. Balen has been awaiting your coming of age although he is far too polite to say so. His grief over the loss of his avatar was all consuming. She was a very special woman."

A lump formed in Zen's throat. To be told that the

woman who brought her to life was considered special by a star and the planet who mourned her was truly a humbling experience. "I wish I had been able to know her, but my parents on the surface were wonderful. I could not have asked for better."

"Olaris was involved in the choice. He almost did not let you leave the growth capsule he had constructed. But when both Balen and I told him it must be done, he watched carefully and chose as best he could. The Sin Ars seem to be a good set of parents and they wanted a baby very badly. They were also willing to raise you on the surface, so that was a bonus." The smile was not the same as Olaris's, but was just as warm and slightly proud. "My avatar chose well."

"He did. I have always known I was a foundling, but never regretted those who found me. Well, there were a few hairy years when I was a teen, but fortunately, I grew out of it."

The laugh that all the men shared was a little embarrassing, but she took it with good humour.

"I should have known that it would be obvious that you were not Ikath. The history of your race is inside the great library. Also, the written history of your mother and her coming to Balen."

"What of Olaris's history?" She was watching his eyes and saw the black surge against the gold.

"He will tell you himself. He wants to have an excuse to visit." Saru wasn't subtle and it made Zen

laugh.

"I think you might have embarrassed him."

"He would be a fool to stay away and not help you train with your growing talents. Because both of your parents were active avatars, you carried the talent for stellar and terrestrial manipulation from birth. It was only a matter of power. That is what the meteors were for. They carried the raw power that you were able to remove from the stone."

Well, that explained that. It even explained Balen's ability to speak to her, not because she was an avatar, but because part of the planet's power was humming in her own veins.

"When will Balen want to take possession?"

"Soon, I should think. He needs to get the planet back to productivity. Balen has rich fields and richer oceans. The Alliance is coming to reseed the planet in a week."

"Reseed?"

"Plants, animals. It is a little traumatic when a planet mourns, so the animals were removed. The plants might come back, but it will be some time before they are up to their full growth, so implants are necessary."

"Is this reseeded process part of why the planet is being evacuated?"

"Yes. That and the massive upheaval that will occur when Balen gets it into full motion. There will be seismic events, flooding and windstorms that will

make the planet uninhabitable. This is why the Alliance has not only the warship on the way, but also the bio forming ships close behind them. The moment that someone can touchdown on Balen, they will be here to start the reseeded."

She blinked in surprise. "Wow. That quickly."

"Unsentient planets are slow to move. Sentient ones know what precisely to do and how to do it."

"There are over ten thousand people here, where will they go?" Her parents' faces hovered in her mind, their earnest features forcing the question from her.

"There is a full warship that will be here tomorrow, as well as a deep space station. It is my home assignment, Station 13." The delight in his eyes was unmistakeable. He was looking forward to the station's arrival.

"That is all well and good, but do they have enough fuel to transport that many people or enough time?"

Sovereign put a hand on her shoulder, the contact sending a ripple of sensation through her. She hadn't even heard him approach.

"There are ten evac ships on that warship. Each carries two hundred evacuees, so in five trips apiece, the planet will be clear. There are also small ships on the station that will help with vital personnel, your parents included."

Saru was watching them with shades of Olaris in

his eyes. "You were worried?"

"They are my family. I have enjoyed meeting Olaris, but Nasha and Dorn raised me, taught me to walk, went with me on my first day of school and held me when I cried about being different. They are my family." Zen shrugged. "I am sorry, but they come first, even above my own life."

Sovereign nodded solemnly. "They will be guarded and transported to Station 13 as soon as it comes within shuttle distance."

A frisson of relief ran through her. "Thank you. I wish they were here. Wait, can they be there when Balen joins with me?"

Saru smiled at her and let Olaris resume control. "Of course. It is only appropriate. I believe that Balen is anxious for you to begin your duties."

Something clicked. "Is that why we are here at this city? Is there a temple or something for Balen?"

Olaris smiled. "Yes. There is a temple on the far side of the courtyard. Sovereign, could you retrieve Nasha and Dorn Sin Ar? I believe that Zenina sent them to the slopes of Vahsh."

A grin came across her features, "Not exactly. My asking them to go to the slopes was a signal that they needed to head for an abandoned mineshaft I found as a child."

Where did you send them?

She thought about it, "Southern slope of Sargo. Why?"

Because that shaft is attached to the airway that allowed me to clear this city. It is under rapidly rising water.

Olaris must have heard Balen, because as she rose into the sky, so did he. Holding her breath didn't make her move any faster, but thinking of her parents under a rising tide moved her until the air boomed around her as she broke the sound barrier. An answering boom from Olaris let her know that he was at her side.

She slowed moderately as they approached the mine opening, the door was ajar and that chilled Zen's blood. She had sent her parents into danger. If harm came to them, she would never forgive herself.

As she landed to enter the mine with Olaris at her side, her day went completely whacky as her suit started to talk to her.

CHAPTER SIX

“Tears, where are you?” Sovereign’s voice was emanating from the collar of the suit.

“I am at the Sargo mine site. Olaris and I are trying to find my parents. Balen mentioned that this area is one of the first to flood. They will drown if we don’t get to them soon.”

“Understood. I will attempt to communicate with them and let them know you are on the way.”

It was a relief that he simply took her word as bond. Telling him that the invisible man in her head was giving her geographic information would have taken far too much time. “Standard com units won’t reach.”

“You have no idea what kind of toys the Sector Guard has. I will tell them you are coming. Now go.”

Taking a deep breath, Zenina strode into the narrow confines of the mine entrance. Olaris was right behind her. “Thank you for coming with me, Olaris.”

“It is the least I could do for the ones who held you

when you needed it." The warmth in his voice was unmistakable.

She understood him a little more in that moment. Reaching out, she touched his hand and held it for a moment. The contact caused a smile to break on his face and she smiled in return before running down the familiar passages as if her life depended on it.

"Why don't you fly?"

"I am not used to it and in the confines of the mine, contact with the ground is key to keeping me oriented. We are almost to the shaft leading to our hidey-hole. We can and will fly in the shaft."

The safety bars surrounding the pit were ignored as they both went up, over and into the mineshaft.

It was a slow fall but a fall nonetheless. She held onto the hand that Olaris extended to her when they reached the five-hundred-foot mark. She could hear the lapping of the rising water. They had less than a minute.

"Mom, Dad. Come to the edge of the pit." Zen and Olaris hovered near the entrance to the safe hole that was lined with all the comforts of home.

"Zenina...you are flying!" Nasha's open and hopeful face was the first one that Zen saw in the dim light.

"Yes, Mom." Landing lightly, she looked down at the rising water. "Grab on, Mom. I am going to fly you out of here. Olaris will get Dad."

Dorn appeared wearing a suit that matched the one

his wife was wearing. "Sparkles, you look wonderful."

"Thanks, Dad. Now grab hold of Olaris and he will fly you to the surface. I will take Mom." She turned with her back to her mother, relieved when the well-worn hands wrapped around her from behind and held her around her neck. It was a backward hug, but she only waited until Olaris had done the same with Dorn and taken off before launching her and her mother skyward.

Sharp breathing from behind her slowed her flight when Zen wanted nothing more than to blast out of the shaft, "Relax, Mom. I will get us to the surface in a reasonable and safe manner."

"Of course that is what you consider it, my dear. But don't forget, you couldn't always fly." The motherly tone in her ear made her laugh. There was no doubt in Zen's mind that her mom was scared stiff, but she was simply trying to keep it swallowed until they reached the stability of ground.

She chuckled as she over shot the entrance to the mineshaft and her mother's hands clenched. Nasha always let everyone around her know what she was thinking. It was reassuring in some ways. With Nasha, you never had to guess.

She landed as gently as she could, her feet bracing her until she could lean back to release her mother. "There you go, Mom. Safe and sound. Now, I have to ask. What the heck are you wearing?"

Her parents were standing across from her each wearing thick black suits not part of the standard Sin Ar wardrobe.

"Sovereign contacted us and told us to get into radiation suits. He was right—the heat coming off your skin is too much for prolonged contact, but not for a hug, Nina." Dorn came forward and gave her a hug that she returned with enthusiasm.

"I was worried. I am pretty sure that I broke the sound barrier, Dad. You would have loved it." She smirked. "From a distance."

"I am a ground pounder, Nina, I always have been. The sky freaks me out, though I know that it has always drawn you." Dorn ruffled her hair, then turned to Olaris. "Who is this?"

"Dorn and Nasha Sin Ar, may I present Olaris, avatar of Saru and my blood father." She put an arm around her mother and gave her a quick hug while Dorn and Olaris looked each other over.

The stocky and dependable Dorn looked squat next to the lean and rangy Olaris, but when she looked at the two, she saw her father and an elegant stranger. A friend but not quite family. Not yet. That feeling would have to be earned.

"Thank you for taking my daughter into your family, thank you for raising her and most of all, thank you for holding her when she cried." Olaris bowed low to Dorn, making the Ikath blink in surprise.

"Thank you for giving us the child we did not have, for completing the family that we were unable to create, for giving us the gift of raising Zenina and watching her become what she is today." Dorn and Nasha bowed as Olaris straightened. When they straightened, a three-way hug took place and lasted a very long time.

Zenina watched with tears pricking her eyes until her stomach rumbled in protest. She was hungry and she had missed two meal times.

She was about to speak when her suit spoke again. "Tears, move your parents to the mouth of the mine, I have brought the shuttle and we need to be on our way to the city once again. Balen is growing eager to come back to life."

"Yes, Sovereign. On our way."

"Balen? The planet Balen? It's alive?" Nasha peppered Zen with questions as she escorted her parents back down the hallway.

"Yes. My blood mother was Balen's avatar. She bore me a hundred years ago and Olaris kept me safe in a growth chamber until I was big enough to launch back to the planet for a proper upbringing."

"You were a baby."

"Apparently, I had been out of my mother for several decades by that point." She smiled and kept her parents to the pace that Olaris was setting.

It was quite nice in the cavern, Olaris was glowing brightly enough to light the way and even Zen's skin

was engaging in a little luminescence. Her parents were safe and she was about to take on the mantle of an avatar. *Oops*. "Mom, I have something to tell you."

"Yes, Nina, what is it?" The nickname warmed her heart as it always did.

"I am about to become the avatar of Balen."

The sudden stop of the Ikath almost had her running into her parents.

"What?"

"Balen needs a new avatar, he has been in mourning since my mother died and now wants to resume his status as a fertile agricultural centre."

"And he is going to jump into your body to this end?" Dorn was looking every inch the offended father.

Olaris merely looked on in amusement.

"I suppose so. I hate to tell you—it doesn't feel wrong. I feel like he has been part of me this whole time." She shrugged and tried to get her parents moving.

"You are staying where you are until we get some answers." Her mother and father locked arms in her path. It was not the first time they had used this manoeuvre and she hoped it would not be the last.

Sovereign could wait. "All right, Balen's avatar, Alriel was Olaris's wife. She had been an avatar for a very long time when they met after he had taken on the position of avatar of Saru. She was nearing the end of her life when she became pregnant. I was

placed into a growth chamber by Olaris when Alriel died and I grew until the day that he launched me and the power that was mine onto the surface of the planet.”

Her parents held hands tightly, she could see them remembering the night she came to them.

“Balén has been in mourning for his avatar for the last century. It is not an ice world, but a world locked in grief that the Ikath have been mining. It is time for the mining to stop and for Balén to bloom once again. For that to be complete, Balén needs an avatar. Oddly enough, I am perfectly suited to the task.”

Nasha and Dorn absorbed what she had told them. Nasha finally asked, “How long will you live?”

That made her blink. Zen looked over at Olaris and raised her brows.

“Centuries, maybe more. Alriel had been avatar to Balén for fifteen hundred years when she died at last.”

Dorn and his wife shared a silent communication. “Very well. We will give you our blessing to become avatar, but if Balén lets you come to harm, we will find every mining raider in the vicinity to destroy the surface of this world.”

Olaris’s eyes went wide at that blatant threat, but Zen just smiled and hugged her parents. “I love you, too, Dad.”

Her gruff and quiet Dad ruffled her hair. Nasha gave her a kiss on the cheek. It was a ringing

endorsement.

“Excellent. Now, if you don’t mind, let’s go get a planet in my head.” Her stomach growled again, “And maybe some lunch.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

They were on the shuttle and in the air before her parents could change their mind.

Sovereign asked, "What kept you?"

"We were delayed while negotiating for possession of my body. My parents have agreed to share me with Balen provided that he guarantees me a long life." She swung into the co-pilot's seat and watched his competent hands steer the shuttle across the icy surface of her home.

"They are in favour of it?" He seemed surprised.

"If it keeps me whole and healthy, I don't think there is much they wouldn't agree to." She could hear the warmth in her own voice and kept her eyes focused on the view screen in front of her. Olaris and her parents were staring at each other in the back of the shuttle and she didn't feel comfortable taking sides in there.

"That is one less care for you. My own sister is leery of my taking up the avatar assignment myself."

"Really? You, too?"

"Yes. Olaris wishes to retire to form what bond he can with you, leaving Saru with no avatar. I am physically acceptable and have already discussed the matter with the Guard and the Alliance. They are ready to hand me over the moment that Olaris gives me the signal. I will need to train in space while you are here on the ground, but I think we may be able to develop a focused communication. Possibly even meet for tea now and then." He winked at her and it was a gesture that Nasha saw.

Blushing furiously, Zen returned her gaze to the view screen once again. The city was looming larger as they approached and a fine tension entered her body. A ration bar had satisfied her hunger, this was all anticipation.

You are looking forward to it?

"Yes. I am." She knew that she answered out loud when Sovereign turned to look at her. "Sorry, talking to Balen." *Yes, I am.*

I am glad. You don't have to go through with it just because you are the most suitable candidate, you know.

I feel as if this is a missing piece of my life. Whatever part of herself Alriel left in me, it wants to be back in the position of avatar and frankly, I don't have any objection to it.

It wasn't a smile but physical warmth that ran over Zenina and it was the equivalent of a hug from the mind of the planet. *See you soon.*

The silence of the shuttle was solemn. Olaris and

Sovereign seemed almost humming with anticipation and her parents were sitting in a calm, subdued manner, willing to support her in whatever her choices were. As long as they were included, they were fine with all of her exploits.

The city grew larger again, filling her with a sense of belonging. The city would be hers, was meant to be hers. She was going home.

Olaris led the way to the temple. Zenina didn't need to follow, she could find the gathering mind of Balen in the dark. She had to hold herself back so that she wouldn't charge in and throw herself into the planet's embrace.

The stone temple was a forest of spires and organically shaped stones. The granite trees reached to the sky, forming a pillar of twisting stone that formed the centre of the city. Doors at the base opened as they approached.

"Wow." Zenina would have continued into the gem-lit interior but Sovereign's hand held her back while the others moved into the temple.

"A moment, Tears."

She looked up into his serious ruby eyes and nodded. "What?"

"I was sent here for three reasons. One, to coordinate the evacuation, two, to be your partner and mate and three, to eventually join the ranks of avatars when Olaris retires. He has requested that he

be replaced as Saru's avatar and I am an agreeable match."

Blinking in surprise, she absorbed the new information. "Wait...my mate?"

"In time, yes. Is this objectionable to you?"

For someone who could make the majority of people do exactly what he said, he was looking distinctly nervous. Grinning, Zenina reached up, grabbed the back of his neck and pulled his head down to hers. She idly heard her mother gasp and her fathers chuckle, but she was far too interested in the taste of the man in her arms.

When she pulled her head back, she was firmly against him, held there by his arms around her waist. "Answer enough?"

"For now. I will have to ask the question later. Your answer might change." His grin showed his white sharp teeth in his violet face. "I look forward to finding out."

His hands were still firmly around her and it was the cleared throat of Olaris that broke their moment of bonding.

"It is time. Balen is ready. It needs to be now, Zenina." Her blood father was standing next to her and with her cooperation, he withdrew her from Sovereign's embrace.

"I will see you after the bonding is finished, Tears of the Star." Sovereign bowed low and straightened.

As she was led into the temple, she asked him,

"Why do you call me that?"

"Until you can know my given name, I will not use yours."

"You have a given name?"

His grin was infectious as she caught it over her shoulder. "I do. And as soon as you are an avatar and agree to become a Sector Guard, I will tell you what it is."

"Then let's get this show on the road."

There was a glow at the centre of the temple. It was green, blue and exceptionally bright. Balen's essence distilled into a coalesced form.

Zen knew in that instant just what to do.

She hugged her mother and kissed her cheek. Hugged Dorn and kissed his cheek, then pressed her hands together with Olaris in a formal greeting. Palm to palm, they stood for a minute, matching power to power, their blood bond humming through the air around them in a halo of energy.

Olaris was smiling with tears running down his face. Zen knew it was her acceptance of him and what he and she were that had pushed the emotional button. They were avatars, born and bred.

She gave Sovereign a quick wave and strode forward into the rapidly flaring energy that was Balen.

She floated high in the air, the feeling of Balen's energy joining with her cells a combination of pleasure and pain. It

was like being taken apart by a warm, cuddly laser.

Zenina Sin Ar tried to scream, but the only noise was a triumphant howl from Zenina/Balen. They were one and the world was brighter and more vivid for their joining.

Zenina/Balen came to herself and slowly floated down to the center of the now-visible polished crystal. When her feet touched the ground, she could feel the solidity of the crystal and she *knew* that it extended five miles below ground. It was maintained by Balen and it had been his outlet into his new avatar.

"Zenina? Are you in there?" Nasha Sin Ar was speaking to her.

"She is. I am in control for the moment. I am honoured to meet you face to face, Nasha." The bow she executed was formal and designed to convey her respect for the mother of the avatar.

Another bow, this time to Dorn. "And you, Dorn. You guarded her well."

The couple clung to each other and stared into her eyes.

"My eyes are..."

"Metallic blue." Sovereign seemed the least affected by her transformation.

"Ah, with Alriel they were green. Good. Change is good." She flexed her fingers and shifted in the body, feeling the response of muscle and tendon after one hundred years.

Sovereign stopped her slow progress around the room. "Balén, we have serious matters to attend to."

"Which are? I am sorry, it is just nice to have a body again."

"Evacuating the miners and coordinating housing for them."

"Right. Excellent. Thank you." He could feel her face stretch in a smile and then he allowed Zenina to come forward completely. Balén would always remain in the background because he did not need to be active to enjoy the freedom that a body afforded.

"Tears. How are you feeling?" Sovereign's hands were on her arms, supporting her.

Zenina smiled and freed one hand to tap her temple. "Full but not uncomfortable. Shall we go to the mine and organize the evacuation?"

"Nina? Is that you again?" Nasha was coming up to her, touching her face with wondering fingers.

"It is, Mom. Balén is still here, but I am driving. From now on in, we share the vehicle." She gestured to her body.

"Does it hurt? It looked like it hurt."

Walking out the doors, she smiled as Saru spread his rays across her face. She could feel Saru now, on the same level as Balén, but slightly muted. Saru was a song in the distance—Balén was a choir in the room.

"It did at first, but now it is a warming embrace. Like a warm coat after a cold shift." It was a common mining phrase in reference to the colder areas that

they had excavated. Safety gear meant that clothing was minimized, so when you stopped moving, you started freezing. Loved ones were known to wait outside the mineshaft for the end of the shift with a hot beverage and a warm coat.

Her mother's smile at the description was a little weak, but the urge to fly was too strong to keep her on the ground anymore. "I will meet you back at the mines. Sovereign can reach me if he needs to."

The power that she had just absorbed demanded use, so up she went. Warm air flowed around her, whipping her hair back as she spiralled and spun through the sky of her planet. It was hers and she wanted to see every inch of it, but for today, she would have to settle for a few hours of playtime.

She flew through snowy thunderstorms and dodged lightning, knowing the destination of every strike before it fell.

Zenina could see the streams and rivers that were locked in the ice, soon to flow once again. That thought brought the mine back to her and the Ikath who were all waiting for something to happen.

She had better go and speak to her people.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sovereign and her parents were waiting for her back at the mine. Zen let Balen take her body over and waited to see what the planet would say to those who were burrowing under its skin.

“Greetings, Ikathan miners. Though you may recognize this body, I am Balen and this is my avatar Zenina.”

Angry murmurs rippled through the crowd and two raised hands and a pulse of power stilled the suspicion into attention.

“The planet’s face is changing. With my mourning for my previous avatar over, I am once again able to resume a normal seasonal cycle. This means that all of the mines will be flooded for several years while the normal water patterns resume.”

Shock was written on every grey-black face.

“Evacuation has been arranged. Housing and relocation will be available until the planet is completely habitable again. This could take three months to a year. I am attempting to make the

transition violent and complete, but a few seasons will need to pass before the surface is habitable again.

“For many of you, the thought of living on the surface is unpalatable and for those, assignments are being arranged at mining colonies throughout the Alliance. You may go where you wish at my expense.

“Any and all of you will be financially compensated for this disruption, full relocation will be offered to all of you if you wish it.”

Balen drew a deep breath and made a statement that surprised even Zen. “This planet is going to be one of the new Sector Guard bases. The jungles that will be revived will be training centres, as will the desserts and the slopes of the high mountains. This means that we will need a base, construction staff and operating staff for many years to come. I hereby offer this employment to all of the current inhabitants of Balen.

“If you choose this path, you will be offered training and lodgings on one of the space stations and when the surface is stable, you will be able to return.”

A murmur of conversation broke out amongst those gathered. Some seemed intrigued by the prospect of continuing life on Balen, others were looking at her as if they thought this was all a joke.

“Return to your homes. The evacuation vehicles will arrive tomorrow and the planet must be cleared as soon as possible. I have already begun the thaw process in some areas and it is going to flood the

mines within a few hours. You will not be returning to the mines, no one will be allowed to drill into my body, all living beings must leave with all haste."

She was drawing breath to speak again when a voice rang out, "Why?"

"Why what?" An Ikath male with violet eyes was glaring at her.

"Why choose that freak as an avatar and not one of us?"

A murmur of assent ran through those assembled and Zen sighed in her mind, letting Balen field that one.

"Not just anyone can be an avatar. Planets and stars search for years before they can find one with a compatible mind. This person must be willing and we wish them to be free of marriage. Zenina was such a one. Her mind and mine are in synch, have been since she was a child. It is natural, of course. Her mother was my previous avatar."

Many confused eyes turned to Nasha, then locked on Olaris with dawning understanding.

"She is the child of two avatars, raised by Ikath, has worked in the mines and has nothing but your best interests in her heart. She is truly the best representative that you could have."

If Zen had been in control, she would have been blushing.

"How do we know that you are not simply Zenina trying to pull some sort of trick on us."

Balen sighed and within their mind, warned her that she would need to speak.

"Watch my eyes. I am now Balen in control of the body..." Balen receded and Zen stepped forward. The gasp that greeted her return showed that those in the first dozen rows could see her clearly.

"And now you see before you, your co-worker, Zenina Sin Ar. Balen is serious. He is coming out of a period of grieving and wishes to be alive once again. This means thawing the surface and that means a lot of water. He does not want anyone to die, but cannot let the mining continue. The ground will be saturated and we have created holes that were never designed to support that mass of water."

She turned to the violet-eyed Ikath. "Why me, Rasul? Because I love the scent of a fresh breeze, I seek out sunlight, I revel in the nature that Balen has left on the surface. This is my home as it was my mother's before me. My father, Olaris, avatar of Saru, stands ready to assist, carrying out his duty to the sun that allows our power collectors to function. If Saru decides to remove his assist to the planet, habitation won't be an issue. We will freeze solid in under a week."

That got their attention. Balen resumed control. "Go to your homes, have dinner, discuss amongst your family what you wish to do. Whether search out other mines or remain here in this system, on the surface, working for the Sector Guard. You have a

choice.”

Balen turned and walked toward Olaris, Sovereign and the Sin Ars. There was a noise behind her and she whirled in time to extend a hand to catch the projectiles that had been fired at her.

Zenina watched her hand in surprise as it extended, increased the density of the muscle and bone and caught the bullets in a magnetic field before dropping them to the floor.

“That was a little rude. You have sixteen hours before the evacuation begins, I suggest you stop playing with weapons and pack a bag.” The blast of air that ripped through the caverns brought the increased moisture to them in a way that the lecture hadn’t. With yelps and wide eyes, the stragglers and the armed moron ran for their homes.

“Children. I am dealing with children.” Balen shook her head and walked up to Sovereign. “Zenina wishes that you make sure the dark mine has been evacuated. This apparently doubles as a penal facility, so be careful.”

“Will do, Balen. I am glad you are making such an easy transition.”

“Zen and I are of the same mind, literally.” Balen turned her body toward Nasha and Dorn, “Do you wish to stay and work on the Sector Guard base? There is an administrative position for Nasha and plenty of construction work for you, Dorn.”

“We would love to stay here if we are able to.”

"Consider it done. I will file your request with the Alliance myself. You will still receive the relocation fee, but you will also get new housing on the surface once the thaw is underway."

Delight ran through their faces and Zen was happy to step forward into control. "I am so glad you want to stay. You would not believe what this planet will look like once it is blooming again. I have never seen something that green."

She hugged her parents and turned to Olaris, "I look forward to getting to know you better."

"When I take up residence here, it will be a little easier."

Zen just nodded as she saw the image in Balen's mind. Olaris was planning to retire and become the administrator of the guard base. Sovereign would be taking over the position of avatar much sooner than she had anticipated.

Don't worry, as an avatar, you are impervious to radiation. You will be able to take him as mate without any trouble.

That was not my primary concern.

It was one of mine. I would like for my avatar to survive having a child and having the next generation grow up to fly free in the Alliance.

You want me to have kids?

Yes.

Why?

I like children.

Zen would have been shaking her head if they

weren't having this conversation at the speed of thought. Balen wanted children—that was an interesting development.

Now, what were the odds that Sovereign would be willing?

CHAPTER NINE

Watching the shuttles descend was a beautiful thing. In a surprisingly orderly fashion, the Ikath were lining up for entry onto the evac vehicles and the first batch was away.

Sovereign was frowning at a data screen when Zen tapped him on the shoulder. "What is it?"

"We removed one hundred and twelve people from the dark mine. They are in a holding facility so that their eyes won't be traumatized by the light. The problem seems to be in that we are missing five of the people from the deepest level. They may be stranded."

Panic surged through her. "Do you have the schematic?"

He scrolled an image onto his screen. "There. This pocket. If they are not there, then they have succumbed to the water. It has risen to tier thirty-nine."

Zen conferred with Balen for a moment. *Can I swim underwater?*

Of course. You don't need to breathe. Nothing on this planet will hurt you.

That is all I needed to know.

"I will go after them."

"I will come with you." Sovereign straightened and looked attentive.

She thought about it for half a second. "Stay at the top of the shaft. They will need decompression if I bring them up to fast and I really plan to."

He sprinted to his shuttle and she took off to the mineshaft. She wasn't going to let them go if she didn't have to.

They are all still alive, but very scared.

The water?

Is closing in, but they are running out of air.

Excellent. She poured on the energy and pushed her new abilities to the edge as she reached the mineshaft and plunged into the darkness as she went down past levels one through twenty-five in seconds. When she reached level thirty-five, she slowed and let Balen's knowledge take her exactly where she needed to go, straight into the icy water and down into the depths of the dark mine.

She wasn't swimming, more like flying underwater. A suggestion from Balen had her skin glowing and instantly, the mine took on a more familiar shape.

She could sense the living minds and heat signatures in the dark and made her way to them

through the tunnel leading to the main shaft.

Zen broke the surface of the water, hovering above the filthy miners crouched against the back of the cavern. They were surrounded by water and were holding together rather well considering that they were going to die.

"I am Zenina, avatar of Balen, and I am here to rescue you. I will get to you all, but who wants out of here first?"

A shivering hand was raised in the air. Wasting no time, she pulled him upright, stood behind him and lifted him into the air with an ease that surprised her.

Zen was able to wrap him in a column of air that kept him safe and breathing and then she plunged back into the water to haul him to safety.

He struggled for a moment against her hold, then relaxed when he was able to breathe and the water didn't freeze him.

The only thought that she kept running through her mind was that she really hoped Sovereign was at the opening of the main shaft, or this man was going to die a very painful death.

When they broke the water, her cargo yelped in surprise, but he held still as she blasted them both out of the shaft. A pressurized shuttle was waiting, so Zen shoved him into it. It sealed behind him and she could only hope that he understood why.

"Thank you, Sovereign. Four more to go." She was turning to jump back into the open air when he

grabbed her around the waist.

“Call me Rolland Excelter. Rolland or Rolly, Zen. Now go and save some miners.” His kiss was hard enough to bruise her lips, but intense enough that she was blinking in surprise when she was released, turned and shoved into the openness of the mineshaft.

Taking deep breaths as she flew down, she was able to make faster progress into the shaft this time, cutting through the water with an ease that surprised her. Her second rescue victim was grabbed, spun and back in the water in seconds.

She moved as fast as she could, keeping a pressure bubble around her cargo until she could eject him in to the shuttle.

The next three went without incident, except the last man cried when she arrived. He had thought she would never come for him.

With the mining team swiftly tucked away, she relaxed. Outside, she could see an empty city and on the surface, shuttles were landing and taking off in an orderly fashion. By the end of the day, everyone would be gone and she would be alone to help Balen remake the world.

No pressure.

Zenina/Balen stood and watched the last of the evac shuttles leave. The miners from the dark mine were already on one of the warships that she could

see with her enhanced vision, receiving the medical treatment that they desperately needed.

Zen's parents were on Station 13. They had already called in to confirm that they were there and about to start Sector Guard intake procedures and Grim had decided to join them.

A light scan of the area confirmed that she had rounded up all stragglers and Olaris had returned to Saru for a little bit of a charge and a deep heart-to-heart.

For all intents and purposes, she was alone, so she flew back to Balen's city and took a seat on the open-air throne at the top of the tower to look out over the surface of her world. The surface that was about to change, hopefully, for the better.

She sat back and breathed deeply, enjoying the nuance of the melting ice in the crisp content of every inhalation.

A slight tang alerted her to a disturbance in her silence. A shuttle was approaching. "Hello, Rolland."

Her suit spoke to her again. "Zenina. The evacuation is now complete. You can commence your renovations at will."

"Excellent. Once I have begun it, I will pop over to Station 13 and spend some quality time with the rest of the Guard. It will be nice to know what I am getting into."

"Haunt and Doc are looking forward to meeting you. I don't think Haunt has ever met an avatar

before, so pardon her if she floats through your doors at inopportune times."

Zen inclined her head to acknowledge the warning. "What about you? When will you take over as solar avatar? Olaris is looking to make the change the moment that the guard base is up."

His eyebrows rose. "That soon? Wonderful. I am ready when you are...but this will give me time to learn about Ikath mating habits."

"Balen wants kids."

"So do I."

"I have never thought about it. Does that make me a bad person?"

"No, it just means that you never considered the men around you as viable candidates. I am honoured that you would even consider me."

"Well, a planet, a star and an avatar can't all be wrong. I do feel strange and intense around you, but I don't know if that is just stress or real attraction."

"I don't have my sister's talent for psychic connection, so what you are feeling is real, Balen wouldn't allow anything else."

For some reason, that surprised her. "A sister?"

His voice held a wealth of affection. "Yes, Roha has been a bane and a blessing, but we both found a home with the Sector Guard." Rolland's features had taken on a very relaxed look.

"It is nice to see that kind of bond between siblings." Zen knew her voice had taken on a wistful

tone, but as was obvious, she had grown up an only child.

"It is a good thing Balen decided to join the Sector Guard then. We are a very close group. It is my favourite part of being a Guardsman. No matter which base we are at, we belong."

Zen had a dark thought that it was nice enough for him, but then it came to her that she would soon be surrounded by the Sector Guard. As Balen's avatar, she had minimal travel opportunities, but any and all living beings on the surface were her business. It was a little mindboggling.

"Will I meet your sister?"

"She was on the station, but I believe she has been sent out on assignment. Her talent consists of identifying compatibility between prospective mates. True affection beyond the initial lust." His pride was evident.

"That is quite the talent. Does it work off frequencies like yours does?"

"Sort of. She reads the waves off the central core of the emotion centre of the brain. When two people have compatible frequencies, there is the possibility for a match."

She smiled at the possibilities that such a talent would open for some of the more restrained races. His shuttle was making lazy circles around her tower and it made her laugh.

"I am about to commence the renovation. You had

better get out of the atmosphere. It is going to get a little wild."

He circled his shuttle and hovered in front of her. She could see his face through the transparent shielding.

Zen gave him a thumbs up. "I will start as soon as you are clear. Go. The sooner you are on your way, the faster I can find Station 13 and see my folks again."

He nodded and pulled the shuttle's nose up, then hit the jets. "I am on my way. Enjoy thawing a planet, Zenina. You are doing something that only a handful of creatures have done in the history of living worlds."

The moment that he was a speck in the distance, she handed control over to Balen. It was time for the surface to come alive.

The power of a planet was rippling through her body and mind. It was fabulous. Hovering above the city that was Balen's alone, she felt every pulse of the entire world.

Tectonic plates shifted, lava flowed, heat melted the ice and steam mixed with cold air to generate healing winds.

They hovered above the city for days, controlling every nuance of the shift in the planet until the moment when nature had the upper hand.

Balen gave her images of her mother to keep in her

mind, casually mentioning a repository of pictures and stories accumulated by the inhabitants of Balen.

She was looking forward to discovering her mother's life, but now it was time to complete her own.

Balen, is it safe to go to the station yet?

Yes, Zenina, it is. I will keep an eye on the transformation and alert you if we need to return.

Good.

She was missing her parents. This was the longest that she had ever been away from them in her life. Balen's companionship was nice, but it didn't give her the warmth that being around her parents did or being around Sovereign did for that matter.

Balen was a life companion, Sovereign was a friend with the potential to be a lover.

Lover, now that thought took some getting used to. She flung out her arms and began to gain altitude, a hard shell of air held in place around her by her will alone. Balen had tried to explain the nature of his protection, but she had frankly zoned out during the mental chat while they were stabilizing the northern and southern poles.

"Sovereign, can you hear me?" She continued her climb toward the vastness of space that was currently occupied by dozens of ships, each with a different purpose.

"This is Haunt, Tears of the Star. Sovereign is in the gym. Can I help you?" The warm tone was

unmistakable.

“Yeah, I am on my way up to Station 13, but I don’t know which one you are. Is there a beacon or something you can give me?”

The chuckle that came through her suit was cheerful. “No problem. Beacon activated. See you soon, Tears.”

Obviously, Haunt knew who she was, so she continued her journey up until gravity had no hold on her and she was using psychic propulsion backed by magnetic fields. Balen had tried to explain that, too, but Zen had centuries to understand it, no need to overload on information at once.

The beacon that was lit on Station 13 was hard to miss. A flaring *Welcome, Tears of the Star* sign was flashing on the side of the station. *How long had it taken to get that sign wired in?*

She followed arrows and blinking lights to the opening on the hull and flew inside.

Zen realized that this was the first time she had ever left the surface of Balen. A strange disorientation gripped her inside the airlock and she leaned heavily on the wall. It was her first time away from home.

Fortunately, the biggest pieces of her home were right here on Station 13. They were waiting outside the airlock and the images of her parents were what kept her from panicking. Nasha’s concerned face through the small window kept her calm, Dorn moved her aside to give Zen a thumbs up a few times

while they waited for the cycles.

When the door opened, she flew into her parents' arms. Nasha sobbed, Dorn grumbled and parts of Zen that she didn't know were tense, relaxed.

"I have missed you so much."

"We have missed you. We have already started training on our new jobs for the Sector Guard. The Guardsmen here are open, friendly and willing to help us with just about anything. We even got new wardrobes for casual as well as uniforms. You should see our new quarters. They are three times as large as our small home on Balen."

Her mother mopped up tears and then slid an arm around her waist to lead her through the halls. The tour was mercifully brief as it ended at the control centre where Zen met Haunt face to face for the first time.

"Tears of the Star. Welcome to Station 13. My name is Haunt but most call me Kaylee. Dirven is around here somewhere. His active name is Doc. Very succinct." The woman was talking a mile a minute, but she floated forward to take Zen's hand in her own. She looked almost transparent, but felt fairly solid.

The woman kept chattering away, "Your parents are great by the way, all three of them. Olaris has been out working on our radiation shielding for the last two days. Sovereign is this way. I alerted him to your arrival, so he jumped in the shower and should

be decent by now.” Kaylee just kept talking as she scooped Zen from her family and started walking her down a hallway.

“You and Sovereign have connecting quarters and your parents are not a huge fan of that. How long will you be staying?”

Finally, a question directed toward her. “Um. Balen needs to monitor the changes closely, so I will be popping in and out over the next few months. Right now, everything is stable and he will tell me when it is not.”

“Good. We hope to have you here for a few days so that we can give you the full introduction to the station and Psyche is still on board, so you can meet Sovereign’s sister, Tears.”

“Please, call me Zenina. Or Zenina/Balen. Whatever.”

“Well, there is a dinner planned for you this evening, so you can meet all of the guards posted here as well as most of the support staff.”

“Wonderful. Is there a place I can change or perhaps a fresh containment suit?”

“Of course, right this way. Sovereign will bring you whatever you need and your care package has arrived from Morganti Base. Fixer is ground bound with a pregnancy, but she is still the best source for unusual containment in uniforms. I think you will like it. I had a small peek.”

The most peculiar thing was happening. As Haunt

walked, they would occasionally pass others in the hall and when they both shifted left, Haunt went *into* the wall, still chattering away. She came out of it again as if nothing had happened. Weird.

"This is your private room. Sovereign's is the one next to it. Someone will come to collect you for dinner." The chipper Haunt floated down through the floors, leaving Zen shuddering. Her palm opened the door and inside was a spacious and comfortable room, with an excellent view of Balen.

Dark spots were beginning to appear on the unrelieved white surface. Oceans and landmass were coming back to life.

The hissing of a door opening let her know she was no longer alone.

"It is quite the view, isn't it?" Rolland was approaching so she turned to greet him.

Having ones' heart flip around in ones' chest was a very peculiar feeling, but watching his damp hair slide around his shoulders, his ruby eyes gleaming as he took her in, it was definitely what she was going through.

"It is a lovely view." She didn't know if she meant him or Balen.

"There are fresh uniforms made with your measurements in the wardrobe. As you are now a full avatar, there have been some additions." He walked to the wardrobe he mentioned and pulled it open, displaying an array of suits with skirts, long draping

vests, and jewels sewn into the necklines.

"Those are lovely. They are mine?"

"Each one matched to your body."

"Thank you."

"They were created by Fixer with the advice of Gant, the living form of Morganti."

"Then I thank them." She inclined her head.

"There is a dinner planned if you want to take a shower and get ready for it." He handed her one of the suits.

It was midnight blue with a bejewelled neckline and an open vest that would brush her ankles. Boots were also included.

She took the uniform in the direction he indicated and after a long moment staring at the array of space and fixtures in the lav, she stripped, stepped into the shower and blasted it to hot.

Balen had satisfied her need for showers with warm rain and for a woman who liked to almost melt her skin off, that didn't cut it. Too many years of working in mining had produced an intense distaste for dirt.

Finally as clean as she could be, she dried off and slithered and tugged her way into the suit. It fit like a glove, but the vest gave her the air of an ambassador, which, she supposed, she was.

With her hair dry and her body clean and in new clothing, she stepped from the lavatory and had the satisfaction of watching Rolland's eyes heat and his

skin tighten over his cheekbones.

Excellent, the lust was not one sided.

"Dinner?" That one word seemed to snap him out of whatever fantasy he had been harbouring.

"Yes, if you will accompany me?" He held out his arm and she took it, welcoming the shiver of sensation that ran through her at the light contact. One day she would feel what it was like for contact without their suits between them, but today was not that day.

Her family and the elusive Dirven were at the dinner, as were several Ikath who were going to become the team leaders of the Sector Guard support team, including Grim.

The Guardsmen who were there were all very friendly, especially Psyche, who embraced Zen the moment they arrived. Her resemblance to Sovereign was unmistakable, but the red eyes looked cute and not sexy on her. The purple skin and white hair was the same.

"Welcome, sister. We are eager to count you in our numbers." The voice of Psyche was light, sweet and she looked at Zen and Rolland with a knowing gleam in her eyes.

Having been briefed on her talent, Zen sighed and smiled politely. "Thank you, Psyche. I am glad to be welcomed into such dramatically talented ranks."

Haunt and Doc laughed at that statement, having drifted close enough to hear the conversation. "I am

talented by my own error in calculation. Doc bears the unusual talent for putting up with me as well as being one of the finest phase researchers in the Alliance."

Cocktails and snacks were being served by slowly moving staffers and as Zen munched her way gratefully through a tray that she had commandeered, light seemed to go on behind Rolland's eyes. "You haven't eaten in days, have you?"

"Alriel's food all went stale. There wasn't the time or forethought to request rations from the warships. Balen can support me, but I do better if I can eat something on a daily basis. It keeps me among the living and breathing. According to Balen, if I stop eating, I will become one of those anti-social avatars. He doesn't want that and neither do I." She crunched through a tiny pastry with enthusiasm.

"I will keep that in mind when I take over for Olaris. Saru has agreed to my staying on Balen as my home base, but I will be radioactive and require special shielding to live a normal life." There were worry lines around his eyes.

"There is another stellar avatar in the Guard, isn't there?"

"Yes, Star Breaker." He grinned. "She is mated to the avatar of Gant. Kale. They seem to do fine."

"Have you met them?"

"Once, when I went to Fixer for your clothing. Kale

and Carella were very charming and she was enthusiastic about my taking on the responsibilities from a living avatar. It does not happen often. Fixer also created some radiation-resistant clothing for me at the same time."

"What is she like?"

"Very pregnant and eating enough for a small planetoid, but don't ever tell her I said that. She was working constantly and eating constantly with her husband, Shade, standing by. He has incredible patience, that one."

The interior gossip of the Sector Guard was a heady thing. Haunt called for dinner and they took their places. Zen and Rolland were across from her parents, an elemental shifter named Storm and next to the armour specialist, Cadiela.

The food was plentiful, which was excellent as few dishes made it past Zenina no matter how hard she tried. The food was just too good to stop eating and Balen was helping her metabolize it so that she stored the energy without the bulky waste.

Toasts were made to the new additions and the new life Balen was taking on. Balen even stood up and said a few words to the cheers and applause of the assembled.

Finally, Rolland offered to take her on a tour of the facility, starting with the great observation bays. The bulk of Balen was rotating beneath them, slowly coming back to life as they watched.

"This is truly an amazing thing." Zen was breathing deeply and Rolland came up behind her, wrapped his arms around her and pressed his lips against a spot in her neck that was more sensitive than it had any right to be. As her knees buckled, she heard his whisper...

"And it is only beginning."

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Station 13 was a short story written for eXtasy Books and depicts the first haunting of this particular station. Kaylee and Dirven are quite a good match, in bed, in the lab and in administration.

For those who love a sex scene, sorry to leave you hanging. Rolland and Zenina are just getting to know each other and jumping into bed doesn't match either of them.

In *Psyche's Caress* (Sector Guard book 10), we finally find out what Fixer and Shade's baby looks like, what talent it will have and whether it is a boy, girl or both.

Thanks again for joining me with the Sector Guard and I hope that you will watch as Balen and its avatar learn, grow and evolve.

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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