



# ARMED AND ARMOURER

Viola Grace

Sector Guard 12

Kahlia has fought a few battles for the survival of innocents on Allishan 9, but her primary concern is her life as a designer. On one of the school trips that her sister badgered her into chaperoning, she meets her destiny, and her doom. Rupture is a member of the Sector Guard and he has his eyes on the woman stepping out of the battle suit. With the holes in the exterior and interior, she was either inside the suit or a helluva magician. Either way, he is going to bring her back to Udell base, by any means necessary. He sets his personality to charm, but it is the facts that draw her attention...and agreement.

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**ARMED AND ARMoured  
SECTOR GUARD BOOK 12**

**BY**

**VIOLA GRACE**

## CHAPTER ONE

Being summoned to the commanding officer's office was an unusual occurrence on Sector Guard Station Udell. They were an autonomous group that only banded together for large assignments. Guardian normally briefed them during sparring sessions. This meeting was for Fenn's ears alone.

Fenn was curious, "You are certain?"

Guardian tented his fingers in front of his face and smiled slightly. "No, but Commander is and that is good enough for me."

Fenn's heart beat a little faster as it always did when he thought about his true mate. As an Admaryn descendant, he was concerned with keeping his bloodline going.

"What is her talent?" He leaned forward eagerly.

"She animates technology."

He furrowed his brow. "Like Tech does?"

"No...she gives it its own soul. It operates on its own. We don't know how yet, but we are willing

to learn." Guardian leaned back and rubbed his ridged silver skull with one hand. "I have no idea if she is a willing recruit or not. Charming her into coming with you is your job."

Fenn flexed his fingers eagerly. "When can I leave?"

"The ship is ready and waiting. Fixer has even provided some toys for your lady, as well as a concealing mask, she is fairly well known to her people. See you when you get back from Allishan 9."

\* \* \* \*

Kahlia Morning huddled with her sister and three of the students from her sister's class while weapons fire blasted past the marble pillar that shielded them.

Shora cried, "What do they want?"

"I believe that they want to kill us, Shora. Your children's day out seemed to have ruined their plan to heist the weapons exhibit here at the museum." Kal was looking at her options.

The tank would be effective, but it had the wrong sort of aura for her purposes. It wouldn't do any good for the children and Shora to be run over by the treads. The battle suit was much better, but it wanted her to be inside it when it moved.

The children screamed as another volley of fire was aimed at their hiding place and Kal made up her mind. "Keep them all here. Don't move a muscle."

"Kal, what are you doing?"

"Hopefully, the right thing." Kahlia used the statue to hide her and waited until the spray of weapons fire was on the far side of the marble.

A shout rang out as she sprinted the ten metres to the battle suit. In seconds, she was up on the foot pedals and the cheerful suit was folding in around her. It was pleased that she had chosen it—it was a defence module and wanted to be useful.

In front of her eyes, the display showed the location of the attackers as the suit powered up. Five bodies with weaponry were facing her and the suit expressed anticipation as its weapons warmed up.

The attackers gave up on the teacher and her class in favour of the battle suit that took a hesitant step toward them.

Encased in the suit, Kahlia winced at the impact of the projectiles. She would be safer if she simply blended herself with the metal of the suit and when it did not object, she did it.

Inside the wires, cables and steel, her hesitant steps became sure as the suit became her body and not her clothing. With precision, her guns started

spinning and she took aim at the men who had crashed into the museum to steal weaponry of Allishan 9's past.

Shells larger than her fist struck the ground in front of them, causing them to scream in surprise. Kahlia would have grinned, if she had a face. As it was, the net guns on the shoulders of the battle suit fired with satisfying reliability.

They were pinned to the ground and fighting for their freedom.

Kal stepped forward and settled the battle suit on the edge of the nets, using the crushing hands on the barrels of their weapons. She ignored their cries of panic as the suit leaned over them, concentrating on making the path safe for her sister and the children to escape.

When they were all pinned and fixed under the glare of the battle suit, she used the speakers.

"I have them pinned. Get the little ones out of here."

Shora didn't waste a second. She hauled the dozen children bodily forward and to the side window. She picked up the bust of one of the city's founders and smashed it through the window, used it to clear the glass and dropped the children, one by one, onto the grass outside.

"Run to the parking lot. If you see police or military, let them know that we are still inside." She spoke to the last of her students as she



dropped her out the window, just in time to see another figure round the corner.

Kahlia cursed luridly. "Hide, Shora. He has a launcher."

Her pinioned captives shrieked in protest, but their companion didn't listen. With a high-pitched cry, he lifted the launcher to his shoulder and took direct aim at Kahlia in her battle mech.

A shadow flickered in her vision and a man with two swords suddenly stood between Kahlia and disaster.

The new man swung the swords and the rocket launcher fell into pieces. Before the terrorist could do more than blink, the apparition punched him in the face and fastened his wrists behind his back in seconds.

The newcomer nodded to Shora politely. "Are you all right, miss?"

"Yes. Yes, I am fine."

Kal watched her sister's blush with amusement. Her amusement grew as the man turned toward her and her sister deflated somewhat.

"May I assist you?" The newcomer in the skin-tight bodysuit had to repeat himself. She had wandered off into a daydream that did not bear repeating.

"May I assist you?" There was a smile lurking around the clean line of his lips, his golden hair was tightly braided down his back, resulting in his

highly pointed ears clearly showing in the light of the museum interior. His musculature showed that he practiced with those swords regularly and Kal's mouth watered as she ogled his abs from the safety of the battle suit.

"Please. I am not in a position to restrain these creatures."

He grinned and nodded, flipping the weighed edge of the net as if it was nothing. He hauled the attackers out, one at a time. The police stormed in as he was tying up the last of the terrorists.

"Rupture, thank you for your assistance. The children told us that their teacher and her sister were trapped inside." The officer in heavy gear nodded to Shora, then looked around with worry.

"Where is her sister? Was she hit?"

Kahlia reformed inside the battle suit and thanked it most cordially for its help while opening the panels so she could exit. "I am here, officer."

"Ma'am, how ever did you get into that suit?"

Rupture held out his hands and she let him lift her out of the battle suit. "Hello, Kahlia. Well done."

"Thank you. Um. Who are you?"

He smiled, the bright green of his eyes warming as he grinned, "Rupture, member of the Sector Guard out of Udell Base."

"Oh. Thank you very much for your

assistance.”

He offered her his arm and she took it while the officer spluttered and looked from the tied-up attackers to the battle suit, to them. They walked calmly to the front doors of the museum and out into the morning sun.

Kal smiled as they made their way past the crowds with little difficulty. Shora and the children were the centre of the attention. Medics came to check her out, but as she was not suffering with shock or injury, they let her go.

“Thank you for your help, Rupture. It was nice meeting you.”

She turned and had taken two steps away before she was tugged back toward him. He lifted her hand to his lips and placed a kiss on her knuckles that sent a warm wave of sensation through her.

“I will see you again, Kahlia Morning. Make no mistake about that. Have a lovely day.” The twinkle in his green eyes spoke of something that he wasn’t telling her.

She shook off the feeling that he was watching her and got into her vehicle, charging the engine and driving away. The safety and security of her home was the only thing on her mind.

So why was she imagining those piercing green eyes watching her as she drove down the road and into the city?

## CHAPTER TWO

“**S**he shouldn’t have survived, sir.” The officer was examining the battle suit. The men who had broken into the museum to raid the war-implement selection were on their way to prosecution.

Rupture glanced at the battle suit and saw what he expected. The rounds that the gunmen had been carrying had taken huge chunks out of stone—the steel of the battle suit had been no match for it. Large holes decorated the front and pierced the pilot’s seat in three places.

“So it would seem. What is your guess, officer?” He crossed his arms over his chest and stared at the younger man.

The officer fidgeted. “I am guessing that the battle suit was shot before she climbed inside?”

Fenn smiled. “Good guess. What did you find out about the ammunition that she used?”

“Uh, by some fluke, the guns that came in empty were reloaded without anyone having a

record of it?"

"You have got it." He clapped the younger man on the shoulder, wondering if he had ever been that young.

Kahlia had saved the day, but Fenn had been standing by and watching every moment in case she needed his help. The appearance of the rocket launcher had been just what he was waiting for.

His Admaryn ability to teleport to his mate was not one he publicized, but just as his ancestors had, he had appeared when she needed him.

The Urska Province administrators and ruling council had reluctantly allowed him to present the offer from the Sector Guard to Kahlia. They were not keen to lose her as a businesswoman, but the offer of investigative services was too tempting for them to refuse. There had been a rash of archaeological thefts that they wanted to get to the bottom of and the Guardsmen of Guard Base Teklan specialized in that exact sort of investigation.

The exchange of personnel had been made, but they still had no true idea of why he wanted the owner of a dress shop that filled the sector with her designs.

Grinning, Fenn Althos made his way to the private apartment of Kahlia Morning. He idly wondered if his prospective mate and partner had any thoughts on what the morning was going to

bring her.

\* \* \* \*

Kahlia stretched, her arms grazing the top of the doorframe. She always felt so energized after she used her talent for melding with things, adrenaline burned through her. She wanted to run across the rooftops. The knock on her door snapped her to attention.

She was off today. Her mother had control of the reins of the Khariel Designs. No one should be at her door.

“Ms. Morning? We met this morning. You may know me as Rupture. May I come in?”

She blinked. The image of the athlete with the golden hair and pointy ears flashed into her mind. She waited, calmed her blush and opened the door. “How may I help you?”

“I am here to make you an offer. May I come in?” The Admaryn with the bright green eyes had an unfailingly cheerful attitude. Two officers of the Urska Province Police Department were with him. When he stepped forward, they remained in the hallway.

She closed the door and followed Rupture into the serene layout of her apartment. He dominated her couch as he sat in the center of it and she surprised him by sitting on his right.

"What can I do for you, Rupture?"

He grinned and her heart pounded. "You can call me Fenn."

She blinked, "Why?"

"It is my name." His grin didn't falter. "Given to only those trusted by the Sector Guard."

She swallowed heavily. When her kettle whistled, she jumped to her feet. "Tea? Orcaf?"

He followed her into her kitchen, nodding at the accoutrements of the shelves. "Orcaf, please. Do you cook?"

"When I can. Business takes up more time than I would like." Kal assembled a tray with the hot kettle, Orcaf blooms and the powdered berries that she used as sweetener.

Fenn had taken up a seat at the buffet counter in her kitchen, so she sat next to him with the tray between them. They both fixed their own tea in silence and after he sipped his, she took a sip of her own.

Kal set her cup down and tried to glare Fenn into speaking. He sipped deeply and smiled happily. "Thank you for that. I have been on rations for a little while now. Your representatives have not exactly been forthcoming with food and drink."

She nodded. "Hospitality is not the purview of the politician. How long have you been on Allishan 9?"

“Three days. It has been an endurance trial waiting for you to have an occasion to use your talents.” He finished his cup and she waited until he assembled his second. She quickly got to her feet and prepared another tray with cookies, bread and cheese.

She returned to his side and gestured for him to eat. He raised a golden eyebrow and tucked in.

“Hospitality *is* my purview.” She laughed as he tore through half the platter in a matter of minutes. She sipped slowly and replenished the hot water by the time he sat back with a satisfied smile.

“That was excellent. Thank you. Now, I am here to ask you to become a member of the Sector Guard.”

The way he proposed it, it was almost an offer of marriage. There was a certain gleam in his eyes that made her think something else was behind his statement.

She stifled her initial urge to agree to anything he asked. “What would I possibly have to contribute to the Sector Guard?”

Fenn smiled, he reached into a pocket and flicked out a small holographic projector.

“Last year, you were on vacation in Sorewach Province. There was an earthquake and a sinkhole threatened to swallow over a hundred people. You were seen entering a construction hover and



less than a minute later, the driverless vehicle towed a barge to the endangered area and rescued those trapped on the island of rock. No driver to the vehicle was ever found, but after night fell, a security camera saw this."

From the empty vehicle, a female figure emerged. It staggered slightly and then made a run for the cover of local buildings.

"That could be anyone." Kal was being difficult and she knew it.

He smiled and flicked to the next image. "Eight months ago, a statue in the city centre stopped a violent attack at a political protest before returning to its podium after dark. Again, a woman was seen in the vicinity before and after. That woman was you."

She snorted. "That is impossible."

"Impossible? Today the battle suit you wore was pierced by no less than three armour-piercing shells. You were unharmed."

The picture on the hologram showed the damage to the suit and Kal swallowed heavily. She remembered the internal alarms, but hadn't realized the extent of the damage. "It was a magic trick?"

Fenn laughed. "Some trick. The officers were afraid to report their findings for fear of being thought insane."

She blushed. "What does the Sector Guard

want with me?"

He looked as if he wanted to say something naughty, instead, he said, "Your skills can be honed and you can help save lives with your ability to phase into objects and control them."

Kahlia smiled. "Is that what I do? I always wondered."

"From what we have been able to determine, yes. You shift your molecules between those of the object you want to control and you take it over." Fenn picked up a cookie and held it between two fingers. "Nice cookies."

"Thank you. My grandmother's recipe." She looked at the tight-fitting bodysuit that her visitor was wearing. "Will I have to wear something like that?"

He looked hurt. "What is wrong with my suit? Fixer designed it with me in mind. It suits my talents admirably."

"It lacks the style and flair that you seem to emanate." She dodged into her living room, reached beneath the couch to grab her pad and started a quick sketch. He looked curiously at what she was working on and she hid the design until she finished.

"There. Isn't that more like it?" She turned the picture around.

He looked it over, whistling softly. "Nice. Can I keep this?"

"Sure. I don't know about the Guardsman thing though."

His grin was incorrigible. "I saved your life today, you owe me."

Her mouth opened in shock. "What?"

"Admaryn tradition, or so I have been told. I saved you. You owe me your life." He smiled as he sipped at his beverage. "I ask that your life be used for the Sector Guard."

She pondered the ridiculousness of the statement for a while. "I have obligations, a life here."

"And you will create a new one on Udell. Isn't telecommuting all the rage? We have the best inter-sector communications available. The newest and brightest in technology is at our disposal. There is no limit to what you can design. Think of the races you can see, the places you can travel and the images you can put into your designs."

Oh, he was good. He was seducing her with the one thing she couldn't ignore. Images of the new.

"How long do I have to decide?"

"Your government has authorized your assignment. We are only waiting for you. There is an assignment that I have been given and it would be nice if my new partner was with me." He gave her a puppy-eyed look and she burst out laughing.

Sighing, she reached over and picked up her com unit. "Selphic, it is Kahlia. I am putting my

mother into position as president and CEO and tapping Shora in as CFO. I am keeping controlling stock and leaving the city. I will contact you again when I have the opportunity to let you know how long I will be off on leave."

She smiled at the high-pitched voice on the other end of the line.

"I don't know how long I will be gone. I will contact you when I can." She smiled as she hung up.

"When do we leave? I want to get out of here before my mother calls."

"Now works for me."

"Give me five minutes and don't answer the com." She grinned and quickly collected a duffel full of clothes and a few keepsakes.

She froze when the com chirped and it silenced immediately. Kahlia felt a frisson of terror when she heard Fenn's deep voice speaking. She yanked the duffel shut, returned to her sitting room and stood, appalled at the sight of Fenn chatting to her mother on the vid phone.

"Kahlia is an excellent designer, but I don't know what use the Sector Guard will have for her." Her mother's soft plaintive tones whined through the vid phone. The elegant woman that had given birth to her was at her charming best with Fenn smiling on the other end of the line.

In an almost silent whisper, Kal said, "Fenn,

stop talking to my mother. We have to go.”

Fenn didn’t miss a beat. “The organization may not be the proper fit, but I have several uses for your daughter.”

Ehcharlie almost choked and she spluttered as Fenn disconnected the call.

Kahlia sighed. “That is going to give her nightmares.”

He was unrepentant. “Are you ready?”

“I am. Let’s go.” She set the locks on her apartment and when he cleared her home, they walked down to a government vehicle with the guards who had waited.

The trip to Fenn’s shuttle was far too short. The late afternoon sun gleamed and glittered as she tried to memorize her home. Lavender and orange skies, lush greenery and the red stone buildings that she called her own. Allishan 9 at its best in the fading light.

“Here is my shuttle.”

The thing that he called a shuttle would be easily confused with a battle ship on another world. Gun turrets, a laser mount and what seemed to Kal’s untrained eye to be a net launcher.

“The Escher Candru. My pride and joy. Welcome aboard, Phase.” In front of the others, he was more serious, but pride in his vehicle was shining through.

"It is lovely, Rupture." Kahlia assumed Phase was a code name for her, so she used his in return. He took the duffel from her and tucked it inside the shuttle.

"If you will join me, we will be taking off as soon as I can get clearance."

She nodded and quietly walked up the steps to the interior. There was no one to salute, no people to wave goodbye to. It was a silent departure. She moved swiftly to the cockpit and strapped into the co-pilot's seat.

Fenn was communicating with the ground control and in under five minutes, her home was falling away under the thrusting engines.

She was leaving home behind and part of her agreed that it was not a bad thing. She looked over at Fenn's sharply cut features and the curve to the point of his ear. *Not a bad thing at all.*

## CHAPTER THREE

**T**hey had been on the way to Udell Base for three hours when a communication broke the silence. "Rupture, this is Udell base."

"Yes, Guardian?"

"Do you have your partner with you?"

Fenn looked over at her and winked. "Phase is here and ready for either duty or assessment. Your choice."

The male voice on the other end of the call chuckled. "Phase, nice name. Did you pick it or did Rupture?"

Kal realized he was talking to her. "Rupture assigned it to me."

"Of course he did. Watch that boyish charm, Phase. He is deadly with it." The voice of Guardian was amused, but there was definite warning in his tone.

"What is the worst that could happen, sir?"

"Instead of taking the assignment to Bosa, he could have you flat on your back with your legs in

the air. Your shuttle might rocket into something explosive while he is charming you."

A furious blush crept across Kahlia's skin, turning her from icy pale green to a darker emerald.

"Bosa is experiencing a season of unrest. A local guerrilla group has abducted some of the Alliance representatives and are holding them for ransom. The Alliance is willing to pay the ransom, but it wants a presence from Udell Base there in case something goes sideways."

"Done and done. Laying in a course for Bosa Prime. What are the primary arms for the guerrillas?"

"Mechs. This will be the perfect shakedown for Phase with you riding shotgun, so to speak. I will send you a file with the details."

Fenn laughed. "Acknowledged. I will get Phase into uniform. Oh, by the way, expect to get some irate calls from Fixer. Phase knows a thing or two about costume design and she has a few ideas."

"Oh gods, stars and tiny grapefruit. It should be interesting. Guardian out."

Kal looked to Fenn for an explanation. "What was that about?"

Fenn chuckled. "Fixer designs our suits. She recently had two children and has thrown herself back into her work. I think your insight on design will either impress her or threaten her. We won't



know which until you have your first head to head."

She winced. She had gone up against other designers and manufacturers before. It always ended in someone getting hurt feelings. "I think I may just keep my mouth shut."

Fenn pressed a few buttons and released his flying harness. "We are on our way to a jump station. Come with me."

He led her through the ship and gave her a full tour. His grin was positively evil when he slid back a panel to reveal that female version of his own uniform. "You can either talk to Fixer about a redesign or live your active life in that. Starting now."

The grey fabric with radiating lines off the left shoulder did not thrill her, but she would deal with it.

"You may as well change now. There won't be time after the jump. We will come out near Bosa."

Fenn left her alone in the main cabin and she took the suit down thinking about possibilities. More colour would be good, as would some kind of draping on the suit. She wasn't a fan of the faithful cupping of her ass in the bodysuit, but she would have to make alterations later. It was time to get into Phase.

Dark grey boots came with her into the lav and she twisted and turned out of her daily clothing of

gauzy shirt and trousers in favour of her new uniform. She realized rapidly that it was not designed for foundation garments. The lines were horrible. Kahlia stripped again and tried getting dressed for the second time.

Aside from how naked she felt under the suit, it fit like a glove. The boots were a good match for her feet as well. Her image in the mirror made her flinch. The pale green of her skin looked sickly next to the grey. Her rich red hair was fine, but even the black of her eyes looked hollow against the colouring.

She was going to have to talk to Fixer after all.

She gathered her clothing and left the lav.

Fenn was waiting on a bench in the galley. He clapped slowly.

"You know, I couldn't see your figure inside your regular clothing. My imagination didn't do you justice." He stood and looked her over. "That colour isn't right for you. If you don't talk to Fixer, I will."

She nodded. "I will. This shade isn't for me. When do we arrive at Bosa?"

"Two hours. Would you care for some tea? I have my own rules of hospitality."

Kahlia inclined her head. "Yes, please."

He smiled and began the peculiarly domestic task of serving her tea.

"Fenn, why do you smile so much?"

He looked at her in surprise. "Why should I not smile? I am on my ship, heading to battle, the woman of my dreams at my side and now we are having tea. How could I not be happy?"

She blushed when he mentioned her and sipped too quickly at her tea when it was placed in front of her. She burned her tongue.

He winked. "Would you like me to kiss it better?"

Fenn slid a cup of cool water toward her and she stuck her tongue in it gratefully. After the initial burn faded, she held water in her mouth and let it flow slowly down her throat.

"No. Thank you for the offer though."

"Pity."

He was back to grinning.

A harsh beeping from the cockpit broke the silly smirk off his face. Fenn sprinted from the table to answer the call. Lurid cursing followed.

"Kahlia, buckle up. This is going to get ugly."

She sprinted to the cockpit and strapped into the harness. Secure, she looked out the view screen and cursed worse than Fenn had. "What is that?"

"A celestial storm. I have seen only one before. You?"

"It's a first for me."

Silence seemed the best option as the swirling vortex of stellar matter coalesced in their path.

Waves of dancing particulates twisted in patterns and colours that didn't exist until that moment in time and then disappeared forever.

Fenn held the controls tightly, shifting his grip and putting on a halo that bemused Kahlia. She didn't have time to ask him what it was before they were in two places at the same time. The shuttle had jumped.

A new system was around them, the beauty of the storm was gone.

"Welcome to Bosa Prime. Damn, I hate that thing." He removed the halo and put it in a small storage cabinet.

"I didn't realize that this was a jump ship."

"It was only recently that it was retrofitted. I don't think of her that way." He gave the panel an affectionate pat. It was less than an hour before they were in orbit over their target.

Bosa Prime looked like a quiet agrarian world. It didn't look like the sort of world that would have mechs as their primary fighting force.

"This is the Sector Guard ship Escher Candru requesting clearance and co-ordinates for landing."

A series of numbers started rolling across the data screen.

"Requesting verbal confirmation using the predetermined code." Rupture was serious, all business now.

A disgruntled voice read the password, "Station 13 rocks, Udell base has lovely pastry."

"Confirmation accepted. Beginning descent." Rupture flicked off the com and turned to her, looking her over from head to toe. Suddenly, he got to his feet and sprinted to the back of the shuttle. He returned before she could do more than grab the clasp of the harness.

"Here, Phase. You need a mask. Your features are too recognizable." He handed her a mask in the same grey as their uniforms.

She slipped it on her face and as it snuggled into place, she felt it morph her features slightly. "It's changing the shape of my face."

"I know. We don't want anyone recognizing you and going after your family. It keeps recognition software from reconstructing you."

Her smile was genuine. "Thank Fixer and Guardian for thinking of it."

His Rupture mask crumbled for a moment, his good humour leaking through. "How do you know it wasn't me?"

He was aiming the ship for entry to the atmosphere. She cackled. "You would take clothes off me, not put them on."

His bark of laughter made her smile behind the confines of her mask. *So far, so good.*

The nervous members of the Bosa government

kept staring at her breasts and ass as they walked into the war room where the details of the hostage taking were under way. They were too afraid to touch her, but that didn't stop them from ogling.

Rupture was direct to the point of discourtesy. "What are they demanding?"

"Five thousand credits per head. There are nine hostages and the solid credits are here and waiting." The governor of the province swallowed nervously.

Rupture nodded and studied the map on the wall detailing the terrain. "Phase, can you verify the value of the credits?"

Phase nodded. She walked over to the box on the table and rapidly worked the chits into piles. It took several minutes, but she was frowning when she double-checked. "We are short nine thousand."

"I thought as much. Gentlemen, did you really think we wouldn't check? Did you think we would allow our lives to be forfeit because of your dishonesty?" Rupture didn't draw his blades, but Phase watched his hands clench. He was far more dangerous than his cheerful demeanour with her had led her to think.

"It was a miscalculation, sir. The missing credits will be provided immediately." The governor swallowed heavily.

Phase could see that he had thought to redirect

a portion of the money for his own benefit. She curled her lip in disgust. It was a nasty business, trying to profit from an act of terrorism.

She nodded to Rupture and he nodded slightly in return. "Where is the mech that you arranged for our arrival?"

The governor swallowed hard, a nervous habit, no doubt. "Captain Horrish, can you lead..."

"Phase."

"Can you please lead Phase to the mech?"

The captain straightened from where he had been leaning. "This way, Phase."

She walked in step with him to a balcony. Less than a foot from the balcony railing was the head of a mech that had to be at least forty feet tall. "Oh, my."

She reached out to touch it and found the mech in horrible repair, but eager to be of service. It would do. "Your superiors don't really think much of us, do they?"

The captain had been watching her butt as she leaned over. He jerked guiltily as she turned to face him. "They consider you a necessary evil, ma'am."

"I am rarely evil. I save it for special occasions." She let the corner of her lips twist slightly upward.

"Rupture has quite a reputation for viciousness. How did you come to be partners with him?"

She blinked slowly. "I ask myself that

constantly.”

Phase cut off all conversation as they returned to the war room. Rupture quirked an eyebrow at her. She nodded. “It will do. It is old and in disrepair, but nothing I can’t work around.”

The men in the room had the grace to blush and look away. It would have been a death trap if she wasn’t going to use her talent. As it was, she was both frightened and humming with anticipation.

New stacks of credits were waiting for her to count. “Total, forty-five thousand. We are ready.” She placed them in the box provided for the purpose and nodded to Rupture as if they did this all the time. The approval in his gaze was warming her far more than it should have.

“Let us go and recover the Alliance personnel. This city is irritating me.” Rupture turned and glared at the governor. “Make sure that there is transport in good working order for the rescued personnel. I don’t want to have to come back here to make arrangements.”

“Yes, sir. It will be ready when they return here, sir.”

It went without saying that they did not expect Rupture and Phase to be successful. Phase hid her smile behind a straight face as Rupture took the box of money and followed her out to the mech.

He whistled as he surveyed her conveyance. He whispered in her ear, “You can manage that?”



She whispered back, "I hope so. It is bigger than a bus."

"Can you hide the money in the mech?"

"Of course. Only I will be able to retrieve it. Is that a problem?"

"Perfect. Here you go. I will be riding on your shoulder, so don't shake me off."

She smiled and took the chest that was a cube as wide as her torso. With a smirk, she shoved it into the head of the mech and heard a soft gasp behind her as the audience caught up with them.

Decorously, she swung onto the mech, not looking down, and wedged open the driver access. Once inside the dim interior, she powered it up and assessed the controls. The suit had had flight capabilities and would again if she joined herself to it.

Well, no time like the present.

Concentrating, she let her body flow into the structure of the mech. She was it and it was her. Confident, she absently made upgrades and refilled the empty guns and ammo boxes with molecules from the suit itself.

With her body dispersed inside the suit, she followed the directions on the map and made directly for the guerrilla camp.

## CHAPTER FOUR

A voice in the interior com had her concentrating on how to respond. Eventually, she figured out the com system. "Phase, how are you doing?"

In her mechanical voice, she replied. "Feels weird, but I am fairly comfortable. You?"

"I am fine. Just catching bugs in my teeth."

She popped the pilot hatch. "Come inside. I am not using the chair."

"What? Where are you?"

"Everywhere that is part of the mech. Come inside."

His long limbs slid through the hatch and the part of her that felt a surge of lust was squelched as she kept striding through the forest. He certainly was pretty. Perhaps a deep violet for a team colour. That would suit them both, as well as provide a dark colour for concealment before battle.

"You are serious. You really aren't in here."

"I beg to differ. I am everywhere and you are now behind the strongest shields this suit can manage." The steps of the suit became less jarring with every stride. She made the shocks as effective as she could.

"How bad was the suit?"

"It was neglected and it was unarmed. I have corrected that."

He grinned, breaking the Rupture mask that he wore. "How do you do that? We couldn't figure it out at the museum."

"I think it has to do with molecular transfer. The same as my ability to become one with objects."

He leaned back in the pilot's chair and put his feet up on the console. "Explain it to me."

"I really can't. It isn't the sort of thing I could have analyzed. I touch something and feel the intent in the object, the love or care that it needs or wants, then I step into it and give it what it needs to be the best it can be."

"That is fascinating. You can do this with anything?"

"Well. It has to be large enough for me to walk into, but after that, it seems to be fairly open. At the museum, there was a tank I could have used, but it was filled with a dark energy by its previous occupants. It wanted to kill and there were children in the way. I wouldn't use that."

He looked surprised. "They have emotions?"

She thought about it as the mech climbed a hill. "More or less. They are left behind by the owners, operators or the assemblers. Traces of their thoughts and purpose."

"How are you speaking to me?"

"I have altered the com unit. You are hearing thought to voice."

"How does it feel to have me inside you?"

She tripped, but did not fall. He jerked upright in the seat a moment before he burst into hearty laughter.

"No banter. We are nearing the camp and I have several heat signatures on the screens. Two mechs coming this way."

While he was using the screens, which tickled, she double-checked the firing mechanisms and flexed the arms of the great robot she was controlling. She would have loosened the neck, but it didn't have one.

"Are you ready for battle?"

"Surprisingly, yes. Apparently, I have a mind designed for action." She mentally tallied the speed at which the mechs were approaching. They were not on a cautious approach. This was an attack, plain and simple.

"We have incoming moving too fast to be casual inquiries. You might want to strap in."

A stand of trees opened with the shove of the

mech storming toward her. He aimed his fist and she noted the rocket sliding into launch position. "Halt and identify."

Before she could speak, the rocket was launched. It was a good thing that her mech was twisting, ducking and rolling into the legs of her attacker.

With her new knowledge of the mechanics of the bots they were driving, she ripped out the hydraulics of the legs and arms while the mech flailed on its back.

The bot shuddered to a halt in less than a minute.

"Next one is coming up. Up and to your right." Rupture was hostile as he worked the monitors. She could feel his battle rage through the ship.

Phase knelt and aimed as the next target came crashing through the woods. She took out the legs before it had a chance to fire. The first mech disgorged its pilot and the small figure ran through the woods, back the way the robot had come.

Phase was busy ripping out the hydraulics of the arms as she straddled the crippled bot and pinned him down. She didn't have time to chase a trigger-happy pilot.

With deliberation, she finished crippling the mech and started toward the small camp holding the hostages.

"That was well done, Phase." He was savagely pleased. She could feel it radiating off him.

"Thank you, Rupture. My first mech fight."

The camp flared with heat signatures. She walked until she was fifty yards from the small fleshy beings on the ground. The guards had the sense not to open fire.

"I will speak to them." Rupture opened the hatch and climbed down.

Phase kept the bot still. No one would believe it could move without a driver.

She watched her partner's back carefully, unobtrusively aiming at the gun-toting guard for the camp.

"I am here to pay the ransom and reclaim Alliance personnel. I am told they are here."

The man scowled. "Where is the money?"

"Where are the hostages? We will only pay for those that live in good condition."

"Money first."

"Hostages first so I know what to pay or I get back into the mech and look for them myself."

The man was frustrated and Phase could see why. Through her cameras, she saw a threadbare uniform, badly maintained weapons, shoes that were worn to bits and a gauntness to his cheeks that bespoke being close to starvation.

They were not guerrillas, they were protesters. They were young, a few small children dotted the

camp, but no one old was visible.

"Our own mechs will defend us."

"Your mechs chose to attack first and question later. They are both incapacitated."

"You destroyed them?"

"No, merely ripped out their hydraulics. They can still be repaired."

The young man looked positively queasy. "I will bring the personnel, but they will remain on the hilltop until the money is provided. Then you can go and get them."

"Done. The faster we see them, the more rapidly you will be paid."

Phase felt small feet on her legs, pressure building until a young man was inside the pilot area ransacking it. She waited for a minute before she asked him, "Can I help you find something?"

The man shrieked and darted toward the exit and she slammed it shut.

"What are you looking for? I may be able to help you?"

She smiled, but he couldn't see it. She carefully knelt the suit and spilled the interloper out of the mech and onto the grass next to Rupture. Through the speakers, she mentioned, "He was rummaging around, looking for something he wouldn't mention. I don't like strangers messing with my drawers."

"Well done, Phase."

The guard swallowed and gaped at the mech. "Is it sentient? Haunted?"

"No. It is occupied by my partner. The only one who can tell you where your money is. Now, bring forth the hostages and we will bring forth the money. Now!"

The young man scurried off and worked his way up the hill to a small cave with an outcropping. Phase kept a camera on him the whole time. Figures emerged from the cave, some limping, but a total of nine walking bodies stood on the edge of the outcropping. The nine beings walked slowly down to the meadow where Phase crouched. She analysed the bodies and decided to ask, "Are you all here or have they thrown in a ringer for the count?"

Two Tival representatives nodded imperceptibly to the man on the end.

Putting on her most robot-like voice, she panned the camera until it focused on the end man. "Analysis indicates that you do not meet the species specs for the missing persons, explain."

He stammered and took a few steps away, running when Phase turned a gun toward him. "Where is the missing man?"

Rupture loosed his swords. "Where is the last man?"

The young man jutted his jaw out. "I am holding him until the money is here."



"I will take this camp apart, brick by brick, until I find him." Rupture's voice did not brook argument. "We are the Sector Guard. We do not negotiate like the Alliance does. We have dispensations above all that."

Upon hearing the name Sector Guard, the young man turned his head and shouted for the scientist that had been taken. A startled older man with Azon colouring but Ontex stature came forward out of one of the small houses.

At Rupture's nod, Phase appeared in the pilot's seat and climbed out of the suit. She gripped the head and slid the chest of credits free. She carried them to the young man and he gaped at her.

Her suit was still on, but she didn't know what the fuss was.

"Here is the forty-five thousand. I counted it three times." She spoke with her own voice and he jumped.

Rupture waited patiently as the man counted the chits over and over. The final time, he smiled. "A fair deal. Thank you for your cooperation."

"There is a lower cargo area in the mech. I am sorry, but it is the only place I can put you." Phase leapt into the mech and settled into the wiring just as the gunfire started.

As quickly as she could, Phase moved the mech between the personnel and danger. She opened the hatch and counted heads as they climbed into

an area that could comfortably seat four. With nine, she hoped they were friendly.

Rupture was in his element, slicing and dicing on a molecular level as he tore flesh, steel and whatever came his way in half. It seems that no one on Bosa Prime was interested in a fair deal.

With her cargo safe and her shields as high as they would go, she got to her feet and waited for Rupture to finish playing with the guerrillas. Their savagery now apparent, they showed the same lack of dealing fairly as their city-dwelling folk.

Rupture concluded dealing with the immediate threat and started to back toward the mech. He was ten feet away when one of the injured sat up and fired a shot at him. He crumpled on the spot.

"Rupture!" Furious, Phase fired her gun into the body of the attacker and scooped up her partner, sliding him into the pilot area of her chest.

He was alive, but wasn't responding. A large hole had been burned into his suit. The smell of scorched flesh was filling the tiny room.

"Phase, shuttle."

"Right. Fastest way possible. Hold on." She flipped out the wings and cued the thrusters, blasting slowly away from the surface of the planet, burning a large hole in the open field where they had been negotiating.

Once she was high enough, she tilted and flew straight to the city. A two-hour run in a matter of

seconds. She skipped the city hall and landed on the tarmac next to the shuttle. Kneeling, she opened her hatch.

"Go into the shuttle. We will take you to an Alliance base."

The frightened men and women nodded, scuttling up the ramp and into the Escher Candru.

Carefully, Phase plucked Rupture out of the pilot's seat. She carefully cradled him in the palm of the robot before she removed herself from the wires and metal.

"Come on, Rupture. I need to get you to reliable medical attention."

"Morganti is closest. Call Relay Wyt." He was faint and the wound in his chest was now bleeding.

She settled him inside the shuttle, strapping him prone to one of the sleeping bunks. The kidnap victims sat in jump seats and on benches.

With trembling hands, she sealed the door and phased into the ship itself. It rose off the tarmac and she took off, putting Bosa Prime behind them.

From inside the com unit, she made the call. "This is Phase in the Escher Candru, seeking Relay Wyt of Morganti base."

"This is Relay, what can I do for you, Phase?"

"Rupture has been injured and we have nine kidnap victims from Bosa Prime. I need help—counsellors and transport."

"Can you lock on to this signal?"

"I think so."

"Then get here as fast as you can. I confess, I have been eager to meet you."

"Will do. Phase out."

The connection had been perfectly clear and with no trouble at all, she saw the coordinates for Morganti. Fenn had used the jump engine and before she could think twice about it, she engaged it.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Being inside the ship gave her a whole new perspective on the mechanics of jump engines. They powered up, opened a window in space and pushed the ship through it. For a moment, they occupied two spaces at the same time. A second later and they had moved through to their destination.

Phase shuddered inside the ship. It was a disturbing feeling to say the least.

"This is Morganti Base. Please respond." It seemed to be Relay Wyt again. Phase couldn't be sure though.

"Morganti Base, this is the Escher Candru. Could someone there talk me down?"

There was a pause. "You don't know how to land the shuttle?"

"Ma'am, I don't know how to fly a shuttle. If I wasn't inside it, this would be ugly."

"Call me Relay." There was a slight pause. "I have arranged a catch for you. When a woman

flies toward you in a black and silver uniform, don't shoot her down. Her name is Star Breaker and she will be there to help."

Through the cameras and monitors, Phase could see the large purple blue orb of Morganti getting larger. "When will she get here?"

"Give her a few minutes. She will catch you in plenty of time. Fixer has been alerted and is preparing some help on the landing. In the meantime, here is what you need to do..."

The data that Relay gave her was beloved information. Each instruction gave Phase hope that she would be able to land the shuttle in one large piece.

Morganti grew into a large ball of frightening atmosphere and rocks. Only the calm communication with Relay and the camera that she focused on Rupture kept her moving forward. He was losing colour and while the rescued personnel had applied first aid, he was not getting any better.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please strap in, we are about to be guided in by Star Breaker and I have no idea what that entails."

They looked at each other in a worried manner, but followed her directions. By that time, the small speck of glowing light became a woman in a star-spattered costume with a bundle of cables in her hands.

A new voice came to Phase through the shuttle. "This is Star Breaker to the Escher Candru. Can you hear me?"

"I can."

"Where are you, I can't see you in the pilot's seat."

Phase sighed. "I am inside the shuttle. In the metal and wiring. I can steer, but I don't know how to land this darned thing."

Star Breaker flew around the shuttle twice. "There is nothing wrong with your shuttle. Why don't you use the auto lander?"

"The what?"

"The automated landing system. You push a button and it lands itself."

That was news to Phase. "Seriously?"

"Seriously. Get your butt into the chair and lock onto the landing beacon, then relax control and see what happens. It should start running through the sequence on its own."

Phase locked it onto the landing beacon and activated the control that Star Breaker described. The shuttle computer immediately ran calculations and changed alignment for the shuttle. Crisis averted.

"Why didn't Relay tell me about that?"

A soft laugh came through the com unit. "Relay wouldn't know. She's not a pilot. I spent a lot of time in a shuttle before I changed. It is the first

thing I thought of. Is it working?"

"It seems to be."

"I will be standing by in case you need me and Fixer is ready on the ground. It should land itself without a hitch though. See you groundside." Star Breaker looped around her loosely, following closely in case she needed any help.

It was more comforting than it should have been.

The ship rocked and shuddered as it entered the atmosphere. Phase registered the frightening climb in hull temperature, but the shuttle seemed designed to take it. After long minutes of bucking and shaking, the ship entered the atmosphere.

The feeling of soaring through clouds while dropping at a rapid rate was alarming and exhilarating at the same time. She let the ship steer itself through the sky and watched carefully as it prepared itself for landing.

The Escher Candru banked and aimed for a landing strip attached to a large base. With the nose up, it downed the gear and used the thrusters to halt the forward momentum. Light as a feather, it stopped on the tarmac and the engines powered down.

Figures approached the shuttle, a decontamination tube connected to the hatch and she was being boarded.

The hostages were hustled out of the shuttle



interior and a gurney was provided for Rupture. Phase didn't want to come out.

When a decontamination crew had gone over the interior and the shuttle was empty, two women stood outside the shuttle and knocked on the hull.

She reluctantly answered. "Who is it?"

"I am Relay, this is Fixer. Come out, Phase. It wasn't your fault." Relay's hand rested against the hull.

"I really don't want to."

"Phase, Rupture is awake and he is demanding that I take a look at your colouration and come up with a more suitable colour." The woman named Fixer smiled. Her dark rainbow hair swirled down her back and gave her a striking appearance.

Slowly, Phase shifted her body out of the shuttle and dropped onto the tarmac. She was exhausted. It took a lot of effort to stay in an object and now that the adrenaline was gone, she could have dropped out at any moment. Not a pleasant idea in space.

Hands hauled her out from under the belly of the shuttle and carried her to the medical bay. She remembered sobbing apologies as they walked, but the women hushed her as they handed her over to the physician.

"It's fine, Phase. Rupture has jumped in front of more blasts than I can count. I am constantly

repairing and adjusting his uniform. They used a compressed acid blast. I have unlimited resources, but I can't plan for everything. His injury is my fault as much as his." Fixer was smiling and held her hand while the doctor ran scanners over her and widened his eyes.

"You are barely holding together, Phase. You are practically hollow." The doctor scowled at her. He had Wyoran features and a pleasant and efficient manner. "Allie, what have you been letting her do?"

Relay scowled at him. "I haven't *let* her do anything, Effin. She is the newest recruit to Udell base and I am guessing she hasn't had any training yet."

"She is on doctor's orders. No more doing whatever it is she does until she has a grip on recognizing fatigue. I am putting her in the pressure container with a nutrient mist." The doctor lifted her easily and nodded to an assistant. The assistant scampered in front of them and opened a plexi case. The doctor laid her down.

"Phase, I want you to lie still and let the pressure and nutrients do their work."

"How is he?"

The kindness returned to his eyes. "He will be fine. He is under the restorative rays that Fixer designed."

"Good. I am really new at this." She lay on the

couch in the tube and relaxed as he closed the tube over her. A hissing reached her ears and she felt dizzy.

The doctor opened a speaker. "You will feel dizzy, then sleep and hopefully wake in less than a day."

"Why not the regeneration beam?"

"You aren't missing layers, you are missing molecules. Your body has lost its mass and we need to replenish it. After I assess you again, we will talk about this matter again. You have a very dangerous talent, Phase." He left her and she suffered for a second in silence. The silence was interrupted by a small face pressed against the glass.

It seemed to be a giggling toddler with the features of a Selna. Fixer came over and scooped the little girl up. "Mabi. How did you get in here? I thought you were being watched by Kale."

On her back, Phase smiled. "Your daughter?"

"One of them. Isala is the other one. She is with the kitchen staff, learning the fine art of stuffing her face with her own hands." Fixer smiled. "Rupture was right. The grey looks horrible on you."

"I was thinking a very dark royal purple, with matte gold accents to compliment Rupture's flash."

"Oh, that would be very good. You do seem to

have fashion sense.”

Phase laughed. “My name is Kahlia Morning, I used to design clothes for a living. Now, I am just lucky if I can make it through the day.”

Fixer’s eyes widened as her hair was stuffed into a tiny mouth that suddenly ceased to be there. The toddler had disappeared. “Kahlia? Of Kharial Designs? Our local seamstress has started to carry some of your work. You have a wonderful eye for line and design. Oh, I am Mala by the way. My husband is Isabi, the only Selna on the base so he is easy to identify.”

“Did your baby just disappear?”

“She does that. It is her talent. Her sister got my end of things. She can manipulate matter, but she needs to eat to replace her energy afterward.”

They chatted for an hour about fashion, design and possible additions to the Sector Guard uniform. When Kal mentioned the design she had given to Fenn, Mala immediately retrieved the sketch. Fenn had been keeping it with him in his sword sheath.

“This is wonderful, I can see it in a dark jewel tone. You have to meet Zalbeeliyah. She is our local dressmaker. She will flip.”

“L’nal?”

“Yes. The name gives it away, doesn’t it, Kahlia?”

“It does. Call me Kal. It’s much easier.” Her

eyes fluttered and it was hard to keep focussed on the woman. "I think I need a nap."

"I will come and visit when you are up and around, Kal. I will bring Isala and Mabi, and you can play with both of the little terrors." Mala smiled and patted the tube.

With the dimness of her vision swamping her, Kal could only nod and fall into the darkness waiting for her.

## CHAPTER SIX

**F**enn was scowling down at her when she woke.

"Hello, Fenn. Are you feeling better?"

"I am fine. Doc fixed me up and now he and Relay are resting. They were up all night fussing over your glass coffin. Apparently, you went into some kind of shock when the nutrients hit your system."

Kal blinked. "I see. I guess it was one of my ancestors who bequeathed a sensitivity to something here. I am not allergic to anything on Allishan 9."

He sighed and rested his forehead on the plexi. "Why did you stay in the shuttle?"

She blinked and was completely forthright. "Because I didn't know how to fly it and after lift off, I was too exhausted to reappear in the centre of the ship. I didn't want to exit and end up loose in space."

He hissed through his teeth. "Was that a

possibility?"

"Yes. I don't always control where I pop out, so I try to be in a safe place when I do it. I decided to stay inside until we were safe. I had no idea that it would take that long to get to Morganti. It was the longest I have ever spent inside something." Her lips twitched as she had a thought and she stifled it.

"What is funny about you almost dying?"

"Nothing, but as the shuttle, I had ten people inside me, male and female. That is a personal record for a long journey."

He stared at her in astonishment. "You..." Laughter overtook him and he howled for a while before clutching his abdomen.

"Fenn, be careful. You are still recovering." She paused. "Am I?"

He sighed. "You are. Effin will be here to release you in a few minutes and then Mala and her little demons will haul you to the food court. There are a few similar genetic markers between you and our favourite Moreski. She has a theory that food will assist you more rapidly than this nutrient solution."

Effin appeared behind Fenn. "Get back in bed, Fenn. You shouldn't be out and about."

"She is my partner, Effin. You know what that means."

"I do, do you? It means you don't take risks

with her life or your own. You do the job, do it right and go back to base. Fun is for the bedroom."

The doctor's chastisement made Fenn blush. He gave her a long look that she couldn't interpret and returned to the outer area of the medical centre.

"He is a bundle of emotions, that one." Effin ran some scans, nodded and opened the plexi case. "You need to be on guard as well as to take care of him. He has been alone in these events too long. He needs a touchstone to reality. That can be you."

He held her arm and pulled her into sitting position.

"That is a lot to put on a girl who is missing her molecules." She swung her legs over the edge of the pod and waited until she no longer felt lightheaded.

"I think you can handle it. Rupture is partially a member of a dead race. It haunts him, but it makes him the person that he is. Just as your blend makes you who and what you are. How many races are zipping around in your bloodstream?"

Oh, that was the problem. "Nineteen at last count. Allishan 9 is famous for its relaxed mingling. I even have some Nyal and two slave races back five hundred years."

"It makes you a tricky patient. I have had to recalibrate all of my machines to scan you."



"Fenn mentioned that Mala and I have some common genetics?"

He snorted. "With your mix, it is more likely than not. She also has a little tangle of vines in her family tree."

He held out his hand and she took it, allowing him to help her get to her feet. When she swayed back and forth, he held her by her arm, not snaking his arm around her like Fenn would. She wanted Fenn with her at that moment.

Mala appeared in the doorway. "Kal, you are up! Wonderful." Two little beauties were in their mother's arms.

"You have met Mabi, this is Isala." The chubby pale cheeks were in startling contrast to her twin. Little Mabi immediately stretched out her arms and Kal firmed up her steps to take the toddler.

Mabi planted a smacking kiss on her cheek, making Kal smile. "Thank you, sweetie."

"Come along, Kal. I will introduce you to the cafeteria and we can see how much you can eat." Mala propped Isala on one hip, wove her arm with Kal's and led the way out of the medical centre and through the halls.

"This is the first Sector Guard base with a full compliment of Guards at all times. We get the occasional loan from another base and engage in training and outfitting on a regular basis. I have to say that being on the Guard's radar has been the

best thing happening in my life. If not for Isabi, I would never have had the enjoyment of having a partner who is also an ideal mate."

Kal tugged Mala to an immediate halt. "Mate? No one said anything about mating."

Mala snickered. "You have feelings for Fenn? More intense than any male you have met?"

Kal blushed and switched the now invisible Mabi to her other side. "Well, yes, I suppose that is probably the case. We have only been together for a day and a half."

"You felt it the first time you met him."

Kal thought about it. "Can we go for food? I am a little hungry."

Mala laughed and led the way. Not another word was spoken until Mala took her disappearing daughter back. "Go on and load up a plate or a tray. I will get a seat for us and the critters."

Kal stood in the briskly moving line and eyed the selections. Her stomach suddenly growled in a decidedly hostile manner. The man in front of her looked back at her and smiled. When he noticed her Sector Guard uniform, the smile turned into a look of respectful fear. Kal thought it was just her he was afraid of, but when a low whisper in her ear said, "Nice to see you out of bed, how long before I can join you in one?"

She smiled and kept her eyes forward, moving

with the line. "Not until you convince me that it is a good idea. I don't think it is."

She started to grab anything that caught her fancy. She was hungry and she needed a little of the fluffy starch on the ground meat base, a plate of steamed vegetables, a small steak, another tuber and then she stopped keeping track as she piled on anything that caught her fancy.

Her tray rattled as she crossed to the large table that Mala had secured, two children's chairs sat on one end and Mala sat next to them.

With shaking hands, Kal picked up the first roll on top of the pile and chewed through the fluffy starch with relief. As soon as she swallowed, she waited for the feeling of fullness to start, but it wasn't the case. She was just as hungry as she had been before the bite. With a sense of determination, she kept eating.

Mala nodded to Fenn as he sat next to his ravenous partner. "You are going to have to watch her. Her skills have the same effect as mine do. I can't wait to tell Effin. He likes to call me an aberration. Hah!" Mala smiled. "Can you watch the younglings while I get a snack?"

Fenn's voice rumbled, "Sure. Are they on solids yet?"

"They need mush. The steamed veg would be fine though."

Fenn took the spot across from Kal and she

could feel him watching her ravenous destruction of her food.

"How are you feeling, Kahlia?"

"Hungrier than I have ever been. It doesn't matter how much I eat, I am still hungry." She was upset. She had been hungry after using her talent on Allishan 9, but the use of her skills had been of relatively short duration in comparison to this last excess.

If she was going to be consuming conspicuous quantities of food every time she used her talents, she was going to be chained to the buffet.

Tears started to fall as she reached the last plate and the pangs of hunger started to fade. Fenn was alarmed. "What is it, Kahlia?"

"I am going to be stuck with assignments that keep me in a food-accessible situation."

The tears came faster and slender arms soon held her. "It's all right, Kal. I am doing amazing things with ration bars these days. Plus, the Escher Candru can be retrofitted with a larger galley and dehydrated meals. There are ways to manage it."

Mala murmured to her as if she was a heartbroken baby. Kal was suddenly shifted and felt hard thighs beneath her. "Fenn, you could have let Mala comfort me."

She kept bawling, but leaned against his chest and accepted the comfort for what it was.

It was the high-pitched wail of the babies that

got through to her at last. She stopped her self-indulgent sniffing and reached out toward Mala. A confection of cream and pastry landed in her palm. As soon as she quieted, the babies slowed to a halt as well.

"It's kinda sad when children have more self-control than I do." She snivelled and ate the pastry.

Fenn laughed and she realized that his arm was around her waist, just under the curve of her breast. His other arm was across her waist, his long fingers curved around her hip. He was nuzzling at her hair.

This was the most public display of affection that she had ever been a part of. She chuckled weakly and looked up into Fenn's concerned face. "I am fine. Just a little tantrum brought on by the meat pie addiction I am suffering."

"You have been given guest quarters, Fenn. You may want to take advantage of them." Mala was busy collecting the bits of vegetable that the girls had been given. "I have to get to work on some new uniforms for you two."

Mala chuckled as Fenn rose to his feet with Kal in his arms.

"Effin mentioned the rooms, but I thought to give Kahlia some time with you first."

Mala laughed. "I am not the one who needs to do a speed courtship before she runs the other

way.”

“I am right here, you know. I can hear you.”

“Hush, Kahlia. You are right, Mala. Remind me to ask Isabi how easy it was with you.” He started to leave.

“He was a Companion, moron. He has moves that would break your brain.”

Fenn’s mouth tightened and Kal giggled. “He was a Companion? Really?”

“Yes, really. And you are never to be interested in him. That’s an order from a superior officer.”

She blinked at him. “We have ranks?”

“No. But when it comes to the women around here, it is best for the men to be aware of his charms.”

Kal smiled. “You like him despite your warnings, don’t you?”

“Yes, Isabi is great. He is a paragon amongst the Sector Guard. He puts up with Mala which takes a set of nerves that I cannot imagine, not to mention keeping her fed and watered.”

He stopped in front of a door and shifted her so that he could press his palm to the plate. When the door slid open to expose the interior, she smiled. It was a lovely room. Wide open and airy with a neutral but comfortable touch.

Kal expected Fenn to put her down and let her rest. She was grossly underestimating his determination. He slid her down his body and

held her against him until she looked up. "When the Sector Guard assigns partners, the best matchmaker in the known worlds makes the match."

He started to give her tiny kisses, trailing his lips along her hairline, across her forehead, over her nose and light brushes across her lips. While he kissed her, he continued to speak. "Relay identifies unusual occurrences, selects candidates and forwards them to Commander. Commander who used to have Relay's job here at Morganti travels to the Guard Bases and finds matches for the active Guardsmen. Sometimes a name is unavailable and he simply sends the Guardsmen to the planet and hopes that destiny will kick them in the right direction."

Her heart was starting to pound in her chest—visible through her suit, she was sure. His fingers unfastened the neckline of the suit and slipped inside, teasing and caressing enough to have her going up on her toes to steer his fingers where she wanted him.

"Psyche found her match during an assassination attempt on her life. Relay found her match when she crash landed. Pilot was assigned to Commander and she seems very pleased with it. You were assigned to me."

"And the matches are always perfect?" Kal was fighting to keep her mind on the conversation.

"They are what we need. Isabi is perfect for Mala because he is patient and she loses herself in her work. Effin watches Allie while she works, making sure that she doesn't overdo it. She is constantly exhausting herself and being wed to a doctor is the ideal pairing. Even Kale-Gant and Carella are perfect. He is the avatar of the planet and she is radioactive."

"What...ah...how could our match benefit you?"

Fenn was working his way down her body. "Oh, I will think of something. From me, you will get a faithful and attentive mate who will defend you with his life."

She looked down at him and cupped his jaw with both hands. "Your life is yours. Guard it with everything in you. You are of no use to me dead."

Kahlia leaned down and kissed him, tasting the wild honey of his mouth and smiling when he surged up, knocking her back onto the bed. "Oof. Graceful."

"I will show you grace. Just let me peel you out of the grey prison that makes you look horribly ill." He was grinning as he pressed his pelvis against hers, through their clothing. Graceful or not, he was just what she needed.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

Kal was leaning up against Fenn in the bed. His chair had come loose sometime in the night and she was enjoying the feel of the golden silk against her fingers. "Why did you join the Sector Guard, Fenn?"

He pressed a kiss against her temple and sighed. "I wanted adventure, action and eventually a woman of my own. The recruiter promised all of these things."

She snuggled against him, the solid mass of his chest under her back a warm wall. "Did they deliver?"

"All of the above."

"What is it with the Admaryn and Terrans? I would have thought that you were more interested in one of them."

"You and Mala had quite a talk. I am not pure blooded, neither are you. Together, our bodies will get along very well indeed." His hands swept down her body and she lost her train of thought.

He curled her to her side and entered her slowly, sending her mind in a thousand directions. His hands caressed her until she sighed and shivered in his arms, the slow, sweet movements of his body a song that hers loved listening to.

He moved faster and when he groaned, she smiled at the way he held her as if his life depended on it.

The connection that was growing between them was more than the physical. She could feel thin, delicate stretches of emotion and affection. It felt remarkably similar to touching a spider's web.

The com in the guest quarters chirped. "Fenn, let her go and get both of your asses to medical. I didn't clear either of you for any strenuous activities and based on the room monitors, you are both in good health but have strained yourselves." Effin's voice was clear and amused.

Blushing, even though there was no video indicator, Kal pulled the sheets up under her arms and scowled at the unit. "It's still early, Effin."

"It is after noon, Kahlia. I am amazed that your stomach hasn't woken you."

Kal's lips twitched as she looked back at Fenn. They had made a night run to the cafeteria and obtained a selection of fruits, breads and cheeses.

The chronometer flashed and Kal blinked. "I will have a shower and haul Fenn along for the ride."

"Excellent. Mala left clean suits in the front room of your quarters. See you in half an hour." The com chirped and the silence in the room was complete.

"Well, that wrecks my plans for the afternoon." Fenn laid a soft kiss on her naked shoulder before he vaulted over her and hauled her bodily to the bathing chamber. The necessary was enclosed and Kal utilized it before brushing her teeth and joining Fenn in the shower. He swung her to him with a growl and they played under the spray until Kal was exhausted but squeaky clean. She wrapped herself in a towel and worked on her hair. The red locks were snarled by the activity of the evening and she called out. "Do you have a comb?"

A panel in the wall slid open and a selection of combs and brushes were exposed as well as a bench to sit on.

"Oh, good. You found it." Fenn was towelling his own locks, but his had the nerve to fall straight.

Muttering to herself about the unfairness of grooming and men, she started on her hair. Without a word, Fenn took her left side and she worked on the right. Kal eventually had to admit that Fenn was better at it than she was and she surrendered her brush without comment when he reached for it.

When he finished, she had two long braids that he arranged in a coronet.

"I should have dated men with longer hair than mine years ago. That's wonderful, Fenn." She stood and kissed him.

The com unit chirped and she heard Mala's voice. "Five-minute warning or Effin will come after you two."

Kahlia pushed away from Fenn, "Would he really?"

"He would. Let's go." With only a towel wrapped around his waist, he walked into the bedroom and through to the front door. He returned with a pile of fabric. He separated the dark purple uniforms and tossed the smaller one to Kahlia.

"Oh, I love the colour." She jumped and slithered into the uniform, dropping the towel and marvelling at the slick and warm fit of the fabric. "It feels wonderful."

"Wow. You look amazing." Fenn's genuine admiration made her blush. "You look like a goddess without anything, but in this, you are truly striking."

She preened and then stopped. "What about shoes?"

"There is a pair of Masuo in the front room."

Kal's heart almost stopped. Masuo were the ultimate luxury. Living footwear that survived by

creating a symbiotic relationship with the wearer. Impervious to heat, slicing and freezing, they were a gleaming jewel in the fashion industry.

She skidded along the floor and opened the lid to a large box that made her entire soul smile. She removed the Masuo and carefully tugged them into place. The creatures hugged her and climbed up her legs until they were mid-thigh. They were in an almost black shade of purple and made her feel that she was protected from thigh to toes.

"I love them."

"They are a gift from Mala. She loves clothes, shoes and anything she can put on her body in her off hours. Morganti grows wild Masuo like no other planet in the area." He had his own boots on, a tight fit to just under his knees.

"Shall we go?"

She was almost dancing in eagerness. The perfect shoes. Women all over the galaxy had been in pursuit of them for years and she had them. "Yes."

They walked down the hall and Kal had a hard time concealing the spring in her step. She wanted to run, sprint and skittle down the halls.

"I am guessing that you are feeling better." Effin looked a little disgruntled as he gestured for Kal to hop up on the exam table.

With Fenn watching from the space next to the monitors, Kal lay still as the scans were

performed.

"I hate to say it, but Mala was right. Your recovery is related to ingestion. A few large meals in a day or two will set you to rights." Effin helped her sit.

"Thank you for your assistance. You were very kind."

He smiled at her, his eyes crinkling in amusement. "And you are very polite. I am just disgruntled because Mala bet me babysitting time for some new equipment. I am going to have to track the little disappearing darling for six hours."

Fenn snorted and Kal laughed. "Is that why she was staring into the tube when I was in it?"

Effin scrubbed his hand over his face and scowled. "Yes. She has a winning gene in her body somewhere and I will stamp it out."

Kal had a hard time keeping her giggles in.

"Fenn, your turn."

Kahlia left the table and watched Fenn undergo the scans.

"You need some more time under the rays. Cloud, escort Phase to Fixer's workshop." Effin waved her away and hauled the machine into place.

Cloud was a Jlinash and had a cheerful look on his-her face. "This way, Phase. May I say, your uniform looks wonderful."

"Thank you, Cloud. Have you been here long?"

"I was assigned to this base eight months ago. I have served in many capacities and my time in medical has been most rewarding." Clood's nine eyes blinked at random, the red-orange orbs startling in the silvery skin.

They walked in companionable silence and the sound of giggling children and welding soon reached Kal's ears.

"Here is Fixer's workshop. I am slightly light sensitive, so will leave you here."

Kal snorted. She had seen the way the support staff acted around the babies and wasn't surprised when Clood didn't want to be pushed into babysitting.

The little ones were inside a light-sensitive bubble. When Mala used a welding torch, they squealed and clapped. The light and sparks entertained them.

Kahlia approached carefully and when the babies clapped, so did she. Mala jerked at the change in pitch and pulled off her welding gloves and goggles. "It's about time, Kal. How long did Fenn keep you in bed?"

"Until Effin broke us up."

Mala blew upward and swiped at her hair. The dark rainbow stuff was held in a series of long and joined tails to her knees. "He can be a bit of a stick in the mud when there is a bet at stake. Let me guess, he owes me a few hours of babysitting?"

"He does. You were right. A gorge of food and I feel much better." She looked around. "I am sorry I have to ask, but where is Isabi, I have not seen him yet."

Mala smiled. "He is due back today. His skills make him an excellent diplomat, which makes him an asset to the Guard. He is also a very good daddy."

The girls clapped their hands at the word daddy.

"If he helped you produce those little gems, he must be."

"They are darling, aren't they? I still can't believe I had two at the same time." She smiled at Kal. "I love the look of that suit on you. Now, come over here and we will install the armour plates."

"Armour plates?" She trailed after Mala as she walked into the maze of her counters and half-finished assemblies.

"Yes. Since you are in the battle guard, you will need a little more protection than the diplomatic or investigative corps. Here, we deal primarily with natural disasters."

"It sounds wild."

"Not for me. I get to stay home with my babies for the most part and enjoy tinkering and creating anything that catches my fancy." Mala steered her to a small dais and had her stand in place.



"Stay still and I will continue the fit." Her hands stroked Kal's back and the fabric went from snug to a second skin. "Now for the armour plates. I have designed them to absorb a variety of energy blasts and take a solid hit from a projectile. Based on your experience on Bosa, they are now coated with a flexible silicate that is resistant to weapons such as the acid that Fenn was struck with."

"Is his suit already defended?"

"It is. I have a body model for most of the Guardsmen and will have one for you, too, after this." Mala pressed a flat plate to Kahlia's torso and it faded in to the fabric.

They kept at it until Kal felt she had more armour on her than the battle suit she used back on Allishan 9.

"Now for the features." Mala smiled, an exhausted delight in her eyes. "The suit has the armour, as you know. The studs near the neck and collarbone act as a com unit. I have been told that you need a mask, so I have another question, do you mind an installed mask?"

Kal blinked. "What?"

"I have been experimenting with Masuo seeds and they are able to connect over a reasonable expanse, like a face. The only problem is that they have to be installed into the skin near your temples. They will do the job. I think."

"Can you install them?"

"I can. Well, I think I can. I can repair your skin if it doesn't work." Mala was looking eager.

"Am I an experiment?" Kahlia wasn't upset, just curious.

Eagerness gleamed in Fixer's eyes. "Yes."

"Then I want your hands steady, let's go to lunch."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“**Y**ou will do no such thing.” Fenn had joined them for lunch and Kal scowled at him as she fed little Mabi her lunch.

“I will so. I need a mask, you don’t, and Mala needs a test subject. I am willing to give her honest and complete feedback during the procedure. After all, I am not the only Guardsman who needs to hide their identity. Fixer needs one herself, but it will be a different procedure for her as she can’t really do it on her own.”

“Fenn, it is a safe process. The pods simply get inserted beneath the skin and a mild electric charge makes them activate.” Activate was code for growing into her body to use it as a new home, like soil.

Kal smiled and focussed on getting the green bean into Mabi’s mouth. The little girl’s four teeth were chomping determinedly and it took nerves of steel to feed her by hand. Fortunately, Kahlia had attended more than one of her sister’s school

trips as a chaperone. Her nerves had been seasoned.

"I don't like it." Fenn frowned.

"You don't have to like it. Just hold my hand while she works." She smiled at Mala and wiped Mabi's invisible face while the girl squirmed.

"Fine. But if anything goes wrong, we are going straight to Effin."

Kal rolled her eyes. "Why don't we just do it in medical? Then I can be monitored the whole time."

Mala smiled at Fenn and stuck her tongue out. A strange voice interrupted her victory. "I am gone for three weeks and I come home to find my wife giving her tongue to another man. Should I leave again?"

Mala squealed and jumped to her feet, tossing Isala at Kal as she ran to greet her husband. Isabi was striking. Kahlia had never seen a male Selna before. He positively oozed sex, but his attentions were firmly given to the woman in his arms. Midnight skin that looked soft as velvet over muscle that looked deadly dangerous. Kal couldn't see the rest of his face – Mala was firmly attached to it.

The arms around Fixer's waist confirmed that the attachment was a two-way thing.

"He is very pretty to look at, but remember that you are mine."

Kal cuddled the little drooling monsters, turned sideways and leaned back until her head was in Fenn's lap. "I have seen pretty things before and yet never taken one home. I classify you as a pretty thing, by the way, and have been debating whether or not that will swell your head." She paused. "Or other parts of you."

Fenn leaned down and gave her a quick peck on the lips. The babies grabbed his hair and he spent a few seconds prying himself loose.

He helped her sit up and she was just in time to see Mala and Isabi part. He looked at her, smiled in greeting and then extended his arms to his little ones.

An ear-splitting squeal spurred Kal on. She stood and handed him the babies. "They are cute little buggers."

Isabi had long black hair and his daughters immediately pulled hanks forward to chew on. "I have missed you little munchers." He looked up at her, "Yes, they are. You are very brave to hold one on your lap, let alone two. Please tell me you are assigned to this base."

She laughed and nodded formally. "I am Kahlia Morning, named Phase. Sorry, I am assigned to Udell base."

He looked impressed and gave her a longer look.

She could tell he was taking in the armour

panels that stiffened the fabric of her suit.

"I am —"

"Isabi, also known as Shade. Mala and I have been speaking."

He looked to the table and raised an eyebrow. "I can tell you and my wife have something in common. Fenn, you are going to be one tired man. Taking care of a molecular manipulator is a full-time job."

Kal smiled as Mala pinched him. She felt Fenn's arm snake around her waist and she leaned against him. "Apparently, you are returning from time off for good behaviour."

If he could have, his face would have blushed. As it was, she could tell by the sudden look to the floor that he was embarrassed. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

Mala jerked her head. "We have an experiment in medical. If you want to come along, you are welcome."

As they walked down the hallway in a group, Fenn had to ask, "What does it say about your children, Isabi, that you have to recruit babysitters from the battle base?"

Kahlia sat in the chair while Mala approached her, small seedpods in each hand. Each pod was tiny, less than three millimetres in length. She held Fenn's hand while Mala positioned the pods and

pressed them gently into her skin on her temples, in her hairline. There was a moment of disorientation and then the world settled.

"Now for the activation." Fixer grabbed two small instruments, each with a tiny spark at its tip.

Kal gripped Fenn's hand and when she jumped, he squeezed her hand securely. The peculiar feeling grew until it seemed part of her.

"Okay, they are active. Now, make a mask."

Effin was standing by, a set of surgical tools at the ready.

Mala picked up a mirror and held it in front of Kal's face. She concentrated and her pale green skin bubbled, rippled and a dark purple mask appeared on her face. She thought about retracting it and it was gone. She wanted it back and back it came. Each time it felt less odd, more like a part of her own body.

"That works so well."

Fenn leaned in close, "Does it hurt?"

"No. But the true test is to have me phase into something and see what happens when I come out. I have managed to ditch colds that way. Who knows what Masuo will do."

Mala looked to Effin and he nodded. "She can, but weigh her after each event. If her body weight drops by more than five percent, call a halt until she can restore it."

Fixer rubbed her hands together eagerly. "I

have just the unit to test your stamina.”

Kal put the mask on and stood upright, her hand still tightly in Fenn’s. She looked at the assembled heroes. “Shall we?”

Fenn leaned down as they made their way to Fixer’s workshop. “Remind me to ask you to put that mask on when we are in our quarters.”

Her hoot of laughter startled three support staff into walking into a wall.

The *unit* Mala had in mind was a twelve-foot battle bot. Fenn gave a mental whistle.

Being weighed before she could enter the bot was a necessary evil, but she still swatted Fenn when he tried to peek. “I am blaming the armour in my bodysuit.”

He was stifling a grin as he watched her walk up behind the bot, checked her mask and boots and then she slowly pulled herself into the machine.

Isabi put the little ones into their shielded playpen and stood near his wife. He jumped when the bot powered up and took two steps into the open area of the warehouse that Fixer called her workshop.

“Kal, can you talk?” Mala was making frantic notes.

It took four seconds, but finally, “Yes. Took me a while to find the speakers.”



"There are targets on your left, please fire at the centre target with the energy beam."

Fenn frowned. There was a tension around Mala's mouth that told him something was going on.

A blast of power shot from the gun on the shoulder mount. It took three shots, but finally, his little flame burned the central target to the ground. He fought back a cheer as Mala continued to frown.

"Please come out of the bot, Kal. We need to discuss something."

Kahlia stepped out of the bot, her mask still in place and the thigh-high Masuo still intact. She swayed in place and Fenn rushed forward to catch her before she fell. Her skin was clammy and her heartbeat was fast.

Effin appeared from behind them with a hypo and a ration bar. "That answers that mystery."

Relay stood behind him, a concerned look on her face.

Kahlia didn't wait—she savaged the ration bar in seconds, drinking the water that Mala held out to her in long gulps. "What happened?"

Fenn shuddered—she was so tiny compared to him. Her body was trembling as she used her talent to metabolize the food. When Isabi tossed over a few more ration bars, he caught them gratefully.

Mala nodded to Effin and he explained. "Unlike Mala, you don't use your talent to shift molecules—you use your body directly. In the case of a working vehicle, like the shuttle, everything is fine, you don't need to exert yourself. But in Fenn's report, he mentioned that you had to re-arm and fix the mech that you were using. You used your own body mass for that."

She was confused, he could tell. "But I have even animated statues, that can't be right."

Fenn spoke softly in her ear. "You told me yourself that you didn't engage control on another object that long. If you are passive, it probably doesn't hurt you."

Effin nodded and continued. "Mala and I rigged this test and the monitors inside the bot proved it. You provided all the power, including the energy blast. That could be dangerous on a long mission."

Fenn heard the despair in her voice, "I am useless then."

Mala shook her head violently. "Not at all. You just need something a little specialized. I can knock something together by dinner if Isabi takes the littles."

The serious Selna nodded immediately. "I need to start teaching them swear words, it is almost time for them to start talking."

Fenn looked to the small woman who was

earnestly trying to comfort Kal. "What can we do to help?"

Mala smiled. "Kal, you like to design things. If you were a bot, what would you look like?"

Kahlia looked up into Fenn's face and she smiled. "I think I might be able to come up with something."

\* \* \* \*

The bot that was created was a thing of beauty. It was shaped like a female and was the same height as Fenn. It was also a walking armoury. For the sake of conservation of energy, projectile weapons, bolts, blades and a gas jet were the least of the supplies housed in the body.

The power supply was ample enough to run a star ship, but here it was inside a bot that would house Phase on missions.

Kahlia was delighted. The curves, the smooth sweep of silver and charcoal grey were lovely. She couldn't wait to jump into it. It was perfect, absolutely perfect. They finished a little after dinner, but Fenn left and returned with a cart loaded with food. He was getting the hang of this.

She handed sandwiches to Mala as quickly as she could. The woman was a bottomless pit.

Just as she was thinking there had to be a better way, Mala mentioned, "Effin has come up with a

nutrient slurry, but it seems to bypass whatever gland it is that transmutes the food into energy. Trust me, I know that all this chewing is tiring."

After hours of work, Mala stood back. "Okay, I think you can take it for a test run."

Trembling with eagerness, Kal stepped into the suit and powered it. It hummed like a fine vehicle. She took a few hesitant steps, then leaped, tumbled and vaulted through the warehouse.

"Can I go for a run outside?"

"Come out for a minute so we can weigh you." Mala's demand was not to be flouted.

Like a disappointed child, Kal approached the scale and bounced out of the bot as soon as she was near. There was less than a tenth of a kilo's difference in her weight. She turned and hugged Mala until the smaller woman squeaked.

"You are happy, I get it, now put me down." Mala's grin belied her cranky tone. "Now, go for a run, see what the suit can do. Fenn, take my rider. It should let you keep up."

Kahlia smiled and turned back to her bot. She jumped into it and waited impatiently for Fenn to climb onto the rider and start it. Fixer opened the great doors at the end and Kal smiled. "Ready, Fenn?"

"Ready, Phase." He kept himself beside her as she started her run through the base, but as soon as they were out of the settled area, she started to

pour on the speed.

The bot she was in was fabulous. Mala was exactly where she should be, creating tech and raising a family.

Kal ran up one hill, boosted the small jets and made a twenty-foot jump. She bounced, she frolicked and eventually, she returned to where Fenn was watching her.

"I really like the suit."

"I noticed. Pop out of there and have a seat." He had spread a small blanket on the ground and patted the space next to him.

She phased out of her bot, only a slight pang of hunger greeted her. "That was wonderful."

"I noticed. Here, have some rations and water."

"You thought of everything." She sat next to him and let him cuddle her as she slowly chewed her way through the bars. She sipped the water and rested one hand on his thigh. It was a lovely day, slowly fading into sunset.

"Udell base isn't like this, you know." He started to trail his fingers over her ribs, and despite the armour, she could feel it. "It is a harsh planet with an unbreathable atmosphere. There is no outdoor picnicking or watching the sunset."

"You are trying to scare me away?"

"No, I just need to know that you are not coming to the base blindly."

"Are you stationed there?"

"You know I am."

"Then I will join you there and we will enjoy our assignments in an unseemly manner whenever we can." She looked up at him and was warmed at the grateful look in his eyes. "Don't be too grateful, Fenn. I still have to keep in touch with my business. I won't let my design company go under just because I am saving lives. People depend on me for their livings and I will not let them down."

"I enjoy that about you."

"Enjoy what?"

"Your sense of duty. It makes your skin flush and gives sparkle to your eyes."

She smiled for a minute before a certain reality came crashing in on her. "What happened to the hostages?"

"They were given medical attention and taken home by other members of the Guard. Beast and Fury. Counsellors are waiting on their home worlds." He started to drop small kisses on her masked forehead.

She shivered and smiled. "Shall I remove the mask?"

"I want it and your boots to be the only things you are wearing."

It took some doing, but that is exactly what happened

## EPILOGUE

*One month later...*

“Rupture ready to launch.” Fenn stood at her side and grinned as they prepared for a dead drop. He was wearing a chute and a small jet pack.

“Phase armed and armoured.” Her jet pack was larger and incorporated into her newest bot. Mala was having far too much fun making them and each one had to be tested.

“Three, two, one, drop!” Razer opened the hatch they were standing on and they fell through the sky.

Together, they fell deep into the jungles of Rexer 5. Kahlia smiled as they tumbled and she started to use her pack to break her fall. She made it down before Rupture and checked a perimeter with her sensors.

“What is the situation, Phase?”

“The residue of the army is north two

kilometres. The toxic gas that they are hauling is leaking like a sieve. Put your mask on and get your butt in gear." She turned her back to him and he jumped on. In seconds, they were flashing through the undergrowth and heading for the travelling toxins. Fixer's suits just kept getting faster.

"Why do I listen when you give me orders?"

Their suits transferred his comments to her clearly.

"I used to be a CEO. I give orders and people follow them. That and you love me and have an interest in seeing me naked."

"Excellent point, love. Onward. Mush!"

She would swat him later. Lives were at stake and she and Rupture were here to see that no more were lost. After all, they were heroes.



## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

Thanks for picking up book 12 of the Sector Guard. Jeepers, I can't believe we are on book 12 already.

I hope you like Kahlia. She will be the fashion maven of Udell base. Even women on an enclosed base need clothing and some of the Guardsmen uniforms are far too utilitarian.

In preparing for books 16-20, I realized that some of you may have requests for powers or locations. Send me your ideas, invent a species and I will credit you in the dedication.

Thanks for joining the Sector Guard,

Viola Grace

<http://www.violagrace.com>

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<http://extasybooks.com>

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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

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

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

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

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