

CELESTIAL STORM

Viola Grace

Sector Guard 13

Andra Nickles has been a Terran courier assigned to the Sector Guard for a few years. The storm that wraps her ship and makes its way inside finds her just outside of Udell. With her body overwhelmed, her mind shuts down and the entity within the storm takes up residence.

Racked with radiation that she doesn't know how to control, she is relegated to the home of Udell's avatar, Nich, where she learns a little about his race and a lot about his taste in botanicals. Using flowers as a tool to visually measure her radioactive output is unorthodox, but everything she is now experiencing is beyond her situational training. With care and control, she becomes the Celestial Storm, now she just needs to rework the name.

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**CELESTIAL STORM
SECTOR GUARD BOOK 13**

BY

VIOLA GRACE

CHAPTER ONE

Andra Nickles fired up her engines with a wave that the Guardsman watching her leave Morganti. The babies in Fixer's arms waved back on their mamma's behalf. A fresh batch of suits and armour boxes for Udell base were stowed in the hold and she was on her way.

"This is the Guarding Flight, Alliance courier, clearing the Morganti base with a flight path for Udell base. Please confirm."

It was second nature to check in with the ground crew when she left. The tech she was carrying was highly confidential and experimental to the point of dangerous.

"Acknowledged, Andra. Keep it in a straight line this time."

"Yeesh, play chicken in a meteor storm once and I never hear the end of it." She was smiling as she lifted off and went through the pre-jump checks on the way out of Morganti's atmosphere.

Her halo was implanted in her skull and her controls responded to her thoughts. Working on

the Sector Guard support staff allowed her to experience and experiment with tech she had never dreamed of back on Earth.

It still struck her as amazing that she had been one of the chosen Volunteers to leave her world and family behind. She had been a courier back on Earth as well. Her shining skill was her inability to get lost. It was so much a part of her that she had never even considered that it could be a talent until the assessors threw her into situations, mazes and even blindfolded her in the trials to prove it to her.

Once out of the atmosphere, she laid on the thrusters while she did final checks on her jump systems. The jump markers loomed and she cubed her position between them. Orientation in three-dimensional space was a skill that came as naturally as her navigational talent.

Andra leaned back in her seat, relaxed her palms on the sensors at the edge of her seat and took a few deep breaths. She opened the gateway in her mind and pictured her destination. She sent a pulse through the jump beacons via her halo and they synched with those near Udell. A sliding wrench and she was in two places at the same time.

The Guarding Flight settled into the Udell beacon space a moment before alarms started blaring and the ship started shaking. "What in hell?"

She was still weak from the jump when air began to hiss out of the seals on the ship. Outer displays showed a brilliant collection of lights and particles writhing around the ship. "Udell base, this is the Guardian Flight, courier Andra. My ship is under attack by a particulate storm and engines are unresponsive. I am in distress. Life support is failing and I have no ability to eject and run."

"Andra, stay put. We are coming to get you." Guardian's voice was calming, but Andra knew that with her seals failing, her life support would soon be useless. She would soon be cold and lifeless in the vastness of space.

"I will wait with bated breath."

"Funny stuff. Do what you can to stay alive."

"Will do." Releasing her restraint harness, she moved as rapidly as she could as her ship lost gravity.

Particulates flowed into her shuttle and danced around in a light and flowing pattern. Andra batted them out of the way as the grips of the emergency breather fought her.

Breathable air was becoming scarce, small particulates made their way into her lungs as she fought to free the breather.

More particles made it into her body. She was faint from the lack of oxygen and ice was starting to pool in her limbs. Her knees gave way and she slumped to the deck with the certainty that death

was coming.

The particulates swirled, becoming thick tentacles that lifted her gently before surging into her mouth and nose. There was no pain, only the feeling of being bathed in warmth as the particles danced outside and within. A curiosity and joy that she knew were not her own filled her from the inside out as the world went dark.

Andra floated in a dark world with a spiralling nebula hanging in front of her. "Hello?"

A wordless giggle rippled through the nebula.

The lights flickered and danced, swirling around her happily.

"Am I dead?"

Another giggle lit the darkness as the light grew brighter, brighter and swallowed her whole.

"Andra. Andra Nickles, wake up." The low voice was tantalizingly familiar.

She cracked open one eye and looked up into a face that was easily recognizable. "Nich-Udell? I didn't die?"

His expression was worried. "No, you didn't die. But you are now more than you were and we have no idea what that means."

She tried to sit up and look around. Nich slid an arm behind her back and lifted her against the pillows. "Where am I? This doesn't look like base

medical.”

“You are too hot for base medical. This is my personal home away from base.”

Smooth walls rose high, a ceiling covered in carvings depicted a long-dead race. The room she was in was clean and pristine. Andra looked down and blushed, yanking the sheet to her chest. “I am naked.”

“Your clothing was burned by the radiation your inhabitant is putting out.”

That widened her eyes and brought her fully awake. “Inhabitant?”

She looked over her body, but she didn’t know what she expected to find. There were no limbs, no tentacles and even her Terran tattoo was in its proper place under the sheet.

Nich rubbed the back of his neck, his stone skin moved easily over muscle that could lift an astonishing amount of weight. Andra had seen him in action before. He had helped speed up the process of unloading her shuttle many times during her rounds. She had always admired the flex and twist of his torso, but seeing it up close and knowing that she was naked under the sheet brought a whole new awareness to her.

Fortunately, he seemed oblivious. “Our medical officer, Helsin, has run a number of scans. Well, he had me do it. You are currently playing host to a most unusual phenomenon. A celestial storm.”

“A what?”

“Celestial storm. There is only one recorded mention of one recently and it was drifting toward Udell at the time. Apparently, it waited for a likely candidate passing by and picked you.”

She blinked. “It was waiting for me. It was hovering around the jump zone, near the beacons.”

“If it was a planet, I would say you had been chosen as an avatar, but all attempts to contact it merely resulted in giggling.” Udell’s deeper tones came through Nich’s lips. The dark metallic purple eyes indicated his possession of Nich, overriding the normal pansy blue.

“Thank God. I just thought that was me. In my mind, there is a bubbly happiness that doesn’t belong to me. It is most disconcerting.” She rubbed idly at her forehead, her sable hair snaking over her shoulder.

Udell smiled at her. “So Nich told me when we first joined. He was disoriented by my presence and made no secret of it.”

“Uh, is there anything for me to wear?” Her voice echoed eerily on the walls.

“We are waiting on a radiation suit from Morganti, but for now, you can use this.” He smiled and placed a folded jumpsuit on her lap. “You haven’t even noticed, have you?”

She blinked and stared at him. Andra looked around the room and tried to figure out what he

was referring to. "Noticed what?"

"The atmosphere of Udell isn't compatible with most species, certainly not yours. Yet, here you are breathing it as normally as you would your own oxygen mix. You are no longer what you were." Nich-Udell nodded and bowed. "I will leave you to change."

Her gratitude was obvious and he winked with one purple-swirled eye as he left her. She unfolded the uniform with the Udell base logo on the shoulder and slithered into it while still lying down. Once dressed, she stood and wiggled her toes against the stone while she got her balance.

She certainly didn't feel any different, but it was not within her scope to assess her body accurately. The giggling in her mind was the only obvious clue that she was no longer alone.

Andra rolled up the cuffs and ankles of the jumpsuit and padded out the door on bare feet.

Nich was leaning against the wall and he straightened as she approached. His grin wasn't well hidden. "We will get you some clothing that fits. Fixer is already on it."

He gestured for her to accompany him down the hall. "Until there is a suit for confinement and control of your inhabitant, I am afraid you are stuck in the jumpsuit. It is gauged for radiation levels higher than normal fabric can handle. I can do something about your footwear though."

It was eerie, walking through a large building of shining stone and they were the only inhabitants. He led her out the main doors and down an open set of steps. The wide expanse of a courtyard, meticulously kept neat and clean with fountains and statuary, looked out over a valley that tumbled down to the Udell base in the distance.

“We are on the side of the mountain?”

He was leading them out of the courtyard and down a path snaking down the mountain.

“My people enjoyed a nice view with their breakfast.” His tone was wry and she stifled a laugh.

The pebbles were a little rough on the soles of feet far too used to the boots of the courier uniform, but she hobbled after Nich, confident that he wouldn’t lead her too far.

She was correct. He stopped and headed into a thicket, “This way. There is some hybrid Masuo here that will probably serve your purpose.”

The Masuo were unshaped, truly wild and they had a metallic shimmer that Andra was unfamiliar with. “Can I try these?”

“Please.” Udell was firmly in control, a smile on his face as he seemed to know something about the Masuo that she didn’t.

It was like picking watermelon-sized grapes. With two of them in her hands, she was a little stymied on what to do.

“Sit down on that rock and push your feet into them. They will do the rest.” Udell was standing and watching her, his head cocked and a silly smile on his lips.

Suspicious, she took the seat and placed each foot gingerly on one of the globes. She had never seen Masuo of this nature before and it was with only a slight hesitation that she pressed lightly into the orbs.

The reaction was sudden. The surreal feeling of having a living creature surrounding her feet was odd, but when it didn't stop at her calves and kept climbing up her legs. “What the hell?”

The happy thoughts were swirling through the back of her mind and as Nich started laughing, the two separate creatures became one and continued their advance up her body.

“It will stop before it reaches your head, just relax and let it cover you.”

Andra could see her feet covered in hard-soled boots in a burnished gold. The baggy jumpsuit covered the rest of the creeping Masuo.

“Is it resistant to the radiation I am producing?” She was worried for the creatures that were slowly covering her.

“It is. I forgot that it was available. With the new base arriving, it never occurred to me that they would need this plant or its product.” He grinned. “But, I am very glad it was here for you.”

It was creeping across her breasts now, a most peculiar sensation. "Oh, this is weird."

"It will appear and disappear as you need it, change styles and colours."

"Thanks for the fashion tips." She held her breath as the Masuo snaked down her arms and gloved her fingers.

The remaining portion snugged up around her neck and mercifully stopped. Andra exhaled the breath she was holding and a happy humming tripped through her mind.

She opened the jumpsuit and peeked down at her new covering. A gold and black swirl covered her chest and outlined her body faithfully. Most faithfully. "Oh wow."

"There, now you no longer need the jumpsuit." Nich was smiling proudly.

"Oh, I still need the jumpsuit. At least until I figure out how to make this a little less form fitting."

"I don't mind."

She looked into his eyes, surprised by the heat in his tone. When it was matched by a warm and appreciative expression on his granite-like features, she shivered in surprise.

CHAPTER TWO

A mechanical tread broke their locked gazes. Nich looked around and grimaced. “Tech, how lovely to see you.”

A large metal woman appeared, making Andra smile. “Hello, Tech. I have never seen you in uniform before.”

“Andra. You are looking a good deal better than when I jacked into your ship and steered it down. You were out cold on the floor, only the occasional twitch gave me signs of life.” The bot bowed low to her.

“Sorry to have upset you, Tech. If I had been aware of the difficulty my inhabitation by a celestial storm would have caused you, I would have arranged it for a day when you were off base.” She couldn’t help the giggle that formed and spilled out of her lips.

The blank faceplate looked down at her and cocked her head. “Do you know, they told me you were spiking with radiation, but I don’t read a

thing now.”

“I have just been molested by local plant life. Nich is horribly proud of himself.”

Tech took a few steps back. “I don’t see it.”

“The turtleneck. I am wearing a Masuo bodysuit and I haven’t learned to adjust it for material mimicry. It’s stuck on the skin.”

The bot tilted its head in curiosity and then a laugh broke free. “I understand.”

Nich chuckled. “I still say I need to judge the grafting of the materials. It has been centuries since anyone wore Masuo from Udell. We used to be proud of our work.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and scowled at him. “You can see your work when I have gotten control of the suit and not before.”

“Spoilsport.”

Tech laughed in surprise. “That is a fascinating exchange, but I have come to warn you that Star Breaker is on her way to help you with training. Whether you like it or not, you have just been inducted into the Sector Guard by virtue of being inhabited by a celestial entity.”

Andra grimaced. “Excellent. Does the Alliance medical plan cover acts of a celestial entity?”

Nich smiled. “Of course it does. We also have dental.”

The snicker didn’t stand a chance of being stifled and rapidly turned into a howl of laughter

that echoed down the hills. Andra had not had a laugh like that since the day she left Earth. She wiped tears from her eyes and sat on a nearby rock to recover from the fit.

“Whoa. That was a good one.”

The other two were looking at her with amusement. Or at least that was what she thought the pose of Tech’s body indicated. Nich’s face was far easier to read.

She let her gaze flick over him for a moment, admiring the planes and angles of his chest under the lightly armoured uniform. Upon closer inspection, she noted that the armour was his own body structure, similar but different from a human male’s. It didn’t make him any less interesting to her greedy gaze, but when he caught her looking, he simply waited with a half-smile of query on his lips.

“You seem to be staring, Andra.”

She blinked and blushed. “Oh, sorry. Just trying to think of the Terran stone you remind me of.”

“Ah. I see. Did you eat much stone back on Terra then?”

She was sure her face showed her confusion. “No, why?”

Tech snorted within her casing. “You licked your lips.”

“Oh. Sorry. Nervous habit.” She tried to put on an innocent face, but she guessed she was less than

successful.

A sharp beep from Tech's suit brought her upright. "Dang. It looks like Kennan's awake. I was hoping that I tired him out more than that."

"Are you just back from an assignment?"

"Yeah, but with my brain doing most of the work, I am a little perkier after work than he is."

Andra shook her head. The romantic lives of the paired-off Guardsmen were quite active. "You tuckered him out when you got back to base?"

"No, in the shuttle." The suit beeped again. "All right, already." Tech sighed and nodded. "I will be back later, but just to recap, Star Breaker, training, new Guardsman. That about covers it."

Suddenly twitchy at the thought of being alone with Nich, Andra fought the urge to yell *take me with you*.

"Nich-Udell has a com unit, so feel free to call me to chat anytime and call me Ilsa. We keep it casual when we are not on duty."

"Excellent. Ilsa it is." She smiled at the blank face of the suit as it turned and bounded back down the hill.

"She seems...energetic. I have never seen her that enthusiastic before." Andra stomped around in her new footwear and looked around the area.

It was surreal to be perched on a hillside on an alien world breathing air that her lungs could not normally consume. Her knees buckled and she

pitched toward the surface, Nich's arms were not quite fast enough to catch her.

"I should not have let you get out of bed. It was foolish of me." He lifted her and carried her back through the empty stone city.

She wanted to comfort him, but her head was spinning. The internal giggling finally ceased and a gnawing weakness ran through her. "I think I need to eat or drink or something."

"It makes sense given how long you were out."

The world spun around her when he put her back into the bed. "How long was I out?"

"Two weeks. We kept you alive with intravenous supplements, but I was so happy to see you awake that feeding you fled my mind."

She leaned against the pillows and soon felt a straw at her lips. Watered fruit juice was perfectly welcome to her parched mouth. Andra's body relaxed as the fluid satisfied her dehydration.

"It's the juice of a solar fruit mixed with water. I hope your system greets it favourably. It was on the acceptable content list that I got from the Alliance."

She opened her eyes to see his concerned face inches from her own, his hand holding the cup with the straw to her lips. "They sent you a *feeding your Terran* list?"

He smiled. "Something like that and all of the Terran Guardsmen agreed that the compositions of

the flora here would agree with you. The fauna list is fairly extensive as well. It will be nice to hunt again, I have not engaged in that particular activity in years.”

She idly wondered if there were other activities he was interested in re-discovering, but she simply sipped the juice again. She had dated a few members of other species since leaving Earth, but the sudden attraction she felt for Nich was beyond the norm. If she could, she would blame the entity inhabiting her body, but the sensations of attraction were all too familiar, just an extreme version of her normal behaviour.

The sudden completion of the juice made her jump – the slurp caught her by surprise.

“I will get you another.” Nich was sitting on the side of her bed, near enough to touch if she had had the energy.

Her hands shook as she tried to take the cup from him.

“I will hold it.” He aimed the straw for her mouth again.

“You probably have better things to do today, rather than playing nursemaid to me.”

“Nothing that I can’t catch up on later. Udell has been working non-stop to provide me with some time to assist your recovery.”

“That was nice of him.”

Nich smiled. “I don’t have much opportunity to

have guests out here. He knows I get a little lonely."

She sipped at the juice for a moment. "How did you come to be an avatar?"

"It's a bit of a story. Are you sure you want to hear it?"

She nodded. It would be nice to have someone else talk for a change. As a courier, she spent a lot of time alone. Other voices were always welcome.

"Well, my species left Udell centuries ago after a falling out with the development that they wanted to engage in. He wanted to keep the majority of the surface untouched and they wanted to go commercial. A small contingent stayed in the city while the rest left to form colonies on other hospitable worlds. The Klalnal did well enough as a species, but they felt the loss of their planet and kept in touch over the centuries."

"Twenty-five years ago, my parents' colony on Paknish was contacted by the Alliance. Wonic, the previous avatar, was dying and all Klalnal colonies were asked to provide volunteers to take his place. I was one of five men sent to Udell from Paknish and I met sixty others who were also chosen and agreed to volunteer for the honour."

"Wonic was weak. He had been the avatar for over nine-hundred years and was tired of his life on Udell. He was the last inhabitant. The rest had passed on in their natural life spans. Udell is great

company, but other beings are needed to keep an avatar happy.

“We each had a quiet moment. Wonic-Udell and I had thought my questions over most thoroughly. I asked him if he would allow the Alliance to set up a base on the surface if I was chosen. He asked me why. So I explained the idea that the Alliance could use a base. It would provide his avatar with conversation partners and could make Udell a fixture in the politics of the region.”

Andra was hooked. “What did he say?”

“He told me he would consider it and called in the next applicant. It was three days later when the shuttles started taking off and I realised that I was the only one not assigned to a shuttle. Wonic waited until all the others were safely off world and Udell left him and transferred to me. The old avatar died moments later and we both grieved Wonic’s loss for months.

“I buried the old avatar with all honours and Udell showed his grief with a roiling of the tectonic plates that destroyed a number of the remaining cities and left the surface a verdant wonderland.

“With Udell firmly in my mind, I contacted the Alliance and sent out an open invitation for a base. It was six years ago when an answer came and construction commenced on the new base. The workers were excellent companions for me and eventually, the male members of the Sector Guard

and the support teams moved in. I was given the status of Guardsman and have even been on a few high-radiation assignments.”

“How have you felt about the Guardsmen pairing off?”

There was a strange mottling under his skin and she recognized it as a blush. “I must be honest. It was one of my prime reasons for jumping at the Sector Guard’s offer rather than another branch of the Alliance.”

“They promised you a woman?” A flare of jealousy ran through her and she stomped it down quickly.

“They promised me my perfect match no matter how long it took to find her. My last meeting with the Commander was promising. He mentioned that my mate would fall from the sky, driven by the stars.” His smile was back.

“That is rather cryptic.”

His hand caressed her cheek slowly, leaving a trail of heat in its wake. “Isn’t it?”

CHAPTER THREE

“Pardon the intrusion, but I don’t think she is up to your level of flirting yet, Nich.”

Andra blinked furiously as her eyes shifted focus from the closeness of Nich to the figure of Star Breaker entering the room. “Hello, Carella. How are you doing?”

The elegant woman in the black and silver uniform smiled, “I am thinking of having the Alliance put a restriction on couriers with Terran origin. We seem to end up ambushed and inhabited by sentient star stuff.”

“They must be attracted to our charm and wit. That or they are desperate and have no taste. Either way, it bodes ill for our species.” Andra smiled as Carella came to take her hand.

Star Breaker was Carella Masul, wife of the planetary avatar Kale-Gant. As couriers, they had worked out of the same dispatch and as Terrans, they had a bond that went beyond blood. When Carella disappeared two years ago, they had never imagined she would reappear inside a globe that

had been used as a defensive weapon for five hundred years. Time travel was just freaky.

“Yeah, absorbing and controlling all that power would probably go to the heads of those back home. Good thing they don’t know about it.” Carella sat at her side and looked into Andra’s eyes. “Are you sure something is running around in you? You don’t show any of the signs.”

“Pretty sure. The last thing I remember is the lack of oxygen and lots of sparkles. Then I woke up here.”

Nich sighed and stood. “I will leave you two ladies to get re-acquainted. Carella, please make sure that she continues to drink. Guardian needs a report on your health and I will need to use my office for the communication.”

“See you later, Nich. I will be right where you left me.” Andra gave him a bright smile and a wave as he left her and Star Breaker together. The moment that she and he had shared was lost forever.

He looked as if he wanted to say something, but he left the room instead.

Carella gave her a considering look. “What did I interrupt when I arrived?”

“Nothing specific, but I think that he thinks that I am the right woman for him.”

“Has Commander been here?”

“So he said.”

Carella grinned, "Commander is the best matchmaker in the sector. If he told Nich that you are the one for him, he is probably right."

Andra groaned, closed her eyes and sank back into the pillow. "Is there an option to stall?"

"Well, threatening to irradiate their junk usually works. It slows them down until the planet extends protection or until the planet reminds them that they are impervious."

The giggle that they shared was a bonding across space and time.

Andra remembered another laugh that they had shared, years earlier. "Do you remember that time in basic when we had to go up against the seduction of a male companion and Helen was allergic to him? I have never laughed so hard as when he tried to seduce her with pheromones and she started sneezing."

"And he kept rubbing and rubbing until she punched him and we had to break up the fight." Carella finished the story with a laugh. "I am glad that my memories came back, Emhara did a fairly thorough job in blanking my mind for the task at hand." Star Breaker's twinkling grey eyes showed that she had recovered most of her soul after her ordeal.

"I am glad. Friends are hard to come by, let alone Terran couriers."

When Carella handed her the juice cup, she

sipped slowly.

"And now, Andra, we share another bond. A creepy one at that."

"What?"

"The dubious honour of having our bodies hijacked by celestial entities. It is a very small club amongst Terrans. Most of our charming Volunteers just end up jumped by aliens. They are happy about it, for the most part, but they are rather restricted in their travelling. Being a member of the Sector Guard provides us with action, adventure and our very own confirmed match."

"So, same deal, better locations?"

Carella grinned, "Exactly."

They chatted about their experiences in the time since they had last seen each other and eventually Andra felt strong enough to stand on her own two feet, or so she thought.

Carella looked her up and down and snorted with amusement. "Okay, I take it back, you definitely are occupied by a stellar presence."

Andra looked down and gasped. She wasn't standing on the floor, a light sparkling mist swirled around her boots and around her calves and thighs. The mist was supporting her weight.

"Cool. That is definitely new. I don't feel a thing."

Carella nodded, "You haven't bonded to it yet."

You are two beings occupying the same space, but it is trying to support you physically."

"It didn't work that way for you and Emhara?"

"She squelched my mind and blanked my memories so that being out of time would not be so traumatizing for me. She just overwhelmed me and when she was gone, I could finally start to surface, but by then, I was locked in the sphere waiting for time to pass."

A shudder ran through Andra. The thought of time passing and being confined made her queasy.

"There was a good reason for Emhara to numb my mind, if I had been awake the whole time and not on automatic, I would have gone bonkers. Come on, let's go for a walk."

"Okay, but if I pass out, you are carrying me back here."

"Deal. Peel out of that baggy jumpsuit, it may be hampering to your system."

Sighing, Andra shucked the loose suit and concentrated on thickening the Masuo. It eventually mimicked Star Breaker's armoured suit.

"Very nice. How are you doing that?"

"Udell Masuo. Apparently, they are quite versatile." Her hands checked the thickness front and back. "Pardon the groping."

"No problem. Just don't ask me to participate. I have my hands full at home, Kale is trying to convince me to take a leave to try to have a baby.

Effin has been making incredible strides in fixing the virus that has kept Kale in quarantine.”

Andra tried to take a step forward, but the cloud under her feet floated her along without her body moving at all. “Okay, that is just weird.”

“I am here for you to get a full recon on your new addition. Is there anything you would like to do?”

She sighed, “I would like to take a look at my ship. I am pretty sure it needs repairs.”

“We will leave that for tomorrow. Today is just for walking. You need to pace yourself and to let the storm acclimate to being with you.”

Carella started walking and Andra kept pace, floating along on a cushion of sparkles. After a few minutes, she started giggling. “Why did it have to be sparkles?”

Her companion started chuckling and it turned into outright guffaws.

“Andra, an alien entity has taken up residence in your body and mind and you are complaining about sparkles?”

“I hate sparkles.” Grumbling, she crossed her arms over her breasts and scowled at Carella.

“Well, why don’t we get you to recall your storm and have you walking on your own two feet. I want to do a test on your radiating systems.”

“My what?”

Her companion sighed and she gestured to the

cloud under her feet, "Suck it up."

It took a strange sort of concentration, like trying to untie her shoes with her mind alone, but soon, she felt an acknowledgement deep inside her mind and then she felt the lumpy surface of the stone under her feet.

"Fine. I am on the ground. What now, power guru?"

"Well, I can sense the radiation around you and the storm seems to manifest without any damage or drain on your system, so I am guessing it is feeding off me. I want you to step up the process."

Andra wasn't sure if she understood. "What?"

"I want you to use the storm and try to feed your body with my energy." Carella's black hair shone in the afternoon sun. The wind of Udell lifted and played with it lightly, then released it gently, as if afraid to anger her.

"How would I even do that and wouldn't it hurt you?"

"Honey, I have the residual power of a star at my disposal, nothing you can do would even make me lightly uncomfortable. Now, let's go and have a seat on those steps and give this a try."

Carella led the way and sat comfortably on the stone. Andra mirrored her, noting for the first time that her suit was taking on a gold and purple spiral. The designs were quite pretty and she wanted to have a closer look at them as soon as this

was done.

“Okay, what do I do?”

“Close your eyes. Breathe deeply and look at me with your eyes closed. You should see my aura quite clearly and once you see it, think of yourself as a magnet or a sponge simply absorbing my radiation.”

Andra tried. She closed her eyes and saw nothing behind her lids but residual sparkle from the sun. For a solid five minutes, her mind scrambled around inside her body trying to find the magical switch that would allow her to see what was hidden.

Sighing, she turned her mind to the new presence and touched it. The curious emotion touched her and suddenly, she saw Star Breaker without opening her eyes. Brilliant colours streamed from her in pulses, the decorative studs on her suit were the outlets and controlled her output very effectively.

“Your suit channels your radiation.”

“You see it. Excellent! Now draw on it.”

The emotion that was the storm whirled out and caressed Carella from every angle. It took several minutes, but the energy flowed from Star Breaker to the Celestial Storm and into Andra. It washed through her like a refreshing dip in a pool and then started to warm her from the inside out.

She stopped the storm soon after she was toasty

warm and felt far less lightheaded than she had at the start of the experiment. Andra opened her eyes and was facing a grinning Carella.

“Well done, Andy. That was very smooth.”

“Thank you, but the storm did all the work. I just asked it for help.” She wiggled her fingers and toes. “That feels much better.”

“I am glad to hear it. Now, you need to rest for a bit so your body can acclimate to the new energy. I love the brightness of your suit by the way. The pulsing and swirling is lovely.” Carella helped her to her feet and escorted her back to bed.

Lightly tucked in, Andra had a fleeting thought that she would rather be in pyjamas and her suit thinned and shortened to a sports bra and boy shorts. Chuckling and yawning, she settled back into the bedding and let the happy humming in her mind lull her to sleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Well, Star Breaker, what do you think?”
Guardian served her a cup of tea while he debriefed her.

“The storm is powerful. Unlike stars or planets, it doesn’t seem to directly speak to Andra.” She leaned back and pursed her lips. “It is more like an exchange of emotional states. They are binding together with each passing second whether Andra accesses the power or not.”

Guardian made a few notes. “Will it injure her?”

“No. In fact, I think that the storm has been looking for a likely candidate for a while. It seems happy with her. I can hear a constant giggling when I touch her aura.”

His lips pulled down in a frown. “Giggling?”

Carella sipped her tea. “Yes, a chipper and cheerful giggle. Something inside her is happy to be there.”

“Do you think it is a stable entity?”

She smiled. “Before I came here, I tracked all sightings and trajectories of this Celestial Storm. It

has been heading this way since the base was built. It broke out of its nebula and made a slow but steady beeline for this base in particular. It wants to be here, Guardian. Now that it is here, I feel that it can and will be a welcome addition to the Guard."

He leaned back in his chair, his office a well-lit haven in the depths of the base. The skylights allowed for as much natural light as possible and gave an excellent view of landing craft on their way to the air locks on the side of the base.

The light gleamed off the bone ridges on his forehead causing the silver skin to reflect bits of illumination into the room. "I don't know if I like the idea of an untested entity on my base."

"As to that, I can speak for the host. Andra is a remarkable woman who has a will of iron if she chooses to use it. Terran Volunteers were put through extensive testing and couriers went through even more. We had to be suited to long terms alone in a shuttle with no one else to speak to, as well as an intense adherence to privacy. It creates a particularly specific personality and set of behaviours, as well as a skewed sense of humour."

Guardian smiled. "You were a courier, were you not?"

"I was. It was why Emhara chose me. I was less likely to go bonkers in the sphere for several hundred years."

He shuddered and she smiled. "Yeah, it was a bit of a ball buster, but I managed."

Guardian straightened. "Do you think that Andra has the same fortitude?"

"I believe that she does. She is also Nich's match, but then you already knew that."

"Do you find it odd that two women in the same line of work were both designated avatars by stellar beings and are the mates for planetary avatars?"

"It seems proper to me and you would have to ask Kale-Gant his opinion. I know that Nich-Udell is eager to try his hand at courtship. He has been alone for a long time."

Guardian scrubbed his face with his hands. "Yes, you are right. I will leave Udell in charge of her and hope for the best. Is there anything she needs while she adjusts?"

Carella smiled. "She wants her shuttle. It's a safety net for her. All couriers fuss with their ships when they are between assignments. It keeps our hands busy so our minds can ignore the passing of time."

"The hull was torn open at several points. I don't think she will be able to do much on her own." He looked dubious.

She laughed at him. "Guardian, never underestimate a courier, a woman, a Terran, and a celestial avatar. She will do what she can and nag

for the rest.”

“I will see about having a crew haul the ship up the mountain, but it will take a few days.”

Star Breaker snorted, “Have them wrap chains around it and leave me to move it to the tower. I will have it there before sundown.”

“I will have Tech work with the ground crew. They’ll wrap it up in no time.”

“Your crew is really coming together. Congratulations, the battle base is getting wonderful reports.”

“Commander is responsible for a good portion of that. If not for his sending Razer and Rupture off to find their women, the others may have gotten restless when none of the promised mates had come to pass. Tech and Phase are invaluable additions to our base and Hyder’s specific directions have led to two very happy couples.”

“Three if Nich can find his way into Andra’s heart and past the Masuo bodysuit he gave her.” She snickered.

Guardian smiled, shook his head and called the ground crew. They had a shuttle to wrap for transport.

* * * *

Flowers were everywhere. The air was heavy with their exotic perfumes. “What is this?”

Nich looked up from the desk he was sitting at. It hadn't been there before she nodded off.

"They are flowers."

She smiled and triggered the Masuo back into a bodysuit complete with boots. "I can see they are flowers. Are they for me?"

"To a certain extent. The flowers are radiation sensitive. If you want to keep them alive, you have to restrain yourself. If the flowers die, you are not suited for regular company. When you can go a week with all the flowers remaining alive and healthy, you can go to the base and have a proper meal with the company of other Guardsmen."

"But if they are all plants from Udell, how could I injure them?"

"Touch them and find out."

Andra scowled at him and reached out for a yellow and pink bloom, only to watch it brown and stain as her fingers approached. She pulled her hand back and it recovered. The blue flowers allowed her fingers to caress the petals but then grew brittle under her touch.

"That sucks. They will recover?"

"Yes, but until you can touch them all, you can't be around living creatures who have no defences. As a Guardsman, you may have to deal with delicate species. You need to work on your control." He had a sombre expression on his face.

She experimented with the flowers and using

the inner eye Carella had her experimenting with the day before. She managed to restrain her radiation enough to touch one of the sturdiest blooms without it collapsing. The red and purple flower became her favourite in that instant.

"This is exhausting. Is there something else I can do?"

He looked up from his documents and smiled, "Star Breaker put your shuttle outside the walls. Go and make a list of materials you need for repairs and I will forward it to the base."

He held up a pen and paper for her.

"Why can't I use a data pad?"

"In addition to your radiation, your EM field is enough to interfere with most electronics. You would fry a data pad in seconds."

"Aw balls." She walked up to him and took the implements he held out to her. She had almost made it out of the room before what he had said sunk in. "Carella can lift a shuttle?"

"She can and she is not called Star Breaker just because it sounds good. She contains enough power to blast a small stellar object into pieces. She also cheats at cards." His wink caught her by surprise.

"How do you know that? You don't look like the type to play cards."

"Udell and Gant have conversations on the planetary frequencies. They are inveterate

gossips.”

Bemused, she left the room and headed through the courtyard and her feet picked up the pace as she saw her shuttle in the meadow beyond the gate. The Guarding Flight was her home and just seeing it again lightened her mood.

Well, her mood was lightened until she got a good look at the sides of the shuttle where the storm had torn it open to get at her. “Whoa. That’s a mess and a half.”

She circled her beloved home slowly, noting each and every nick and dent that now marred the surface. Andra sighed as she opened the hatch and stepped in to her living space. The storage bins were jostled but intact.

A brusque knock on the door of the shuttle and Star Breaker was inside. “Wow, this is nice. It takes me back.”

“To the endlessness of space and carrying data and cargo of a highly sensitive nature?”

Carella started straightening the bins and locking everything down. “Exactly. Do you have anything from Earth in here?”

“Sure. I got a *Wii* for my last birthday. Or anniversary in space. I can’t remember.”

“Are you serious? From whom?”

“Our friendly neighbourhood smuggler, Pandora Smythe. Though, technically she isn’t a smuggler.”

Andra smiled as she checked the medical supplies. "What is she then?"

"She was abducted from Earth after the Volunteers had been selected but before the planet was under interdiction by the Alliance. So, she was still a registered Terran occupant and therefore did not fall under Alliance rule. She has been running choice items off the surface and to certain members of the Terran Volunteers for dispersal for a few years now. Pan can come and go as she pleases."

"Nice. At least running into you in courier training made me feel less alone."

"Right back atcha. It is comforting to know that someone is looking out for us somewhere, even if it is just supplying us with goodies."

"Want some chocolate?"

Seeing Carella swoon with happiness brought a smile to Andra's face. She reached into the emergency supplies and drew out one of her coveted bars.

"Here you go. I used to get them every six months when I swung by Station 13."

Carella took the bar with reverence. "What do you want in return?"

"Help me with my shuttle. I have heard that you can lift just about anything and the storm left me with a lot of open gaps in my transport. If Star Breaker would help me with the repairs, there could be another chocolate bar in her future."

“Make a list and I will bring it from the base.”

Andra rubbed her hands together, “Excellent. I enjoy it when a plan comes together.”

Carella hooted with laughter and saluted before breaking off a piece of chocolate. “Let’s get your ship back up and running.”

* * * *

Days passed with Star Breaker, Tech and Phase working with Andra on the ship. Nich kept her supplied with new panels and rivets, measuring her progress on the flowers every morning and evening.

Carella brought the supplies from the base, Tech held them in position with her armoured unit and Phase coaxed the metal into proper shape for Andra to fasten it. They rapidly became a tightly knit group that worked well until mealtime, then Phase and Tech had to return to base. The atmosphere would not allow them to breathe and Andra could not join them yet. Her body was still too hot, but it was getting better with every passing day.

“Have they left you alone?” Nich’s voice distracted her from the joint she was soldering.

She could only see his feet from her vantage point under the ship. “They had to go eat and Star Breaker has to return to Morganti for a day or two.

Her husband is missing her.”

Hands gripped her ankles and pulled her out. He was between her thighs when he finished pulling her out. “Uh. This is rather unusual, even for you, Nich.”

It was Udell who answered, purple eyes flaring. “He is rather embarrassed. His mother has called and wants to meet the prospective mate that her son has been assigned before any interaction of an intimate nature occurs.”

“Why would intimacy occur between us? He barely even acknowledges my presence.” It was easier to explain it to him when it wasn’t Nich’s pansy blue gaze looking at her.

“He doesn’t want to come on too strong for fear of driving you away. Prolonged arousal becomes rather painful for his race and he does not wish to discomfort you or cause himself an injury.” The sincerity in his voice kept her from laughing.

“Whoa. Wait a minute. I have to meet his mother?”

“She will be here by sunset tomorrow. Nacra has been travelling for a week and looks forward to meeting you.”

The strength in his hands was casual as he held her by the waist, her knees bent on either side of his hips. His rejection of arousal was funny considering their position. It was a good thing Udell was in charge or she might be climbing the

avatar.

Self-control was the hallmark of every courier, but the last week had tested her resolve to the limit. Twice, she caught Nich coming out of the shower and all that smooth granite skin had called to her like the most erotic of statues.

The towel he had been wearing was nothing more than a tease. She blinked away the images in her memory and answered him.

"So, I am not offended by his interest, am creeped out by meeting his mother and really need to do some research on his species, but my own attraction to him is causing me a difficulty as well."

"How so?"

"It is throwing my concentration into disarray and my control over my radiation levels vary widely. If not for the Guarding Flight keeping me distracted, I would be crawling the walls by now."

"You seem competent at this kind of mechanical work."

"All couriers need to know their ships inside and out. It is a matter of survival."

The absurdity of being in an intimate position with a man who made her blood heat just by looking at her and having a conversation about her shuttle maintenance was not lost on her.

"Is there anything else? I need to get the connections sealed and locked in before I can take her on a test run."

He blinked and pansy blue started to bleed into his eyes. "You are leaving?"

She smiled and patted his cheek with a grimy hand. "Not leaving, but the Guarding Flight is my transport and has been my home for years. It is going to remain part of my life."

Nich was back in control and he lifted her torso from the ground into his arms. Her pelvis slid against his in a fascinating way as he locked his lips over hers in a kiss that curled her toes and sent her clothing's colours and textures fluctuating wildly.

He tasted like the flowers he brought her every day smelled. Wild, sweet and exotic. The kiss shaped itself from a hurried claiming to a slow exploration. When he finally released her, he was on his back and she was lying on top of him.

She pushed against his shoulders until they were a foot and a half apart. "That was a little sudden."

"It was the thought of you leaving me." His fingers teased at her hair where it had come loose from the topknot to straggle across her cheeks.

"Leaving you or leaving Udell?"

"Both. You are my match in every way and I look forward to discovering the details with you one at a time." His eyes were bright and glittering with anticipation.

There was no hiding his interest as she

straddled him, all parts of his body were as hard as she imagined in the depths of the night.

“Are you sure of that? It could just be a fluke.”

He started chuckling and she held on for dear life. “Let my mother be the judge of that.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Nacra Waynorth was an elegant woman, her hair in a complicated twist that had Andra's admiration, and eyes as pansy blue as her son's.

"So, you are the one selected for my son? Do you always dress in such a revealing manner?" Her voice was a light chime of sound, so cheerful that Andra almost missed the insult.

Nich-Udell almost spit out his tea.

Andra smiled. This was not her first time with a protective mother. "Only when I have been irradiated and burn through all standard clothing. I am still getting a grip on my new occupant and it is rather hard on textiles. Your son was kind enough to assist me in clothing myself and I believe that the body suit is rather dashing."

Nacra's lips twitched. "It is. It matches Udell's eyes when he takes my son over."

"Yes, it was most generous of your son to offer his body to Udell to increase the planet's reach, wealth and status within the sector. He came in with a business plan and Udell jumped at it. It is an

honour to wear the colours of so perceptive a being.”

Nich-Udell was watching the verbal sparring with fascination. Neither woman gave an inch and Andra looked at him several times when Nacra gave her a particularly veiled insult.

Finally, his mother got to the point. “You are quite delicate. Will you be able to give me a grandchild?”

Nich looked at her curiously as if he was waiting for her answer.

She took a deep breath and formed her answer before she spoke. “Nacra. Your son and I have just met. We have not even discussed furniture, let alone bonding or children. I am inhabited by a being we know nothing about and the radiation I have been exposed to—it may have sterilized me, could affect a pregnancy or it could be perfectly harmless once my body has adapted. I don’t know. I will table your question until there is the possibility of an answer.”

The pansy blue eyes stared at her for a moment before a smile broke out over the woman’s face. “I accept your answer. You will make a most formidable daughter.”

“We will see.” Andra was smiling back.

Nich let out a sigh of relief that made both of them laugh. The rest of the tea party proceeded in a friendly and relaxed exchange of species details.

Nich ran for cover when they started exploring sexual habits of the Klalnai. They were just getting into the most common positions favoured when Star Breaker came running into the hall.

“Madam, Andra. I am afraid that the Celestial Storm has her first assignment. We need to do a shakedown cruise on the Guarding Flight and check out a situation on Ingal 9. It can’t wait.” Carella would have looked out of breath if it were possible. As Star Breaker, she did not need to breathe—the stellar energy simply powered her body and surrounded her at all times.

“Nacra, do you mind if I cut our visit short?” She rose and thought about where Nich could be hiding. A tendril of energy spun free of her hand and slinked around a corner.

There was a yelp of surprise and Nich-Udell was pulled into the room by the sparkling rope that suspended him above the floor by its grip on his waist.

“I have to leave. I didn’t want to leave your mother alone while I took off.”

“What is going on?”

Andra blinked and a smile spread across her features. She released him from her grip with a flick of her wrist. “Unless I miss my guess, it’s my first assignment.”

Nich-Udell smiled at her, his blue-purple eyes gleaming. With his hands on her shoulders, he

pulled her close and placed a kiss on her forehead. "Good luck and play nice with the other Guardsmen."

She laughed and gave him a quick peck on his lips. With a gleeful shout, she lifted off the ground and dove out the window, a trail of glittering energy around and behind her. The Guarding Flight was ready, or at least habitable for two beings who did not need to breathe.

Star Breaker took position in the navigator's seat and as she buckled up, the pre-flight checks began under Celestial Storm's hands.

As they lifted off, a few doubts flickered through Andra's mind. She had tested flight, but aside from a calming wave when she thought about going into the vacuum of space, the entity was remarkably unhelpful. This was going to be a shakedown of herself in space, sink or swim, live or die.

In her communications with the other Guardsmen and the physicians, she had found out one thing that struck her as funny, she was the only one who had doubts that she could do this.

Star Breaker smiled at her, as if reading her face. "It will be fine. I will be nearby in case you need help."

"I really hope that that doesn't come up. Care for some chocolate?"

* * * *

Ingal 9 was a quiet world. The inhabitants had little to no technology and were dependent on the defence provided by the Alliance to keep the gentle bipeds from being turned into slaves.

“What are we looking for?”

“There are reports of raiders in the vicinity and they are not packing light. A major assembly of raider ships is headed this way and no Alliance ships could get here as quickly as we could.”

Celestial Storm swallowed, “What? And we are going to stand between raiders and this world in this dinky shuttle?”

Star Breaker smiled. “No. We are going to stand between raiders and this world with our bodies and the power that we house. I will take on the offensive, you hang back until you can figure out where your talent lies. No pressure, just a shakedown.”

“Does everyone get a trial by fire?”

“No. Just the special ones.” Star Breaker smiled. She opened the coms and sent a message to Udell and Morganti. “This is the Guarding Flight. We are in orbit around Ingal 9 and waiting for contact. We will check back in three hours unless we wrap this up earlier.”

A double click sounded through the input speakers. Star Breaker shut the com down and

turned to Celestial Storm. "We go com silent until they get here. Sending the message out is a warning to the raiders. The double click is a response from our bases. Anything that comes in from now on is a raider communication trying to pinpoint our location."

"If that is a problem, why send the original communication?"

"My sense of fair play. Anyone who is worried about meeting a Sector Guard ship out here will turn and run. Those who pursue it need to be taught a lesson. We are just the ones to teach it." Star Breaker released the harness and started stretching.

Celestial Storm released her own seatbelt and turned to watch her friend. "How will we know when they are here?"

"Open your senses. The planet has a heartbeat, the moons hum, the sun pulses. Anything in between is our problem."

Andra closed her eyes and opened her inner vision. "Aha! Three jump ships just entered the system. They are disgorging a series of smaller vessels and heading this way."

Carella chuckled. "Exactly. Good girl. It took me quite a bit longer to figure that out. Mind you, inside the sphere, my other senses were all that I had to use."

"What do we do when they get here?"

“Set the Flight for auto correcting orbit and join me in a walk outside. The stellar winds are lovely tonight.”

If a glittering energy wasn't already coating her hands, she would have been sweating with nervousness. Her hands shifted across the control panel as she set the program to hold and correct the orbit as necessary.

She was shaking as she crossed the deck to the outer door. The giggling in her mind that was now constant took on a fever pitch. The storm wanted to get back into space and the anticipation had it swirling outside her body and covering her in a loving, glowing shield.

She reached for the door release and smiled weakly as Star Breaker took her other hand. It was now or never.

The air rushed out and took them with it, leaving them floating alone amongst the stars.

This is so cool!

CHAPTER SIX

The disorientation of flying in the depths of space faded quickly and soon the storm was spiralling out and whirling her around and around. Andra was having a helluva good time.

Unfortunately, all good times must come to an end and when Star Breaker darted toward a wave of incoming ships, that time had arrived.

Celestial Storm hung in orbit, her senses expanded to find any stray ships that made it past the blasts of energy that Star Breaker was throwing out.

Holy hells. Andra found another rank of ships that was approaching from the other side of the planet and there was no way that Star Breaker or Celestial Storm could make it there in time.

A deep purr ran through her mind. The misty glitter shot out of her body and left her quivering in shock. It expanded in an ever-increasing wave, the thick mist turning into a hard candy coating that was almost transparent.

With her arms and legs splayed in a starburst, she stopped fighting the storm and gave herself up to the power coursing through her.

Her senses watched Star Breaker's battle and she waited for the sneak attack. The moment that the first ship touched her barrier, she shivered at the pulse of energy that went through her. The storm was taking the energy from the ship and giving it to her.

The next three ships met the same fate, tangled in the glitter of the storm.

Andra didn't want the ships locked in a deteriorating orbit, so with a flex of the storm, she shot them away from the pull of the planet's gravity. There would be no excuse for their companions to land on the surface.

The next three were travelling more slowly when they struck the storm, but they tried to blow their way through the barrier first. Andra smiled as she simply absorbed the energy from half a world away.

Star Breaker was almost finished destroying the small fleet, only one ship made it past her. That singular ship powered up weapons and got off two shots before the storm sent a beam of energy out to drain the ship of all powers except life support. The two shots that struck Andra in the centre of her chest simply absorbed into her body.

She shook it off and when Star Breaker

returned, she reeled the storm back in to her body. All ships had been dealt with and none was on a collision course with the planet. It was a well-executed defence.

Celestial Storm gave Star Breaker a thumbs up as they moved through space back to the Guardian Flight. It was a tricky matter to match speed with an object in orbit, but Star Breaker's experience was invaluable in getting them back to and within the shuttle.

When the atmosphere filled the shuttle again, Andra took a deep breath. "Well, that worked out well."

"Just a moment, we need to report in."

"Oh. Okay. Sorry, I am new at this."

Star Breaker reached over and ruffled her hair. "Sit tight. We will have you back on Udell in no time."

Her hands moved swiftly over the console until she had a four-way connection lined up. "This is Star Breaker on board the Guardian Flight. We have rendered the attacking raiders near Ingal 9 helpless and the majority of their ships retain life support. This is a request for a mop-up team and Alliance warship."

A strange voice came through the com. "Thank you for your assistance, Star Breaker. The Acker is on the way, estimated arrival in two hours. Will you remain on site in case of any additional

attack?"

"Yes, General Carver. We will remain on site until the warship arrives." One of the com lights blinked out and Star Breaker relaxed.

"Kale wishes you to remain safe, Star Breaker." The feminine voice chimed in.

"Tell him to blow it out the volcano, Relay. He's a worrier."

"He wants you on leave, you know."

A chuckle came through on the other line and Star Breaker scowled into the com. "Quiet, Guardian. I don't need you laughing at me as well."

"But you make such an easy target. How is Celestial Storm?"

"I am fine, Guardian. I think that full integration has finally been achieved."

"Glad to hear it. I look forward to learning of it in person."

"I am not sure if my radiation control is sufficient yet."

"I will chance it." Guardian sounded cheerfully optimistic. "Report to medical when you land. Helsin looks forward to meeting you in person."

Star Breaker took over the conversation, "Acknowledged, Guarding Flight out." She disconnected the com and turned to Celestial Storm. "You will be fine. Nich has let me know that your levels are no worse than a standard vid

display.”

“What? But he keeps putting those flowers in my room.”

Carella came out of the serious face she wore as Star Breaker, “I know. He likes your face when you get the flowers, so he will keep giving them to you. Udell grows them in a special arboretum in the keep.”

Andra was amazed. “How do you know all that?”

“You still sleep, I don’t. Neither does Nich. He is very into finding out what makes a Terran girl happy. Don’t be surprised if chocolate starts showing up on a regular basis.” She buffed her nails on her body suit and looked at them innocently.

“You convinced him I need chocolate?”

“Yup. And I am going to be charging you a slight finder’s fee.” The giggle was endearing.

Andra had read up on Star Breaker’s history in Nich’s archives. She had come out of the sphere with little to no idea of who or what she was. Each memory she regained was an effort of will and she was only now becoming the woman that Andra had met and trained with.

“Stop tearing up, Andra. I am fine. Each day brings me back a little more. Life with Kale is working even better.” Star Breaker held her hand and gave it a squeeze. “Come on. We have two

hours. Let's see what you can do with those glittery tentacles."

The Acker jumped into the Ingal system precisely two hours later. After some technical pleasantries that Star Breaker handled with skill, the Guardsmen were on their way back to Udell.

At Star Breaker's order, Celestial Storm set the Guarding Flight down next to an airlock at the Udell base. The moment that the shuttle door opened, Andra found herself pulled into Nich's arms.

The kiss was intense, deep and she felt the longing in his body and hers echoed it. She shook hard as she pried her limbs from his neck where they had wound without her conscious thought. "I have to go to medical for a check-up."

"I will come with you. Hells, if it will mean I can keep my hands on you, I will carry you." Nich lifted her and she wrapped her legs around his hips for safety. Together, he walked through the base and she kept her grip with the side effect of their bodies rubbing against each other in a most distracting way.

He pushed through a door and the medicinal tang reached her nose and instant before her butt came into contact with an exam table.

A friendly male with red velvet skin, navy blue hair combined with bright gold eyes made for a

vivid impression. "Hello, I am the base physician. Call me Helsin."

"Andra Nickles. Nice to meet you face to face."

Nich-Udell leaned up against a nearby wall and watched Helsin closely.

"Okay, let's start with a full workup while you let me know what you have learned about the entity inside you."

She lay back so he could run his scans and at her thought, the Masuo shrank into her exercise gear. "I thought that would make it easier for the muscle-tone scans."

"That is...fascinating."

Nich scowled and cleared his throat.

Helsin gathered himself and continued the scans.

"Now, Andra, tell me about the storm."

"Well, it is old. It is very old and very lonely. It does not speak as the stars and planets do, but instead, it gives me impressions, feelings, a full emotional spectrum."

"How does it feel?"

"Usually, I hear or feel giggling. It has been wanting to be active for quite some time and was looking for a compatible being. The storm knows what it can and cannot do, and tells me when it has something I can use."

"What about the protection factor?"

"Oh, it plans on keeping me alive no matter

what. That may have strange effects on creatures near me, but the storm has its own agenda.”

“Which is...”

“Keeping me alive and functioning in a useful capacity. It felt a surge of joy when we were able to stop the raider attack and wants more of it. I have no idea where this storm came from, but it wants to be part of the Sector Guard, Udell base.” The beeps and chirps of the monitors were comforting. They let her know she still had a heartbeat.

“How are my radiation levels?”

“Almost normal. Nothing that would injure a normal being.”

That relaxed part of her soul that had been tensed with the anticipation of living a life of solitude. Just because she *could* do it didn’t mean she wanted to.

The remainder of the exam went off without any further details from her.

“Well, Andra, I hate to say this, but aside from being occupied, you are in perfect health. Check in after every assignment and whenever you are feeling a little under the weather and I will be a delighted doctor.”

With relief, Andra sat up, had her uniform resume its full coverage configuration and hopped off the table. She walked up to Nich, “You promised me dinner with other people around.”

“Well, lady, if I promised it, it will be done.”

He held out his arm in a courtly manner and with a wave to Helsin, they left medical and he gave her a walking tour of the base.

There was an indoor pool, a gym filled with the backup staff that accompanied the Guardsmen on assignments that required a remaining detachment. Several appreciative gazes roamed over her until they noticed Nich standing next to her. The gazes turned less predatory and more speculative in that instant.

“You are welcome to use these facilities, but I don’t think that any of the machines can take your strength level. Like Star Breaker, you have the capacity to move anything you want to if you put your mind to it.” Nich pulled her along and showed her the rainforest that supplied oxygen to the base, the wild flowers that reminded her so much of Earth it sent a pang of longing through her.

“It’s lovely. I see your hand in this as well, Nich. What did you do before you came to Udell?”

He smiled, stroking his fingers down her arm. “I was a botanist. I love plants – the growing, the riot of life that is displayed in the jungles here.”

“I can tell. You kept rearranging the flowers you brought to me once you realized I wasn’t killing them anymore. Few men would pay that much attention to the sun access for some potted plants.”

A sheepish smile crossed his face. “They needed

more light. I didn't think you would notice."

"I may not comment, but I notice a lot more than I talk about."

"Unlike Star Breaker. She asks questions that would make my mother blush."

"I heard that you two were getting close."

"Jealous?"

Based on the smells wafting down the hall, they were approaching the commissary. Andra swallowed as her mouth started to salivate at the enticing scents.

"Maybe a little. Are we having lunch?"

"Dinner. Yes, by all means." He steered her through the large double doors. "And while you eat, I can investigate the little jealousy you just confessed to."

"Fine. Do it over dessert." She grabbed a tray and went after the food line up with a goal and an eye for sweets. He could interrogate her for days as long as she could eat pie and ice cream while he did it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

No one ate alone on Udell. Within half an hour, the table that she was sitting at was filled with those in Sector Guard bodysuits. Ilsa introduced Kennan, Kahlia smacked Fenn on the shoulder when he got out of hand and Vornan bowed low before sitting, his Kozue braids clashing together as he took her hand in his own.

“Knock it off, Flame. Find your own female.” Nich’s voice was no nonsense, but the swirling of Udell’s colours in his eyes was the dangerous portion.

“As you wish, Avatar.” With his eyes sparkling, he took a seat near Fenn and got into deep discussion with Helsin when the physician arrived.

“Guardian, how nice to see you.” The wry tone was lost on most of those seated at the table, but Andra couldn’t keep it in.

“Please, call me Cevin. I see you have met everyone.”

“Yes. They have been most friendly as have the

staff, who are fetching an additional table for you as we speak." She gestured and he stepped aside as the table was added to their collection.

He settled in at the head of the table. She watched as he surveyed his employees. "We have received some information on the storm you are hosting."

Nich put down his eating prong and Andra did the same. "And..."

"It is the remnant of a star named Shulo that imploded nine thousand years ago." Cevin leaned back as a staffer placed a plate of food and a cup of steaming beverage in front of him.

"Nine thousand? Holy heck." She checked the storm and it merely swirled happily inside her, humming and giggling. It recognized its name but was not concerned.

"Indeed. It was quite an implosion. Until the radiation signature was analyzed and recognized, we had no idea that any part of the star survived." He tucked in to his dinner while the others went back for refills at random.

"That is interesting. Where is the black hole located?"

"I will give you the coordinates in a few days. You need to take a trip to Morganti with your shuttle."

She blinked. "Can't that wait a few days?"

"No. Your engines and electronics need to be

shielded from your radiation. Carella took care of shielding your equipment on your trip to Ingal 9, but she won't always be there for you."

Andra was surprised. "She did?"

"She did. We will arrange for you to have an escort that can do the same for you and your ship while you are on the way to Morganti."

"Fine. Is there a better name for me? Celestial Storm is so bulky."

Nich smiled and Cevin almost choked on his salad. Everyone turned to watch their fearless leader try and swallow. He cleared his throat. "What would you suggest?"

"I don't know. Just The Storm?"

"It may be confusing if and when we have weather elementals in the ranks of the Guard."

"How about Stellar Storm? That one has alliteration working for it."

He didn't look happy. His fingers drummed against the table. "Will that be it? Does anyone object to her change?"

The table at large declined to contest it.

"Fine, I will make the adjustment to the personnel records when I return to my office. Anything else?"

"No. That's everything. I am enjoying my time here on Udell." She watched Nich from the corner of her eye. "Will I be stationed here permanently?"

The shock on the faces of the Guardsmen was

comical. Only Nich's features were grim. "Please excuse us." He lifted her from her seat, flipped her over his shoulder and carried her out of the commissary. The aura of power was flowing around him, scattering support staff as they passed them in the halls.

She concentrated all of her power on keeping her dinner where it had landed. Ralping down Nich's back as he strode through the Udell jungle was not something she wanted to be remembered for.

Andra could have used the storm to free herself, but it was interesting to see where Nich was going to take this. She could wait the ten minutes it would take for Nich to make it back to his home as he sprinted through the early jungle evening.

Instead of her room, he kept walking to a part of the main building she had never been in. A bedroom decorated in blue and silver streaked past her as she pushed up against his waist to admire her environment. He tipped her onto her back and she squawked as she landed on a soft surface.

"I thought avatars didn't need to sleep."

"We don't." He unsealed his armoured suit and peeled it off his shoulders to his waist. He sat next to her on the bed and pulled her into his lap. "Why are you making light of our relationship?"

She could have said *what relationship*, but that

would have been petty. "It was a defence mechanism. Everyone seems to think I will calmly fall into a life as a member of the Sector Guard and forget what I am or who I have been. I want them to remember who I am. That includes you."

"I want to know who you are." Nich was murmuring gently into her ear, his breath heating her skin as he proceeded down her neck. "I want to know who you have been, but most of all, I want to be there to see what you will become."

To her surprise, the Masuo left her skin bare as his lips skimmed her shoulders. "That's cheating."

He used his mouth to caress the curve of her breast and she clung to his shoulders, "I am the avatar of Udell, master of the world you walk on. The plant matter is mine to command. Plus, I asked it nicely."

She giggled and sighed as he reached the tip of her breast, bringing his tongue into play. Andra threaded her fingers through his hair, holding him to her as he brought her body to full alertness. Her thighs shifted together restlessly and as he slid his hand between them, she was wearing nothing but her boots.

When he finished stripping himself and moved over and into her, she was done with laughter. Instead, her gaze was locked with his as they rocked together until their energy signatures blended, became one, parted and joined again.

Lying in his arms, she stroked her hand down his stone-hard flesh. "You never answered my question."

His voice was a low rumble that sent a prickle of anticipation along her skin. "What question was that?"

"Why do you have a bed if you don't sleep?" She idly traced designs on his chest, caressing her way down to his hip and back again.

"I believe I just demonstrated why I needed a bed."

"How often have you brought women to your lair?" She flicked one nipple as a surge of jealousy rippled through her.

He laughed and rolled until she was under him again. "I feel the jealousy, we are bound now."

"Good for you. Answer the question."

"The bed arrived with my mother. Nacra brought it in her transport and we set it up while you were on assignment. She also thought that you might want a place to sleep since you require it."

"Oh." She scowled up at him, the pansy blue and metallic purple glowing in the darkness. "I can feel how smug you are. Why can I feel that?"

"Mate bonds. We joined, our entities joined and now emotions, thoughts and desires can be communicated without words."

Andra couldn't speak while he was talking, Nich's body joined to hers and she had to admit,

he was right. They didn't need words, this was so much better.

* * * *

"I still can't believe you left Udell to accompany me to Morganti." Her mind was still reeling at the other passenger next to her who was responsible for keeping her from frying the electronics of the Guarding Flight.

"It will be fine. Nothing will happen that I am not prepared for on the surface and we will return home in a few days."

Having Nich in the navigator's seat next to her was a bizarre occurrence. She had never thought that an avatar would leave his planet, but apparently, it happened all the time.

"Avatars are chosen as the representatives that will go where the planets cannot. Stop being so surprised."

She chuckled and merely kept her gaze focussed on the readouts. Andra was slowly getting used to the emotional sharing between them, but it was tricky. He was watching her like a hawk and no stray emotion got past him without a hug or caress to calm her mind.

"Final approach to Morganti. Time to make contact."

She flicked her fingers over the coms and

winked at Nich, “Morganti Base, this is the Guarding Flight requesting clearance to land.”

“Stellar Storm, this is Relay, please follow the beacons that will take you to the workshop. Welcome to Morganti.”

“Acknowledged. Locking onto the beacons.” She flicked the toggles and let the ship follow the signal into the atmosphere.

“Now we just follow the signal to the ground. I have to admit it feels odd to be heading to a planet not my own.”

She could feel the trickle of unease under his anticipation. Andra took his hand in hers and he smiled in appreciation.

She released his hand as she brought them in for a landing outside Fixer’s workshop. She had delivered countless pieces of tech, as well as picked items up, from this exact spot. It felt odd to be stripped of her previous position. Nich’s hand on her arm calmed her as the pang ran through her.

With only a slight bump, Stellar Storm brought the shuttle down into the precise position indicated by the beacon. Andra waited by the rear exit, Nich’s arms around her as they waited for the hastily installed radiation sensors cleared them to exit the shuttle.

Time to get back to where it all started.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“**S**tellar Storm. It’s a good name, Andra. Avatar Nich-Udell, it is an honour to meet you.” Fixer was greeting them cheerfully, her rainbow locks swinging in the breeze, blowing across the tarmac. “Kale-Gant is on his way with Star Breaker. They have been enjoying their honeymoon in one-day increments. Today will have to be postponed.”

“Nice to see you again, Mala. So, tell me what you are going to do to my baby?”

Mala grinned. “Nothing terribly invasive. A simple lining of the electronics with a substance resistant to the frequencies of your radiation, a small boost to your engines. Maybe an improved jump engine, it depends on the space.”

Chuckling at the thought of the Guarding Flight being all it could be, she rubbed her hands. “Fabulous, now where are the babies? I have hugs that have been building up.”

“Before you go into over-hug mode, you will have to succumb to my scans and be measured for

some uniforms. Though I see you have it mostly covered. Is that Masuo?"

Mala led her into the depths of her warehouse by the hand and Andra kept the other hand firmly in Nich's. Together, they went to get her measured and assessed by the greatest inventor of the Sector Guard.

Carella had a peculiar glow about her when she and Kale-Gant appeared. Something was different. Andra couldn't stop smiling as she realized what the difference was.

With Mala measuring her with a variety of scanners, she leaned forward to whisper. "Effin did his job. Congratulations."

Carella froze and looked astonished. "How did you know?"

"You mentioned it in passing and I have become very observant."

"What are you two whispering about?"

"Stellar stuff. Where did the boys go?" Andra fought her grin as Carella gave her a grateful look.

"They are talking about avatar stuff."

Mala looked up as she finished her measurements. "Can I interest you in a shopping trip, Andra? I don't recall seeing you in anything other than loose jumpsuits and this body suit."

"Sure. I haven't had a girls' night out for years. Can we get dinner as well?"

Fixer chuckled. "With me around, food is more likely than not. I will just file these measurements and set the extruder for maximum density and we can be on our way."

"Excellent. The boys can find us if they want us."

With Mala occupied with the fabrication of a heavy-duty suit, Carella and Andra wandered off to the storage area where selected suits were displayed with a variety of features.

"I don't want to tell anyone until the medical scans determine that the development is normal. He is watching this closely, but it means that you will be the go-to Guardsman for stellar events. Is that okay?"

"Carella, sweetie, if it can make you as happy as you are right now, it is definitely okay with me. Besides, Nich is the type to want to come along with me and I can't think of a better guy to watch my back."

"You're in love."

"Yup, but don't tell anyone. It's a secret."

They laughed and when Mala asked what the big secret was, they told her Andra was in love with a planetary avatar who liked to bring her flowers.

Mala was delighted and she herded them both to her skimmer, aiming it for the thriving town visible from the base.

“Who is watching the babies?”

“Kale and Nich. They are braver than I originally gave them credit for. The girls are teething and keeping track of Mabi is becoming a full-time job. Isala is easier, but then, she is always visible.”

A dress shop owned by a l’nal was their first stop. Mala and the large spider embraced and talked about the babies for a moment while Andra started shopping. Her dark brown hair and rich blue eyes made finding colour matches difficult.

“Now, young lady, what can we do with you? Oh my, striking.” The spider froze in her tracks as Andra turned to greet her.

She had never heard her features described as striking before.

“Those eyes. I have just the thing.”

Two hours of gowns, wraps, tunics, trousers and more all fit with her Masuo taking the shape of shoes that flattered each outfit.

She left the store with nine bags, wearing an evening gown of glowing blue with deep violet trim.

Mala pulled the door open and kept talking. “Now, for food. They make the best...well, everything.”

“And my darling wife has tasted it all.” A handsome Selna was waiting inside the restaurant.

Carella grinned, “Hello, Isabi, did you come by

yourself to wreck girls' night?"

He laughed, "No. I brought Kale and Nich with me. They needed a break from the children."

Two exhausted avatars were waiting for them at the table. They rose as the women approached and the heat in Nich's eyes was all that Andra wanted from the gown.

"You look...amazing."

"You are pretty yourself. Did the babies chew their way to freedom?" She gestured to his shoulder, it was wearing a damp patch that looked suspiciously like a gnaw pattern.

"Nearly. We had to whip out the tickle monster to subdue them." He chuckled, kissed her cheek and assisted her into her chair.

"Nieces and nephews?"

"And younger cousins. I had quite the exciting life of family events before joining Udell." He snickered and reached for a menu.

Isabi laughed. "Don't bother with a menu, they will just start bringing Mala food and we will grab what we can until she is done eating. It's tradition by this point."

He wasn't kidding. As they sat, their glasses were filled, food arrived and they ate until they groaned. Mala kept going until she gave an imperceptible nod to the staff and they heaved sighs of relief.

Andra chuckled. Her hand had found its way to

Nich's and she didn't mind a bit having their burgeoning relationship displayed on the table. Carella and Kale were sending each other secret smiles and Andra couldn't help but watch smugly.

The thumb caressing her hand sent prickles of heat through her body and she sighed deeply as her breasts were pressed tightly against the inside of her gown as they began to swell slightly with arousal.

Mala took the bill over, "The amount of design bonuses I have made this year will keep me in snacks until my kids are over a hundred. I can pay for dinner."

Together, they left and Isabi and Mala took the skimmer, while the avatars and their stellar ladies enjoyed the comfort of the crawler that the men had taken into town.

Kale-Gant drove with his arm around his wife, Andra cuddled with Nich-Udell in the back seat.

It was a beautiful night and Nich's skin gleamed pleasantly in the dim light of the available moon. He felt her admiration for his hard roman profile and he caressed her cheek.

Their trip back to the base was slower than the outgoing flight, but it was a romantic drive in the moonlight and Andra wouldn't have traded it for anything.

"We have been given guest quarters in the base. Tonight, I will show you what I can do when the

bed we are in is not designed for sleeping.” His whisper in her ear had her shaking right up until the moment that they opened the guest quarters and she dragged him in by a handful of his uniform.

“C’mere, Nich. Let’s see how well you can manage fabric that doesn’t tremble and dodge when your hands come along. I plan to try stripping you on my own. Just as an experiment in dexterity you understand.”

She hauled his bemused body all the way to the bedchamber, locked the doors and began by opening the neckline of his uniform, peeling him free of the fabric, inch by inch.

His pansy eyes were bemused and heated as she kissed each exposed inch softly until he was shaking with the need to touch her and she was still wearing the gown she bought from the l’nal.

When he was naked, she stood slowly from her kneeling position, brushing against his granite-hard-but-oh-so-sensitive skin as she went.

She tilted her head up and sent him the waves of heat she was feeling, his mouth came down on hers with a force that left her gasping. She moaned happily as his hands found the closures to her gown and as it slid to the floor, she twined her arms around his neck, wearing him into the bedding as he lay on his back.

Sitting up on him, she used her slick flesh to

ease him into her and began to ride him until they both came apart in sparks of energy and exhausted limbs.

He lifted them, moved the bedding and tucked them in for the night.

Andra felt his touch on her mind. He may not need to sleep, but if she were resting, he would guard her and hold her until she was able to do it herself.

CHAPTER NINE

“I have never seen repairs on a ship go that quickly.” Nich was pleased as they took off in the newly refit Guarding Flight.

“Neither have I, but I do believe that Mala is exceptional at whatever she does.” Andra smiled and entered the coordinates for Udell. “Prepare for jump.”

“Are you sure this will work?”

“No, but we are both almost indestructible. Let’s take a chance.” She settled the halo on her head and used her mind to trigger the jump from one point in space to another. The new engines worked like a charm, almost no trauma to the ship or its passengers.

Nich looked queasy, but Udell quickly came to the fore. “It worked, we are home.”

“This is the Guarding Flight requesting landing authorization on Udell base.”

Guardian’s voice came through. “Ready and waiting. Drop down outside the base.”

“Acknowledged. See you in half an hour.”

The flight was automatic. She made it down to the base without a hitch and locked the shuttle to the air lock. The storm inside her was quiet. It knew it had a job to do and it would wait.

The radiation sensor registered nothing abnormal as they prepared to leave the shuttle. The door hissed open and they walked through the halls of Udell base into the boardroom where Guardian was waiting.

“We have a situation. For medical reasons, Star Breaker has been removed from the roster until her condition is rectified. That leaves our Stellar Storm as the go-to Guardsman in this sector of space. An assignment is waiting for you along the same lines as the previous raider assignment. Given the circumstances of your mate and partner being the planet’s avatar, we are not sure of the protocol.”

Nich lifted her hand and laid a kiss on the back of her knuckles. “Udell has an avatar for a reason, to go where he can’t. I will accompany my mate wherever she goes.”

Her smile was radiant and she knew it. “That settles that then. One year of assignments in the depths of space in my newly upgraded shuttle with a man I can’t keep my hands from. I get paid for this too?”

Guardian chuckled. “Good. Get the supply packs that the commissary has ready for you and get your ship to Filan 3. There is a meteor heading

toward the colony and they need our help. The evac team is already there and moving everyone to a safe distance while you take the storm out for a spin. Call me when you arrive and once you know what you will be able to do.”

Nich-Udell stood and kept hold of her hand as he led the way down the halls. “Are you upset that I am joining you on your assignments?”

She thought about it for a nanosecond before she wrapped her arm around his waist to hold him to her as they walked. “If I was upset, I would not have expounded upon my delight at having a companion in my shuttle, Nich. We have the makings of a good team. Settling into a routine at work and play might just be a way to cement it.”

He didn’t respond verbally but wrapped his own arm around her waist.

“Besides, would you really allow me to have another pilot in the shuttle when I come back all weak and exhausted?”

“You know that would drive me insane.” He brushed a kiss on her forehead.

“Then, let’s get this assignment over with and then go to see the birthplace of the storm. I want to see where it came from before I go any further.”

“I have the coordinates. I will download them before we leave. Now, let’s get the ration meals that the poor creatures in the commissary have slaved over for you.”

“Sounds like a plan. I am sure that the cooking won’t be up to your standards, but the effort will be appreciated. The faster we get the meal packs, the faster we will be able to make a detour to a black hole.”

He laughed and hugged her close. “That sounds like more fun than it should be.”

“Doesn’t it just?”

Giggling, they raided the pantry and made their way to the Guarding Flight. Their first official joint assignment was about to begin...it felt like a first date combined with bungee jumping. Andra’s excitement remained during their long flight and while she created a net from writhing storm tendrils to save the colony on Filan 3.

They reported their successful halting of the meteor and then went radio silent as they searched out the black hole that had borne the storm.

They were having a picnic with the black hole spinning in the distance. They were far enough way that the gravity well was only a mild tugging on the sensors.

Andra opened a bottle of wine that she had in her horde. She poured glasses for both of them, “To Shulo, the star that burned bright and used its last bit of effort to create a storm that was designed to do good and craved action.”

“To Shulo.” He raised his glass and toasted the

black hole that they were watching from a safe distance.

“To Nich, a man who offered a planet the means to join in making the sector a safer place.” She took a sip and smiled at his embarrassed face.

He turned the tables and raised his own glass. “To Andra, a woman who accepted a strange entity with grace, stole the heart of a planet and melted the heart of a man.”

Her blush could have lit the interior of the shuttle on fire. With a gulp, she finished her glass and put it aside.

She crawled across their picnic and up Nich until she had her arms around his neck and her lips inches from his own. “To love, that creeps in when you aren’t looking and wraps you in an embrace you never want to leave.”

“To love.” His hand cupped the back of her head and drew their lips together in a kiss that sparked into something warm, wild and truly stellar.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is the third of the Udell-base Sector Guard books. They needed a Terran, so Andra fits the bill in a number of ways.

The next book finds a mate for Vornan. As Flame rescues a woman who was rescuing others. *Resurrecting Flame* joins the Devine Destinies line up before the end of 2010.

Thanks for joining me with the Sector Guard...I look forward to seeing you...in the future.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

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

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

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

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