



RESURRECTING FLAME

Viola Grace

Sector Guard 14

Jenya has spent days leading one hundred prisoners to freedom through a tunnel of her own making. She succeeds in her task and is ready to rest, but the arrival of the Sector Guard throws a wrench in her plans to fade away. Green flames pull her back into the living world and the silver eyes of a Kozue Guardsman are the first things she sees when she wakes. As Digger, she is offered a place in the Sector Guard and put through her paces with Flame and Guardian watching carefully. What possible use could her talent for burrowing through rock be to the Sector Guard?

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RESURRECTING FLAME SECTOR GUARD BOOK 14

BY

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CHAPTER ONE

The tunnel was pressing on her, but she couldn't stop to enjoy the sensation of blind panic that it was engendering. Jenya sent her talent forward, inch by inch, eating away at the rock and dirt of the walls of her prison.

The prisoners who had followed her into the tunnel were now her prime concern. They trusted her to deliver them from the persecution of the Lekark regime and she was going to die trying.

Teachers, doctors, musicians—there were close to one hundred who agreed to follow her if she could bore a hole through the rock.

She inched forward and drew on her inner reserves to evaporate the rock. Jenya knew that her power was failing, but she couldn't trap them in here with her. She had to give everything she had if they were to make it out alive.

Jenya shoved herself right to the edge of the stone and blasted forward with furious intensity. She rode the adrenaline and did the same shockwave of power over and over until finally, after what felt like six hours of crawling, they

struck daylight.

She fell out of the hole and tumbled to the ground. Hands grabbed her and pulled her aside. The light of day blinded her and she couldn't see who had a grip on her. If it was the polizai again, she was just going to let herself die.

A voice called to her, but it was far away. In the sun, finally free of the oppression that had almost taken her life, she looked into the daylight and let her mind relax.

A face blocked the sunlight. If she was dreaming of an escort to the afterlife, this face would not be the one she would pick. Braids banded with metal swung and clashed around his face. Silver eyes in a bronze face were the only celestial markers. The rest of him was all warrior and firmly grounded to the earth.

A light slap to her face got her to focus. "What?"

"Are you all right? Can you sit up?" The man seemed angry.

She sat up and her head spun. "I am up. But if you want me to dance, you are going to have to buy me a drink."

Jenya's eyes were shielded by the scowling wall of muscle at her side. She saw the endless dispensing of the escapees from the narrow hole in the side of the rock face. "We made it."

He looked down at her and kind warmth with a touch of pride filled his gaze. "Yes, Digger, you

did."

"Can I sleep now?" She sighed. It would not be a sleep she wanted to return from. She had depleted herself entirely digging them out.

He nodded absently as someone caught his attention for the emerging folk.

She scooted so that she was leaning against the wall and relaxed. Just a little rest and it would all be over.

* * * *

The staging area was going nuts with the influx of ninety-four refugees and Vornan was trying to make sure that they all got the attention they needed.

Razer and Tech were in the process of attacking the totalitarian government that had taken over this minimally populated world, and the rebels that they were rescuing were already free.

"Razer, this is Flame. The majority of the rebels have been freed and are receiving medical attention." He waited for the double click that acknowledged and returned to attending the medical needs of those who had fallen out of the wall.

He went from cot to cot until finally a woman grabbed his arm. "How is Jenya?"

He checked the roster. There was no Jenya in the

medical tent. "Who?"

"Jenya. She led us through the darkness. She made that tunnel as we went. It took so long." The woman's face was oddly clean. As what she had said sunk in, a chill ran through him. He looked around the room and noted that aside from some grass stains and dirt on hands and knees, their faces were clean.

"How long did you crawl through the tunnels?" He checked her vitals and the bandage on her wrist that seemed to be the most common injury.

"It was a dark forever, but I think it was somewhere between six and twelve hours."

"Was the tunnel already there?"

"No. I told you, Jenya made it as we went." She lay back and looked up at him with exhausted eyes, "Is she all right?"

He didn't answer, Helsin was on this assignment and he checked with the physician. "How long were they underground?"

"Based on pupil response and dehydration, two days. The investigations have shown that the tunnel is over six miles long."

Helsin may have said something else, but Flame was running.

She was slumped against the wall where he had left her, her body quiet and smudged with dirt. He had called her Digger as a joke, but as he searched her body for signs of life, he came to the conclusion

he hadn't bothered to look for.

She had offered her life to free her people, and he had left her here to die.

* * * *

Green pain wrapped around her and she fought it, screaming out of the warm, light cocoon of fluff that had ensconced her consciousness. Jenya struck out with her hands to fend off her attacker and the flames followed, burning her nerves and bringing tears to her eyes. A silver gaze held hers through the flames and when she struck out at him, he laughed.

The owner of the silver eyes lifted her and carried her to the large tent that housed so many of the escapees. She was breathing through her teeth in a hissing spasm, panting as the pain slowly receded.

"Helsin! She needs help."

She was handed from the man with silver eyes to a creature of bright primary colours. He looked down at her with kind eyes and started a regimen of sprays and liquid drips that soon had her looking like a science experiment.

The silver-eyed man stood at her side after a while. He held her hand. "I am sorry, Digger. I didn't realize what it took to get you here."

"It's okay. It's the reason that they locked me up

to start with. No freaks in the new utopia." She smiled.

"I happen to like freaks. My name is Flame, by the way."

She looked him over. Thickly muscled thighs, knives strapped to each hip and fastened with bands around those thighs. A narrow waist, a wide plane of a chest and shoulders that led to a neck that seemed to defy the collar of the uniform around it. His braids were Kozue, as was his skin tone. She had read about the nomads in school, but never thought she would meet one.

"There is nothing that looks like fire around you."

"Do you remember the green fire that pulled you back?"

She scowled. "That was you?"

He sighed. "It was. I am sorry for the pain, but it is the way my talent works."

"Talent?" Her head was spinning. *He caused my pain? Why did he haul me back?*

"Yes. My people do not care for talents either." He still held her hand. Their gazes locked and she simply let herself get lost in his silver eyes, so different from the midnight black of her own.

Flame held her hand throughout the day and until the physician removed her drips.

She tried to ignore the fact that she held his hand right back.

CHAPTER TWO

She was finally asleep. Vornan walked over to speak with Helsin.

"Helsin. I believe she is the one."

He was reading some of the medical reports, "The one what?"

"My one. She feels like mine."

The doctor finally looked at him and his eyes widened. "Oh. Well, her talent is very impressive. She not only disintegrated the stone and dirt, but she transformed it into oxygen for those in the tunnel. Her talent also supported the tunnel while it was occupied, but just as she fell asleep, it began to collapse. If she had that much power at her disposal and that much control, she could truly be a force to be reckoned with."

"Good. I will run it past Guardian and if he agrees, I will offer her the post of Guardsman."

With a spring in his step, he walked out to the shuttle and past the couple on the bunk.

"Geez, Flame. Can't you give some warning?" Tech was on top of his twin and she was scowling

at him.

"No. I need to make a call before she wakes up."

That got his brother's attention. Razer sat up and dumped his wife to the floor. "She?"

"Yes, she. I have to ask Guardian if I can take a partner." He avoided using the word mate. It was too soon to use the word mate, no matter what he felt in his mind and body.

He sent the codes and entered the data for the communication, ignoring his brother and sister-in-law. "This is Flame calling for Guardian."

"Guardian here, go ahead, Flame."

"I have found a talent that would be a welcome addition to the Udell base."

"Bring him along."

"Her. I wish to take her on as my partner."

The pause in the speech was telling. "You are asking my permission to bring a girl home?"

The snort from behind him was going to demand retribution. "This woman dissolves rock and turns it into oxygen, she can support six miles of tunnel as long as she is conscious and she has used her talent for two days straight to save her people. I believe she is a good candidate."

Guardian's voice lost its teasing edge. "Then she is indeed a worthy candidate. If she will come, we will be happy to have her. Does she have a name?"

"Her first name is Jenya." Flame paused, "I call her Digger."

The grin in their commander's voice was obvious. "Digger it is. See you in a few days, Flame."

He turned and faced his brother. With a lunge, they were battling and Tech moved out of the way.

"I am going to check on your lady friend and see if my uniform would fit her."

Flame looked at her helplessly as he got his brother in a headlock. "I do not appreciate laughter while I haven't even gotten the woman to trust me yet."

Razer choked out, "Trust you? You brought her back from the edge of death!"

"She doesn't know that. She woke up to green flames and pain. I have to get her to look beyond that." His brother tapped him on his forearm and he released him.

Razer rubbed his throat. "You are right, it's tricky. You had better get over there before Ilisa does. She doesn't have a lot of decorum for this kind of thing."

A trickle of unease ran through Vornan. "You don't think she would..."

"Yes, I do. Go." Kennan clapped his twin on the shoulder, shoving him out the door.

Vornan looked back at his brother and then broke into a run to beat his sister-in-law to the woman who just might be the woman he had been waiting for.

* * * *

A low argument woke her. She opened bleary eyes to see a couple standing a few meters away. The woman was unknown, but Flame's mood was hostile. He grabbed the woman's arm and directed her out of the tent and the woman in the bodysuit went with a grumble.

Jenya's heart sank as she took in the casual intimacy between the two. Even after their argument, there was no tension in either one as they went their separate ways. Her parents had had a relationship like that. They might still have one if they had stayed safe in her hometown. The tiny village was hopefully far enough off the beaten path to have avoided the scourge of the new arrivals.

Flame approached her with hesitancy in his step that hadn't been there before. He sat next to her and took her hand. "How are you feeling?"

"Still tired. Did they all make it?"

"Every single person you led out is safe. Out of those who stayed behind, seven died in the fire that the invaders set to destroy the facility. They were trying to cover their tracks."

She shuddered. "They did love burning."

"I can now understand your extreme reaction to the healing flames. You must have thought they

had caught up with you.”

“It was a surprise to go from floating weightlessly to being wracked with awakening nerves on fire.” She tried to smile, but knew it was a feeble attempt.

“I have a question for you.” He swallowed carefully. “Are you aware of the Sector Guard?”

“Of course. It was announced on a global transmission a few years ago. Specially, talented people who go quickly to assist people and planets in emergencies.” She looked to his uniform. “You are a member of the Guard?”

“I am. The question I am here to ask is would you like to join the Udell Base Sector Guard detachment?”

She looked into his serious face, studying him for any traces of amusement. “Are you serious?”

“Of course.”

“In what capacity? I have never left my home world.”

“As my partner.”

That surprised her. “What about the woman you were arguing with? You seem to have a partnership of sorts with her.”

“She is my twin brother’s wife and partner. Tech. My brother is Razer. They liberated the population of Cinder and saved a number of the prisoners who had chosen to not follow you to what they classified as *certain death*.”

"It could have been. I didn't really know what I was doing." She scrubbed at her forehead.

"You need a little training and finesse. Your talent holds a lot of promise and you could save a lot of lives." He seemed endearingly unsure. "So, will you be my partner?"

His glittering gaze held her frozen in place. She thought about it, her talent used at the side of this man with the healing green fire. "I will."

Delight filled his face and she had to stifle a chuckle. What she remembered of the Kozue was that they were stoic and silent. What she was seeing were far more intense emotions than she would have expected.

She extended her hand to him. "Jenya Norquil. At your service."

"Tech is getting you a spare uniform and I think I will call you Digger."

She sighed. "That isn't flattering."

"No, but it makes for a nice team name dynamic. Flame and Digger. Digger and Flame. It sounds good." He winked and helped her sit up.

The cots were mostly empty. "Where did they all go?"

"With the aliens arrested, it was safe for them to return to their homes. This particular cult has been infecting the Sector and we have been running behind them, digging them out."

She sat forward and examined the grime on her

hands. "I would like to help you dig."

The brightly coloured physician returned to her side when Flame raised his hand. "Helsin, is she well enough to transport?"

"She is still weak, but if you keep her hydrated and allow her to rest, she will be fine. What are you thinking?"

"I wish to take her to Udell base for assessment and training. Nich can probably offer environmental training."

Helsin nodded and gestured for Flame to take her arm. "She still needs about eight hours of sleep, but she can get it on the way to Udell. Don't let her over extend herself for a few days."

Flame let her lean on him as she swayed. "Yeah, don't let me over extend myself. I have no urge to turn green again. It hurts like hell."

"I do apologize for the pain, but you were on the edge of death. I couldn't let you die because I didn't realize what you were." He led her to a shuttle where a couple were rolling around on a bunk. Jenya's cheeks pinked.

"Kennan, Ilsa, cool it. I need to take Digger back to Udell for assessment."

A man who shared a face with her companion snickered. "Need to or want to?"

"Stop being juvenile, Kennan. She has agreed to join the Guard and Guardian needs to engage in an interview. So, either strap in for travel or go and

share Helsin's shuttle. I don't care."

Jenya froze when he left her. "What do I do?"

Flame looked back at her in surprise. "You really haven't been off world before?"

"No. Never even in a shuttle. Where do I sit, do I need to wear a special suit or something?"

Tech and Razer started to exit the shuttle, carrying small shoulder bags. Razer smiled over his shoulder before he left the main cabin. "We will see you back on Udell, but you owe us dinner for this."

"Fine. Just go, Kennan."

Chuckling, the mirror image of Flame exited the shuttle. Jenya was shocked. "You look very much the same."

"We are twins, very unlucky amongst the Kozue. Talents are even more so."

"We are born in space, so pardon my ignorance at how to explain things I have seen all my life."

She nodded her acceptance. "First, where do I sit or stand?"

He showed her the co-pilot's seat. "This is your spot for take-off and landing. You strap in with the restraint harness and we will run the pre-flight checks that assure us of an atmosphere and proper seals for the vacuum of space."

"Oh. Good. We need proper seals, I think."

He grinned and took his place at the helm while she buckled and fastened her harness. "Fuel is full,

vents are closed. Internal atmosphere is on, pressurizing. Watch out, your ears may pop." His warning came as she winced and swallowed.

"Test fire of engine. All checks are green. Prepare for take-off."

She watched as he pressed a strange halo onto his head before his long fingers gripped the controls. An alarm sounded around the shuttle and a few folks in the distance waved acknowledgement. "Three, two, one."

The lift off was peculiar. And anti-climactic. The shuttle simply lifted from the ground and headed skyward on a gentle rise. She noted his frequent glances at her and finally understood. "You are taking it easy so that I don't panic."

He chuckled and increased the angle of ascent. "You noticed?"

"Yes. Won't you burn too much fuel that way?"

"I will, but we have more than enough to trigger the jump engine. Do you mind if I increase our speed?"

She flexed her fingers on the arms of her seat. "Be my guest. I am merely along for the ride. By the way, I didn't realize how many mountain ranges my planet had."

"Worlds look very different when you are above them." His banded braids clashed as he turned his head. "When you are with the Sector Guard, you will see more worlds than you ever imagined

visiting.”

His smile warmed her and she had to ask. “Do you have a large family?”

“Yes. It’s funny. I normally don’t discuss this kind of thing with women I have just met.”

“You named me Digger before you knew my name. It think that normal does not cover our interactions.” She smiled back and watched her world fall away from under her.

Grey, green, blue and brown, the terrain of Wael spun past the shuttle.

Flame’s voice was quiet. “Look up, Digger. See your new territory.”

Jenya jerked her head up and was lost in amazement. The stars that had always seemed so far away were uncluttered by clouds and atmospheric interference. The two moons that lived in her sky were huge, blue-white and beautiful. “Oh.”

His hand left the steering mechanism and he held her hand. “Welcome to my worlds.”

CHAPTER THREE

Jenya didn't scream when they jumped. She fought panic when the ship occupied two places at the same time. They came out of the jump in a system that Flame immediately identified.

"Welcome to the Udell system. Udell is a sentient planet that has graciously allowed us to build a base."

"Sentient planet? It can communicate?" That was news. Wael was not an intelligent world as far as she knew.

"Sentient worlds who wish to communicate obtain avatars. Udell's avatar is named Nich."

She watched the planet they were approaching grow larger. "What is the surface like?"

"The air is not breathable by your standards. You will need a respirator if you go out in the jungles. Our base is completely enclosed. We have a reliable atmospheric processor."

"Good. I don't know what that means, but good." She smiled and yawned.

He pressed some keys on the shuttle console and there was a crackle before a voice came through. "This is Sector Guard Base Udell. Please

identify."

"Manito, this is Flame coming in with new personnel. She requires full medicals and guest quarters."

"Glad to have you back, Flame. Is your companion up for dibs?"

Jenya blinked as Flame growled into the com, "She is my partner, Manito. Come near her at your peril."

The ferocity with which he threatened off the other male suddenly registered with Jenya. When she had agreed to be his partner, she had apparently agreed to more than a working relationship.

Well, hells.

"Spoilsport. Drop your shuttle at bay three, dock two."

"Acknowledged. Let Guardian know we are on our way in."

A rich chuckle came through the com unit before it clicked off.

Flame sighed and shook his head. "Jackass."

"How many men are there on the base?"

"It is easier to say that there are only a handful of women. Udell's woman lives off base, Tech and Phaze are both posted to the base, but are frequently out on assignment. Once they finish cleaning up the Lekark infestation, Tech will be home."

"Tech is your sister-in-law?"

"Yes."

"How does she tell the difference between you two?"

He laughed as he moved them into a descent pattern over the dense jungle growth. "Tech is sensitive to electrical impulses. Though we are twins, Razer and I have different methods of thought. It is strange, but Tech has always been able to tell us apart on sight."

"Interesting. My people consider multiple births to be a blessing, but each person has only a portion of the soul. Therefore, all siblings of this nature are one being."

He snorted. "The Kozue believe something similar. No warrior can be complete without having a whole soul, so twins are shunned, removed from the gathering."

"Does that happen a lot?"

"No. There are not many twins born to those who skim the stars."

She kept her mouth shut as the planet's surface grew closer. Her ears popped a few times as pressure and gravity kicked in.

Parking was similar to nestling an air car in its space.

When they had stopped moving, she unbuckled her harness and stood, stretching to relieve the pressure on her lower spine. Her lower limbs were

heavy so she stomped her slippered feet.

"Damn. I was supposed to grab an extra bodysuit." Flame did his own share of stretching and she watched the slide of muscle across his arms and torso with fascination. He was certainly more bulky than the average male of Wael.

"For you? Don't you have something on base?"

He chuckled and ruffled her hair. "No, Digger, for you. After the medicals, you will get some rest, but after that, it will be time to start working with your talent."

"Working how?"

"Practicing, mastering it. Most of us learn to use the power within only when the most urgent of circumstances arises. Using it with deliberation is another matter entirely."

He placed his hand on her lower back and pushed her through the cabin to the door. Lights cycled and went from red to white before a hiss and the door rolled open.

A tall man with silver skin was waiting for them. "Hello, dear lady. I am Guardian and the commander of this base. Welcome to Udell."

She stared at him in fascination. A set of bony ridges delineated his skull, pointed ears had a series of jet-black hoops and black and silver hair framed a face that held changing eyes. They rippled through a colour sequence that she couldn't pinpoint.

His musculature was impressive and Jenya had the distinct impression that weight lifting was a pastime on Udel.

She extended her right hand and pressed her left over her heart. "Honoured to meet you, sir."

"Please, call me Guardian or Martuas if you are not on duty and currently, you are not." He took her hand and covered it with his own in a higher-ranking greeting.

"Jenya Norquil, lately of Wael. Flame calls me Digger." She released Martuas's hand and smiled in response to his friendly gaze.

"Helsin's report indicates that you burned through miles of rock with your talent to save close to a hundred of the prisoners that the Lekark were going to execute." Guardian turned to walk down the hall and with Flame's hand still on her back, she had little choice but to follow him.

"I don't know how long it was. I only know that it was the only way out that I could find after a month in the prison. The Lekark don't like talents that are outside species standards."

"I have heard that. They are masters of using their political and religious agendas to manipulate the populations of the worlds they infiltrate. Being able to corral them on Wael before they were able to gather up enough momentum to make it to the next planet will stop this particular branch of the Lekark from infecting the rest of your system."

"The Sector Guard did all of that."

"If you had not taken the political prisoners out of an area where the executions were likely to occur, the uprising may have gone in favour of the Lekark. With so many loved ones missing, the population was demanding answers that the leaders could not provide. The hole they left in was behind a rock that the last entrants into the tunnel had pulled in behind them. No one thought to look behind the rock initially and they certainly were not going to enter a long narrow tunnel."

"Did they find it? I was a little far away at the time."

"They did and they lit a fire to try and destroy any oxygen that you had. Apparently, a glittering shield kept them from getting the embers into the tunnel."

"I don't remember doing that."

"What do you remember of the tunnel?"

"I remember having to crawl, because if we walked, I could not support the entire tunnel for the amount of time it would take to get free." She nodded to a few of the men who stopped to stare at her as they passed. "You seem to have a lot of support staff here."

Flame was scowling. Guardian chuckled. "They are all here to see a woman who can melt rock with her hands. They are eager to see what you do to Flame."

She chuckled and looked down at her grimy tunic and stained and torn trousers. "May I have a change of clothing?"

"Yes. As soon as Flame gives you a complete workup in medical. We keep before and after statistics on all Guardsmen. You will be expected to attend a medical exam for the first few weeks while you master your talent under lab conditions. It will be imperative to keep an eye on your biological signals to find out what kind of side effects using your power generates. Several of the female Guardsmen seem to require large quantities of food when using their talents."

Jenya shook her head as they entered a room that smelled of antiseptic. "I just get sleepy. No odd hunger pangs here."

Guardian nodded. "I will leave this to Flame and the assistants. Flame, bring her to my office and I will lead her to her quarters."

"I can do that." Flame was still scowling.

"Very well. Then I will have some suits brought to your rooms and I will see you after you get some rest. The crews are designing a testing ground for you inside the base, but you may have to put on a breather for some of the larger environments."

"Understood."

Flame led her to the exam table and patted it. "Up you get."

She hopped up and nodded to Guardian. "I will

see you later, Martuas. Nice meeting you."

Flame shoved the other man out of the medical bay and turned back with a sigh. "There. Alone at last."

She was going to argue that the medical attendants constituted additional people, but they scattered under Flame's glare.

He prepped some scary-looking equipment and helped her lie back on the table. "Call me, Vornan."

"Why?"

"It's my name. Flame is my designation."

She swallowed as the lights started to flare and the scanner began to move. "Will this hurt?"

He stopped the scanner.

She looked up into his silver eyes as he hovered over her.

"Jenya, nothing I do to you will ever hurt you. Even the green flame was to bring you back from the edge. It didn't hurt—it healed. Pain was just the by-product."

She was going to nod, but he pressed a kiss to her lips before she could. The coolness of the metal bands on his braids across her neck and cheeks was a contrast against the heat of his mouth. She was just leaning up into his lips when he leaned back.

His fingers caressed her cheek. "Now, lie still while this machine scans you with a variety of

waves and measures your entire system."

The attraction was mutual. That was nice. She kept herself still as the band of light moved up her body. It moved back and came up again, slowly taking pictures of all of her through her clothing.

When the machine finished, she took his hand and he helped her sit up. "That was painless."

He chuckled. "Trust me. These scanners will measure your responses during your practices. I will apply them after you have had a chance to bathe and rest."

The small items that he showed her looked harmless. "They will just measure my body's signals?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now, where can I get a bath and some sleep?" She yawned and blinked up at him.

He chuckled and read some of the scans. "I will just transfer the data to Helsin and keep a copy on this data pad for my own review." A few keystrokes and he held up the pad that had all of her information on it. "Now, I will take you to your chambers."

He helped her hop off the table and she walked down the hall with him, her feet making no noise in their soft slippers. They walked past a commissary and she enjoyed the scents, but her body wanted sleep and nothing else.

Vornan pressed his palm to a door and it

opened to display a wide common room with a large screen and several couches. Doors led off the common room and Flame took her hand to press it to a panel, sliding the door open. "This is now your room. It is keyed to your palm print. Also, a voice key is available if your hands are full."

Jenya loved the room and the bed was almost screaming her name. "Where is the bathing room?"

He gave her a quick tour and left her on her own. Her relief was almost palpable. A detailed scrubbing under a pounding shower made her feel much better. She combed out her hair, the black, brown and red strands sorting slowly, but falling down to the edge of her shoulder blades when she was finished.

Clean, wearing a wrapped towel, she crawled gratefully into the bed and snuggled under the covers. As her mind relaxed and she drifted toward sleep, she replayed the kiss.

A slight smile curved her lips as she nodded off.

CHAPTER FOUR

Uornan was standing at the foot of her bed and rather than frighten her, the idea that he was watching over her while she was vulnerable struck a comforting cord.

"The computer monitors vitals while you are in your bed, I should have mentioned that earlier. It told me when you were waking." He looked a little embarrassed. Two unfamiliar objects were in his hands.

Her voice was husky. "What is that?"

The towel had come loose under the sheets so she hugged the bedding to her breasts as she sat up.

"This? Oh. Masuo. I thought they would be a better fit than any of the stock suits that we have. It will also give you more protection than the standard suits could do." He came around to the head of the bed and knelt. "Slip your feet into them and they will grow up around them, wrap around your legs and all the way to your neck. It will feel strange, but once you get used to it, you will be

able to thicken the material at will."

"All right. What about those sensors?"

He looked surprised. "You are right. Wait here a moment."

Vornan left her and she quickly straightened her hair and wrapped the sheet around her. She was composed and looking at the door she had come through when a panel opened on the wall and he stepped through it. "Adjoining rooms?"

"You are my partner. In the Sector Guard, that tends to mean that we will eventually develop a relationship."

She chuckled. "I can see that as a possibility. Being in this kind of a situation would make people want to be around those with complimentary talents. A relationship in that context would be almost inevitable. I don't have a lot of experience with relationships."

He sat beside her on the bed. "What is *not* a lot?"

"None. There were none like me in my village and even with my parents having a solid trade, no dowry could entice a man to entertain me as a wife. A woman who can dissolve rock is just too scary."

"I can see where it may be. Let me assure you, I am not frightened of your skill. In fact, I find your power part and parcel of a very impressive female." He raised her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to the inside of her wrist.

She blushed. "The sensors?"

"Right." He placed her hand back in her lap and opened the box of sensors. He pressed two to her back, one over each lung. One on the centre of her spine, one on her tailbone, one over either kidney. As he worked, he tugged the sheet lower and lower until it was only covering the curve of her buttock by its folds.

"Now for the front of you." He pressed two sensors on her outer thighs and slid his hands across her abdomen, leaving two more behind. Her breath was catching in her chest as he put the last sensor on the inside of her breast, over her heart.

Kneeling on the floor, his head was just below hers and when he looked up at her, she smiled and pressed a tentative kiss on his lips. "Now, for some clothing."

He laughed and retrieved the pods he had been holding. "You realize how counter-intuitive it is for me to be putting clothing on you?"

"It's taking all my nerve not to just make a run for it. How does this work?"

"Place your feet on the pods and press downward. The Masuo will activate and do the rest."

She followed his direction and held his hands tightly as the pods liquefied and crawled up her body. "This feels very odd."

"I know. Almost to your abdomen. Just hold

still a little longer.”

The liquid was moving up her body, warming, holding, supporting her as it went. It crept beneath the sheet and when it covered and cupped her breasts, she moved her arms so that the sheet fell. The suit was taking on a bluish pewter colour that Jenya couldn't help but admire.

She focused on the fabric and it thickened as it moved across her shoulders and down to her wrists. Vornan released her hands as it continued to advance down her hands. It left her thumbs and fingers exposed, but covered her palms and her knuckles. She flexed her hands and smiled at Vornan. “I like it.”

She stood and the soles of the feet thickened and a slight heel appeared. The colouration darkened until mid-thigh and she was wearing a skin-tight suit with thigh-high boots that felt like she wasn't wearing anything at all.

“This would never work on Wael. Loose clothing is preferred for all social situations.” She turned from left to right, trying to see her backside.

“Guardian has had a luncheon sent to his office. He is expecting us and you are clean, rested, wired and dressed. All the criteria that most women seem to require for leaving their quarters.”

She laughed. “Is there something to restrain my hair?”

“No, but we will get something for you. I think

your hair looks nice down, but it may get in the way on duty." He held out his hand and she took it, letting his fingers wrap around hers in a comforting grip.

They walked through the halls and she found herself concentrating to make the heels of her boots higher. She had gained three inches when Vornan noticed. "What are you doing?"

"I felt a little short. Most of the males on base are taller than I am and there is no reason for me not to use the suit to elevate me. It works very well."

"It isn't a toy." He was trying to scowl and laugh at the same time.

"Yes, it is. Since everything here is new to me, coming from a restricted tech world, I am determined to enjoy every new thing that is offered. That starts with the comfy bed and extends to this suit." She smiled and bumped her hip into his.

He looked surprised at her playful behaviour, but kept his grip on her hand. As they approached, a door slid open in front of them. "Guardian's office. If he wants to see you, you will always know it. The door opens for you."

Guardian looked up as they entered and he whistled softly. "One of the Udell Masuo?"

Flame cleared his throat. "Yes, it is. Nich brought it over this morning at Andra's insistence."

Guardian chuckled. "The colour suits you, Digger. Well done, Flame."

"She has done all the work on it. The Masuo is responding to her on a very intuitive level." He assisted her into a chair at a conference table, then took a seat next to her.

"Good day to you, Guardian." She reminded him that he had not greeted her properly.

A dark pewter came to his cheeks. "Good day to you, Digger. Are you ready to begin testing?"

"I am."

Guardian uncovered a few trays and a selection of sandwiches, fruits and vegetables were exposed.

"May I?"

"Please, help yourself."

"Thank you." She reached for an empty plate and put a selection of food on it.

As she ate, Guardian took up a data pad and began to list her duties and responsibilities as a member of the Sector Guard.

Jenya swallowed and took a sip of water. "But I am not yet a member of the Guard."

"You will be once you have rudimentary training. We have requested all records of your talent from Wael. You manifested very early."

She nodded and swallowed again. "When I was three or four. My brother told me to hide so I ran into a rock wall and kept going."

Flame looked at her in surprise. "You have a

brother?"

"Jenaik. My elder by five years. He was due to be wed before the Lekark arrived. I wonder if they allowed him to go through with it?"

"No weddings were allowed during the purge. The Lekark were focussed on gaining control of your people to achieve control over the minerals of the planet."

She shook her head in amazement. "So, it was all about money."

"That is their primary focus. They land, establish their religious order, expand until they have a standing army and move to take over the governments. On Wael, we were able to catch them before their army had been massed, but after they had sewn paranoia in the populace. Were their many other talents that were arrested when you were?"

"There was one elderly healer, two truth sensors and a companion with an empathic link. Are they all right?" Her appetite was gone.

Guardian still ate slowly and Flame was consuming everything he laid his hands on.

The silver base commander put the food down carefully. "The elderly healer was killed in the fire that was lit to destroy the prison. One of the truth sensors was killed immediately preceding our arrival. The other two women made it out in your merry band of crawlers."

She nodded. It was what she had expected. "Salneth was the healer and Zikna was the truth sensor that did not come with us."

"Do you know why they didn't come with you?"

Jenya sighed. "Yes. Zikna made the point that if the entire prison disappeared in one moment, the chances of our escape would be less than favourable. The ones who stayed behind said that they would make an effort to distract the guards."

"They staged a riot. It caused a surge of military to the prison, allowing our Guardsmen to sweep in and make sure the regular citizens were safe before we tidied up the military and the priesthood."

"What will the government of Wael do now?"

"The Alliance is sending staff to assist in rebuilding the infrastructure and sponging out any residue of the Lekark philosophy."

"Good. So the seeds that they were planting were pulled." She nodded. "Excellent. Is there a way to get a message to my family?"

Guardian looked sharply at Flame. "Didn't you say your goodbyes before you left?"

"No. I went from the medical tent to the shuttle. It doesn't matter. If I had gone to their homes, they would not have let me in. Not without confirmation that the church was no longer looking for me. My brother wouldn't have let them."

"He was a sympathizer?"

"No, Jenaik always erred on the side of caution. If he suspected that my parents would be in danger, he would not let me in." Jenya just smiled at the shock of the two men. "Sending a message will be better."

"A message it will be." Guardian regained his composure and continued with the details of her responsibilities.

He finished. "If you agree to the terms and conditions, please press your thumbprint on this space."

She looked into the data pad that he slid in front of her and read all of the terms and responsibilities he had just outlined. Jenya glanced up and looked into the eyes of the Guardsmen in turn. With her gaze locked to Flame's, she pressed her thumb into the pad.

"I guess I am Digger until I die."

CHAPTER FIVE

A solid chunk of stone eight feet high, four feet wide and one foot thick was immediately in front of her.

"All right, Digger. Whenever you are ready, walk through the stone."

Jenya stretched and walked forward. The stone disappeared as she approached and she soon was through the door she had made.

Flame and Guardian were glancing between her and the data display.

"Digger, could you go through the two-foot stone now?"

She walked through the two-foot thick stone with only a light pause before the stone let her in. Once again, they were busy staring at the hole she made and the monitor. "Next please."

She pressed through the three-foot stone, marvelling at how dense the rock was.

"Stop for a moment, Digger." Flame went to the three-foot wall and checked something with a scan.

She leaned against the wall and watched him double-check his calibration. "Is there something wrong?"

"That was the densest stone we have available and you just passed right through it. Not only that, but there was an energy surge after you began to dissolve it and a spike in the breathable air. You actually channel the destruction of the particles and scatter the results."

"Is that good or bad?"

"It is excellent. Unexpected but excellent. Now we will see how well you can climb. That thirty-foot wall is completely smooth, your goal is to get to the top and then to slowly climb back down safely."

Jenya assessed the wall he pointed to and walked up to it. "How am I supposed to get up it?"

"In whatever manner you can." Guardian was bent over a display and he waved his hand absently.

"And how am I supposed to get down?"

"The same way you got up, Digger." Guardian smiled, but kept his head down.

She looked to Flame and he nodded encouragement. "You can do this."

Making a fist, she punched the wall, pulling her hand out quickly and leaving a hole the size of her clenched fist behind. She made the same move with her left hand and when she took it out, the

hole matched the first.

Digger leaned back and assessed the holes, then knelt to create some foot holes. With the holes ready, she put the toe of her boot into the first hole and pushed herself up the wall, making handholds with her fists and stepping up the wall with slow progress. When she reached the top, she looked down and clung to the wall as tightly as she could.

"Digger, are you all right? Your heart rate just skyrocketed." Flame was beneath her, but he was thirty feet down.

"I think I am afraid of heights." She heard the tremor in her own voice and hated her weakness at that moment.

"There is nothing to be afraid of. I will come right up and help you down." He put his data pad down and prepared to climb.

She couldn't abide that. "No! I will come down, just give me a minute."

"One minute and then I will come up after you."

Digger breathed deeply and lowered her body down until her right foot was on the edge of the nearest hole. She slid the toe of her boot in and the Masuo morphed into something softer with more grip. Relieved, she moved her left foot into position and then lowered her hands one space each.

She forced herself to breathe with her limbs shaking until the ground was firmly under her

feet. Flame was waiting for her.

With a low cry, she turned and threw herself at him, sobbing uncontrollably. He soothed her, smoothing her hair and holding her tightly. "You did it, Digger, and you won't have to do it again. I am placing an order for an anti-grav device. You may have to climb, but you will just be able to slowly descend at your own speed."

She snivelled. "There are devices like that?"

"On a large scale for shuttles and small craft. For you, I am sure that Fixer will be able to whip something together." He pressed a kiss to her forehead and she had to smile at how right the light contact felt.

"Fixer? Another Guardsman?"

He rubbed his chin along the top of her head. "One of the first. She is a very powerful molecular manipulator. Tech is good, but she can't create new and original creations, just repair the technology that already exists."

"She?"

He chuckled. "Yes, she. She is married to a Selna and has two lovely little girls."

That surprised her. She leaned back and stared up at him from within his embrace. "She has family? The Sector Guard is allowed family?"

He stroked her hair again. "Of course they are. There is a reason we are partnered as male-female. Our pairings are authorized by another talent.

Commander, one of the best matchmakers in the Alliance. He has not made a bad match yet."

"Has he made a match for you?"

Flame chuckled. "He has not, but Guardian has already sent your specs and holograms to him. We will know within days if our match is solid. I already know that you are my destiny."

She looked into those fascinating silver eyes. "How do you know?"

He smiled, the harsh planes of his face softening. "The same way you do, Digger. The same way you know." He leaned down and kissed her.

Heat rippled through her and her world turned green and silver as she went up on her toes for his kiss. Her hands wrapped behind his neck and she held on as he parted her lips with his tongue and tasted her. Jenya gasped and pressed closer, her hips snuggling against him until she felt something that had not been nearly so insistent when they had been hugging.

Jenya tried to back away, but Vornan wrapped his arm around her waist and pressed her back against him. His kiss continued and he began to coax her into mimicking him. When she touched his lower lip with her tongue, she flushed hot as he groaned in reaction.

A cleared throat behind her made her jerk free of Vornan and stumble a few feet away.

Guardian spoke. "Well, I am glad to see you getting along so well, but I have some data to share. Would you like it here or shall we head to the commissary?"

"The commissary would be good. I am a little weak after that climb." Her hands were also shaking, but that could have been residue from the kiss.

"Come along then. It will give you two time to cool off. My ears almost caught on fire." Guardian chuckled as they joined hands again and Digger followed him with Flame in tow.

The smells and the steady trickle of staff in and out of the hall led them surely to the commissary.

Jenya took her place in line behind Guardian and in front of Vornan. Flame wrapped one arm around her waist and pressed her back against him. His whisper in her ear sent her nerves pulsing. "What do you prefer, sweet or salty?"

She cleared her throat as the line swayed forward. "I will try anything once. Most of this food is new to me, so I am going to tread carefully. Both for my sake and yours. Who knows what it takes to kill the Masuo?"

The shaking of Vornan's body was obvious given his proximity. He was trying not to laugh out loud.

She picked up a tray and made some careful selections, asking the serving staff for details when

an item was both tempting and scary. She took her selections, got a few different beverages to try and looked around for a table.

Guardian was already seated with Flame. A couple in brilliantly coloured bodysuits were sitting with them. The male appeared made of stone and the woman had a skin similar to her own Irgothal colouring.

Jenya approached the table and sat in the chair Flame held out for her. The woman smiled and made the introductions, "I am Andra, the Stellar Storm, and this is the avatar for Udell, my mate, Nich."

Jenya smiled. "I am Jenya, the Digger. Partner to Vornan."

The phrase came easily. It was right and she knew the moment that she said it that Flame was pleased. Guardian was pleased as well, it showed in his changing eyes.

"Digger? How does that work?" Andra asked the question and her earnest interest was evident.

"You would have to ask Flame or Guardian for details on how it works. All I know is I stand in front of stone and move forward and the stone comes apart."

Nich got a rueful smile on his face and she hastily added, "Nothing living. I tried to go through a tree once and I gave myself a concussion."

"Good. I feel safer already." Nich sipped at his beverage and his violet eyes started to swirl with darkness. "Pleased to meet you, Digger."

Andra helped out. "This is Udell, he shares Nich's body and the symbiotic relationship allows the planet to be active in decisions about its surface."

"Pleased to meet you as well, Udell. I promise not to go excavating any hills or mountains without your authorization." She nodded formally.

Udell grinned. "I appreciate it. There is an area of cliff faces and rocky outcroppings that have been set aside for your use. A breather will be necessary, but I don't believe that it will be too arduous."

The eyes cleared back to violet and Nich winked. "It takes some getting used to, I know."

Jenya grinned. "With the restrictions on my colony, I have to get used to everything. A man occupied by a planet is just added to the list."

She turned to Guardian and took the hand Flame extended to her as she forked up some of the shredded meat and noodle mix that she had selected. "Now, Guardian, what did you find?"

Guardian lifted the data pad and looked up with his fork raised. "Well, for one thing, you and Flame are now irrevocably tied together. The green fire he uses to heal people is imbedded in your

neural pathways. In effect, Flame is keeping you alive."

Jenya swallowed heavily and Vornan squeezed her hand. "I thought I was dead. I just didn't know how I could have been if I was up and running around. So the fire is inside me?"

"Inside you and burning brightly, using your own talent as fuel if these scans are any good." Guardian gestured vaguely with his fork. "As far as we can tell."

"I am assuming that you will run further tests." She sipped at the hot, sweet beverage that she had selected and grimaced. Too sweet.

"Of course. Each Guardsman has special medical needs. Yours will revolve around monitoring your system at the flame that seems to animate you."

Jenya was rapidly losing interest in her meal. "Did you learn anything else?"

"Yes. Your talent breaks down the molecular bonds of rock or dirt, no matter the density. It is a field that you project and it wraps around you like a shield. Any inanimate object that you focus on is immediately dissolved into oxygen and energy. It makes sense. Those would be the things you need if you were underground for any length of time."

She nodded. "I was asked once if I could walk through steel, but I have never tested it. Could we?"

The light of investigation lit Flame's eyes. "I think we could arrange that. How thick?"

"What have you got? I would like to try every type of substance in a nice, safe environment. Glass, metal, magnetic metals. Plastics?"

"Oh, this will be interesting. I will put it on the schedule for tomorrow." He lifted her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss on the back of her knuckles.

"How much longer is today?" She picked at one of the desserts.

"This is the evening meal. Only three hours until standard bed time. I thought you might want to watch some educational vids in the common area."

"That would be nice. Our educational system was limited, only giving us the basics of the Alliance species and traditions. I would love to learn more."

"Then finish up your dinner and we will settle in for a little education." Flame smiled at her and his thumb stroked her palm.

Andra smiled as she watched them. "The first blissful days with a partner. At least you aren't locked out of the base because you are radioactive."

Jenya laughed. "Is that what happened to you?"

"A celestial storm took up residence in my body and I was too hot for public exposure."

Nich laughed and leaned over to kiss his mate's

cheek. "You are still too hot for public exposure."

Andra blushed very becomingly.

"Do you two live here on base?"

"No. Nich-Udell has a place in the hills. A lovely view of the entire base."

Guardian snorted and leaned back in his chair. "His place in the hills is an abandoned citadel from Udell's original civilization."

"Well, it isn't abandoned anymore and if we get any other inhabitants that can breathe the local atmosphere, they are welcome to move in." Andra made a face.

Jenya finished her sampling. "I think I am done here."

She pushed her tray away and looked to Flame. His tray was empty. "Anytime you are ready, Flame."

"Lady, gentlemen, we will see you later. Guardian, we will see you in the lab tomorrow morning." Flame got to his feet and she followed suit.

"It was nice meeting you, Andra, Nich-Udell. I look forward to seeing you again. Good evening, Guardian."

She took the arm that Flame extended and they made their way out of the commissary. "That was nice. Well, except for finding out that I am the walking dead. That was a bit of a shocker."

"I wish I could say that I didn't suspect it, but

your body has been singing my tune since you first woke.”

CHAPTER SIX

A documentary on the Kozue made Vornan a little uncomfortable. He squirmed under where she was leaning on him when the vid got to the sexual habits of his people. She snickered. "We can watch the documentary on my people next, but it isn't nearly as interesting as yours. The Irgothal only have their penchant for marginal existence going for them."

The narrator described the preferred sexual position of the Kozue male and Jenya had to admit she was fascinated. "Men from my culture will take it any way they can get it."

"As will I when we get to that, I am not in a hurry." He caressed her hair idly and she felt a light tugging on her locks.

She smiled and settled back against him. He was wedged in the corner of the couch and she was leaning up against his chest. With her back against him, she listened to the pulse in his body and felt the echo in her own. She still had a pulse, blood moved in her body, she grew hungry, she needed

the restroom, she felt alive. How could it be that she was not? Or that she was alive but using someone else's power?

Jenya found that her outrage and despair didn't last when she thought about having even a small portion of Vornan inside her.

She yawned as the vid wound down with a light overview of Kozue hierarchical structure. "I think I need to get some more sleep."

"Then we will go. The Masuo does not need to be removed, but if you can convince it to minimal existence, you will be able to get a good night's sleep."

She concentrated on her suit and as she watched, it turned into a loose, flowing gown. She laughed in delight. "I had no idea it could do that."

His voice was amazed. "Neither did I. I don't even know if Andra can do that with hers yet. You seem to have a knack for it."

"I am glad I do. I have no other means of clothing." She yawned again and stood, beckoning him to join her.

He followed her to her room and she flipped back the covers. "It is acceptable for courting males to sleep in the same bed as the female they are courting provided that it does not escalate into anything indecorous."

He laughed and peeled his own bodysuit off his shoulders and down to his waist. "I will attempt to

remain decorous." His boots thudded to the side of the bed.

With only his upper torso exposed, he shoved her into bed and crawled in next to her. He curled himself against her back and wrapped one arm under her, creating a pillow for her head and one arm around her waist, holding her tightly.

Jenya sighed and tried to relax against him. The thin gown provided no protection against the incredible amount of heat he was exuding. She snuggled back, finding the hard ridge that had risen earlier to be the last part of him to fall asleep.

Breathing audibly, she looked to Guardian and Flame for results. "Well?"

"The magnetic metal slows you, but you can still make it through. Even dried wood allows you access. It is only the living structures that you cannot enter. Interesting. Grass or moss would be excellent Digger repellent."

She cocked her head. "And yet the Masuo doesn't have a problem with me and it is a living creature."

Flame scratched his head. "I am guessing that the Masuo keys itself to the wearer."

"That would explain why it thickens and thins depending on the substance I move through. When can I ditch these sensors?" She stretched and winked at Flame as heat warmed his silver eyes.

"After your first assignment and when we are confident you are stable."

She sidled up to him and whispered in his ear. "Fine, but I am not engaging in anything of a remotely sexual nature while these things are on. The last thing I want is a permanent record of my first time." She felt his entire body jerk in response to her statement.

A knock on the door and a feminine voice got her attention. "Digger?"

She pushed away from Flame and met the new arrival, a woman in a black- and silver-studded suit. "Yes. Can I help you?"

"I am Star Breaker. I have a parcel for you from Fixer on Morganti base. She said there was some urgency."

The woman practically swirled with power. She held out a box and Digger wandered over to take it. "Pleased to meet you."

Star Breaker's eyes crinkled as she smiled. "You as well. The first Irgothal of blended genetics that I have ever met."

Digger blinked. "I have mixed genes?"

Flame scrubbed his hand over his face. "I was going to let Helsin explain it to you. Genes are not my area of expertise."

Guardian came over. "It really isn't his area. Helsin will be able to give you a much more in-depth discussion of your origins. He is back and

uploading his findings from Wael."

Star Breaker handed her the box with a grin. "Here you are. I can't wait to see this. Fixer ate half the commissary and made Isabi try the damned thing for hours."

A belt with a series of studded protrusions fell into Digger's hands as she opened the box.

Star Breaker reached forward and helped her put it on. "It's a hover belt. When activated, it will keep you from hitting the floor no matter how hard you fall. It creates a force field around you that stops any quick-moving objects from penetrating it. All you need to do is try it out."

The weight pressed low on her hips and she looked around. "How?"

"Climb something and fall off. If it doesn't catch you, I will." Flame came forward, "You don't have to fall far. Eight to ten feet should show you if the field is stable."

The rock wall with the handholds was still in place. "Better late than never. How do I turn it on?"

"It is motion activated. If you are moving at a speed faster than walking, the field will engage." Star Breaker was pattering after her, her booted feet making almost no noise.

Digger double checked the link on the belt and started climbing. She was up at a distance that didn't frighten her and she held on for a moment.

“Clear the landing area.”

She looked over her shoulder and confirmed that her audience was safe. “Three, two, one, fall.”

She pushed away from the wall and let the disorientation take her. She fell and then skimmed along the ground like a glass marble until she sat up and pressed her feet to the floor. She hadn’t felt the impact—it was a slow deceleration that she barely felt.

“I have to do that again.” She scrambled to her feet and ran back up the wall, this time climbing higher. At twenty feet, she pushed back and let the suit catch her. This time she aimed feet first. The slowing was gradual, but it worked.

“That is wonderful. Can I send her a present?” She said it a moment before she ran back to the climbing wall and pulled herself to the top. Closing her eyes before she could rethink it, she heard Flame cry out as she let go. The descent was slow, but she tried something when she landed.

“Aha!”

“Aha what?” Flame rushed to her side and took her arm, helping her out of the hole in the floor that she generated.

“I can use my talent as I fall, but the belt makes me fall slowly, so I am capable of making a hole through horizontal panels, not just the vertical.”

Flame’s eyes lit with understanding. “So if there is a building that we need to enter...”

"As long as this belt is functioning, I can create an entrance into anything."

Guardian scowled. "And a very large dent in the floor."

She grinned. "At least we know I can use the belt and my talent at the same time."

"Yes. And Fixer gets another bonus from the Alliance as soon as you use that in one successful assignment." Star Breaker was smiling.

Jenya focused on that one thought. "We get paid for doing this?"

Star Breaker laughed. "They always forget to mention that in exchange for risking your life, you get a rather large pay cheque. I got four hundred years of back pay for my services... Never mind."

"Would you care to get something to drink? I think I have provided enough data to Flame and Guardian for the day. I want to get some more information on the Sector Guard."

"Lead the way. This base has an excellent chef."

Together, they made their way through the halls, attracting plenty of attention from the males on the way. "Does your base have the same male-to-female ratio?"

Star Breaker snickered. "No, but we are not a battle base. Morganti has more of a natural disaster focus. I handle celestial events with occasional help from Stellar Storm."

They entered the commissary and selected their

foods. They sat at one of the tables and dug into their respective meals. "Do you think I insulted Flame by running out on him like that?"

"No. Well, maybe. But you can't just cling to him forever. You will be sent on missions where you have to perform on your own, Flame's talent doesn't lend to direct battle. Sneaking off for coffee is a good start." Star Breaker smiled and extended her hand, facing sideways. "My name is Carella, by the way. Late of Terra, as is Andra. Our species is new to the Alliance."

"Carella, it is nice to meet you. I am Jenya." She clasped the woman's hand carefully and when the grip relaxed, she withdrew her hand.

She laughed. "Yes. I know. Your file opened and our Relay rifled through it to brief me on what we knew about you. Your people were quite forthcoming with your initial recorded events as well, by the way."

"They know I am here?"

Carella chuckled. "They do. It was announced to your family and they were relieved that you were alive and well."

Jenya sipped at her beverage while she absorbed that information. "Why did you join the Sector Guard?"

"When you have a portion of a star inside you and can harness all manner of gravitational fields, there are few respectable options for

employment." She grinned. "That and I popped out of a restriction sphere in front of an asteroid. My arrival introduced me to Kale-Gant, my mate and the avatar of Morganti."

"It seems that avatars are excellent husband material. Are they all the same species?"

"No. They are usually the indigenous species of the planet they are sharing their bodies with. Not always, but usually."

"Interesting. So, we get paid for this?"

"We do. It is up to you to choose what to spend your credits on. If you don't have an account, they will have opened one for you. Most Alliance outposts will take your thumbprint or ocular scan as currency."

"And the ones that don't?"

"All shuttles are outfitted with an emergency pack that includes standardized currencies. It is behind the command chair in a hidden panel in the wall. An even pressure of your palm will pop open the panel."

"I am guessing that they would not tell me that." She laughed and kept sipping at the beverage.

"No, they would not. It's a guy thing. They try and keep all the information to themselves and just end up looking dumb when they forget that the information is available."

"So, what else does the shuttle hold?"

Carella grinned and shared the inventory of all the hidden panels and the goodies therein, from climbing gear to frigid-weather kits and atmospheric suits.

Even birth control was included in the med kit, oral, intravenous and prophylactic.

The array of food was phenomenal, dehydrated and ready for the steam injector. There was enough food for weeks or months in each shuttle and enough water for the same as well as a processing unit that could create clean water out of contaminated or salt water.

"That is impressive."

"Most of the modifications to the shuttles were Fixer's designs."

"She sounds amazing."

"She is. And a great mother, though with one of her children intermittently invisible, babysitters are hard to come by. The little ladies have a play room segregated for their use and Gant enjoys working with the girls, but when I get home, he is off babysitting duty."

Jenya laughed and their conversation turned to the romantic interactions of the Sector Guard and who was most likely to have the next little Guardsman.

Carella got a peculiar expression on her face and started running through the roster.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“**Y**ou are pregnant, aren’t you?” It took her half an hour to catch on to the facial hints as Carella spoke.

The Terran laughed. “I am. I am off active duty, so all I am allowed is to do the occasional courier run. I tend to jump at the opportunity. It’s nice flying a shuttle again.”

“Can you fly in space without oxygen?”

“I can. But we are not taking any chances with this little one.” She pressed her hand protectively over her belly. “It was hard enough getting pregnant. I don’t want to risk any damage to this little hybrid.”

“Do you anticipate a male or female?”

“Jenya, as long as it makes it to term, it could be a flying squid. With my irradiation and the father being the last of his race, any healthy, living child will be welcome.”

“I understand.” She reached out and took Carella’s hand.

Star Breaker returned her smile and then looked

over her shoulder. "The warden has found you. Make a run for it."

She turned in her chair to see someone who looked like Flame approaching. "That isn't Flame that is Razer."

Carella grinned. "Sorry, Kennan, she figured it out."

He paused just a few feet from them. "Kennan is still off base, Carella."

"Well, you aren't Vornan, so who are you?" Jenya was certain. Her body wasn't reacting at all and her skin prickled when Vornan was near. This wasn't him.

He sighed. "You have me. Vornan couldn't fool Ilsa either." He nodded to her. "Hello, Jenya, you look much better than the last time we met."

She was going to reply, but he held up his hand and went to grab a tray from the commissary. Tech entered the room and waved to Jenya and Carella before piling a series of random foodstuffs on her tray and beating Kennan to the table.

"Did he try that twin swapping thing?" Tech started the conversation with that particular introduction.

"He did. Ilsa, I presume?" Jenya grinned and inclined her head.

"Indeed. Nice to see you again. Your family was overjoyed that you survived, by the way. Jenaik is hoping that you will be able to attend his wedding

in the spring. His fiancée survived her time in the prison and she is looking forward to greeting you as a sister. Your parents are simply proud. Citizens that were in the tunnel keep coming by to offer them gifts for your assistance."

Jenya smiled up at the server who came by to refill her cup and then moved on to Carella's. "It's Irgothal tradition. You thank the gene donors of the one who rendered you the service. They created the person who assisted you."

"Interesting tradition. So, you don't benefit at all?"

"Why would I want to? I have my home, my work. I need nothing more as long as my family is comfortable."

Carella and Ilsa smiled. "Excellent attitude."

Kennan looked up briefly and smiled.

Jenya felt hands on her shoulders and a kiss on her hair. "Hello, Vornan."

"Hello, Digger. Helsin wishes to see you." He kept his hands loosely on her shoulder. "Hello, Ilsa, brother. Did you have any trouble mopping up the Lekark?"

Kennan draped his arm around Ilsa's shoulders. "No. They gave up without a fight and their penchant for metallic belts made it easy for Tech to spot them hiding in the forests."

"Good. I look forward to reading your report. Come along, Jenya. Helsin is freaking out as we

speak."

Bemused, she got to her feet and waved her goodbyes. On their way out the door, she asked, "Freaking out?"

"It means he is in a state of excitement."

"I know what it means. Why is he freaking out?"

"Your acceptance of the flame inside you is unorthodox. Normally, it works from the outside in. With you, it is inside your cells." Medical loomed in front of them and Jenya let Vornan push her through the doors.

Helsin was still a study in primaries. Blue skin, red hair and yellow eyes gave him a vivid presence. "Jenya, so glad to see you up and around. Please hop up on the table."

She hopped. "Is there something wrong?"

"Has Vornan explained your physiological situation?"

"He has. I am being constantly healed by the flame he used on me when I had begun to pass through the veil."

The doctor looked surprised that it could be so simply described. "Yes. Precisely."

He ran the scanner over her and she lay perfectly still. "Can you remove that belt? It's interfering with the scan."

She sat up and unbuckled the belt. Jenya handed it to Vornan. "Don't lose it."

He laughed. "I won't."

Helsin ran the scans and nodded. "The presence of Flame's energy is still there, but it seems to be dormant."

"Good. Can I sit up now?"

He nodded.

She reached for the belt and clicked it into place. It made her feel better.

"Now. You are not pure Irgothal. Are you aware of that?"

She shook her head. "There was rumour of another race in my bloodline, but it has never been researched by any of the family."

"You have a strong vein of Terran and it seems to have risen to the surface in your blood. My guess would have been one of the abducted Terrans from a slave run three hundred years ago. There are others in the Sector Guard who have just that kind of DNA in their systems from around that time period. Interesting."

That information was fascinating. "Are you sure?"

"I am. There is a distinctive pattern in the Terran genome. It is also prone to supporting talent. Do you have any history of talents in your bloodline besides your own?"

"My great grandmother could not get lost. It was impossible. Underground, above ground, in a new city, she could never get lost."

“Interesting.” Helsin’s fingers made frantic notes.

Guardian interrupted her appointment. “Flame, Digger. I have your first assignment. A hostage retrieval on Hickel 9.”

“Hostage retrieval? I don’t know if I am capable of that yet.” Insecurity flashed through her.

“We will be briefed before we leave. Come on, Digger. Let’s get the information we need to execute the assignment.” Vornan grabbed her waist and lifted her to the ground.

An anticipation that she couldn’t place started inside her. She was excited, but her mind was telling her she shouldn’t be.

It was Vornan. He was broadcasting and his energy was picking up the signal. She was going to hold onto that little tidbit for a moment when it would throw him for a loop.

They sat in Guardian’s office at the giant boardroom table once again. A hologram of a twenty-three-story building appeared in front of them. “This is the Kallof building on Hickel 9. It is a bank and an Alliance representative centre. Twelve Alliance staffers including the Representative from the Azon colonies are being held with bombs located on the floors above, below and in the lift. It’s a short jump from here and both Udell and Hickel have given us close proximity jump authorization. You will be arriving

and deploying directly from your shuttle."

She swallowed. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Go in, get them away from the rigged floors and get them to the roof. We will get them free with your back up."

"When do we go?"

"Now. The shuttle is fuelled and ready. Good luck, Digger. Good luck, Flame. See you at debriefing when you get back." Guardian's dismissal was unmistakable. "All files have been transferred to your shuttle."

With her head whirling, Digger led the way to the shuttle bay.

Flame was next to her. "How do you remember where to go?"

"Remember the great grandmother I told you about?"

"Yes."

"She wasn't the only one who could find her way out of anywhere. Why do you think I never dug straight into the ground? I knew where daylight was supposed to be. I put the image in my mind and I went to it."

Nausea hit her at the shuttle door, but she double checked her belt and went forward.

Digger sat in the passenger seat and strapped in.

"Can you bring up the file that Guardian mentioned? I am getting the seeds of an idea." She turned in her chair and examined the wall panels

that hid all the goodies Star Breaker described.

He handed her a data pad and she brought up the file, checking on the floor where the hostages were being held. They were being held on the seventeenth floor with snipers watching for aircraft on the roof.

"Could you hover high enough to be out of gun range and yet close enough to aim me precisely?"

He was busy running his pre-flight checks. "Why?"

"I will tell you on the way. Now, get us in the air before I change my mind and run through the side of the shuttle."

He chuckled. "As my lady commands."

They taxied out of the shuttle bay, a crackling field kept the unbreathable air out and the oxygen-laden air in. They left the ground smoothly and as soon as they cleared the moon of Udell, he spoke. "Prepare for jump."

They occupied two places in space for a moment and soon joined a series of ships that were in orbit around Hickel 9.

"All right. Drop me down over the building and I will fall through the floors. Thanks to the belt, I will fall slowly and if the rest of the description is accurate, I will be bullet resistant. They seem to be located on the seventeenth floor, so I will fall through until I find them. Once I find them, I will lead them through the walls to the stairwell and

bring them to the roof."

Without a word to the ships nearby, Flame swooped down and entered the atmosphere.

"Do you think you can make the jump?"

"I can if lives are at stake. What are the hostage takers after anyway?"

"We are not privy to that information. We just rescue and go." He shrugged.

"Doesn't that bother you?"

"Not as much as citizens being used as leverage for personal gain."

"Good point. I will go in, get them out and worry about why later."

"Excellent. We are here. Prepare to jump. I will drop down, drop you and get to safety. While you are inside, our backup should arrive and they will take out the snipers on the roof."

There was something that he wasn't telling her, but she unbuckled her harness and went to the position that Star Breaker had described. Two sets of climbing harness dropped into her hands and she strapped them to her body. She wanted to have them in case she needed them, but there was no way she could hold them and fall at the same time.

"Are you ready?"

"No, but I am in position." She locked her hands into the loops and waited for the door to open.

The door opened and more than two hundred feet below her, the flat top of a building was

beckoning her. Flame came up behind her and pressed an earpiece into her ear. "This will let me communicate with you. I have adjusted position to accommodate wind currents. If you need to tell me anything, just talk and I will hear you."

She nodded and before she could change her mind, Digger jumped into her first assignment. The feeling of dropping brought her stomach to her throat.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The fall was both short and the longest thing she had ever done. Digger kept her breathing even and only winced a little when the bullets struck the shield. She stood for a moment with the snipers bearing down on her before she dropped through the floor.

On the next level, she took a few steps to the left before dropping through the next floor. Then a few steps to the right. Now there was no direct line of sight for her to be shot at.

The rest of the floors went easily. She stopped on each floor and checked the door numbers to make sure she didn't overshoot her stop. The eighteenth floor showed evidence of devices so she passed through. The seventeenth floor was silent, but there was a rippling tension in the air.

Digger moved through the halls, checking them for occupation. She breathed deeply and put an image of an Azon in her mind. The response in her mind was clear. Twenty metres up and to the left.

She put an image of the snipers in her mind and

sighed with relief when there were only two on this floor. Digger made her way to the area that would lead her to the Azon. She could hear furtive movements on the other side of the door and an evil grin came to her lips. She used her fist to make a hole in the floor and stirred it around until it was large enough to hold a body.

Digger stepped over it and knocked on the door. "Sandwich delivery."

One of the hostage takers opened the door and saw her. She caught a glimpse of the position of the other man an instant before she turned and ran down the hall.

"Hey! Get back here!" Footfalls behind her made her grin as she heard the panicked yelp when he fell through the floor.

Snickering, she placed the image of the next hostage taker in her mind. He was still in the doorway. She moved until he could see her and then ducked through the wall across the hall with no sound.

He took a step out of the room, saw the hole and ducked back in. That was what she had been waiting for. With a room full of hostages, he would want to keep a wall at his back. That would be his first mistake.

She sensed his location and positioned herself behind him. The wall between them was their only separation until she stepped through and made the

wall into a doorway. She dropped with him into the floor and his yell of surprise made her snicker. On the fifteenth floor, she let him go and left his stunned self on the floor after turning his gun into a large pendant. Holes were not good for firing pins. Digger ran down the hall and locked three doors between herself and the kidnapper to gain her the time she needed.

She used her fists to make her way back up the wall, her passage through the explosives made her a little nervous, but she continued upward until she was back on seventeen. She knocked on the door where the hostages were and called in, "I am Digger of the Sector Guard. Please don't try and kill me, I am here to assist you in your escape."

A weak chuckle and relieved murmurs greeted her. She opened the door and did a head count. "Oh good. You are all here."

"How are you going to get us out? Someone shot the Representative." A woman was sitting on the floor next to a prone Azon man.

"Can he move? We have a medic on the roof." She pressed her earpiece. "We have a medic on the roof, right?"

"We do indeed, Digger. I am on the roof now. I will make my way to the stairwell. Do you have the hostages?"

"I do. It will take me three minutes to get them to the stairwell safely."

"How about unsafely?"

She caught the subtext that the building could blow. "I will do what I can."

She asked the hostages. "Can you lift the Rep?"

One of the young women scowled at her. "Why can't you help us?"

"Because I will be making the path." She got the image of the stairs in her mind and she oriented herself. The hostages were all on their feet. "This way."

Sweeping her arms out, she made the widest and most direct path that she could. They walked through office after office and arrived in the stairwell in record time. "Okay, up. Go up."

The young woman pouted. "Why can't we take the lift?"

"Because it is rigged to explode. As are the floors below and above us. So, go up, that is where the shuttles are."

The others filed up slowly and their lack of speed almost drove Digger out of her mind. She perforated enough of the floor while she waited for the hostages to make it past the eighteenth floor. She learned that if she used a handhold, she could dig the holes with her feet.

Anyone following them would have to be damned careful or the metal would fall apart like lace.

They climbed upward and they were on the

twenty-first floor when Flame shouted in her ear. "Are you all right, Jenya?"

"Yes, Flame, we are fine. Why?"

"Thank the stars! The squad on the main floor saw one of the hostage takers press an ignition button. We assumed it was for the upper floors."

"I think I dropped through the wiring system. Would that have had an effect?"

His chuckle in her ear was warming. "I will see you in a few. I am on my way into the stairwell now."

"Good. The Rep has been shot. I am bringing up the rear." She smiled and kept walking half a floor behind the rest of the hostages.

When she heard the Azon roar, she smiled. Someone else had just gotten flamed. The hostages picked up speed and ran up the stairs. Once again, Digger found herself looking for a light. The daylight coming in through the doorway was blocked by a masculine body and she ran upward into his embrace.

She was pressed tightly against him and she murmured into his chest, "I did it. Are they safe?"

"Safe, sound and being debriefed. The building is going to be destroyed as soon as we are gone to destroy any ordnance that wasn't fired. That includes their share of bullets as well as the explosives. Come on, let's go home and get you a bath."

She chuckled and let him keep her under his arm on their way back to the shuttle. Digger yawned and snuggled against him. She had never used her talent through so many substances in the same day.

His buckling her into her seat was vague, but she woke when they landed on Udell. He unbuckled her and lifted her into his arms. She reached up and looped her hands behind his neck. Safe and settled, she nodded off again.

Warm water was pelting her and her eyes blinked up at Flame sleepily. "Shower?"

"Shower. You were smudged."

His hands were caring and lightly rough on her face.

She lifted her face to his kiss and under the warm spray, her Masuo became a choker on her neck, leaving the rest of her bare to his caresses.

He swept her out of the shower and sat her on the counter, parting her knees and stepping between them.

She placed a hand on his chest. "Stop."

He drew back, dazed and confused. "Why? Your Masuo's behaviour indicates that you are interested in more than a hug."

She giggled shyly. "Yes. That is true. But I want these sensors off before anything else happens."

Understanding dawned in his eyes. Grinning, he removed the tabs with smooth movements. He

laid them on the counter as he removed them and counted them. "That is all of them."

She looped her arms around his neck again. "Then proceed."

He moved between her thighs and she marvelled at the difference in the texture of their skins. He was so hard, like sueded leather, where she was smooth and she was very appreciative of the differences.

As he caressed her body with rapt attention, she enjoyed the scent and sensation of having a male so fascinated by her skin and responses.

When he moved between her thighs and pressed into her flesh with his own, their gazes were locked and green flame flared to heal the small hurt he caused. After that moment of pain, what followed was an experience that left them sweaty, exhausted and clinging together.

She licked his shoulder, enjoying the salty sweat and the hum of enjoyment he made at the contact. "Back to the shower."

He laughed and lifted her in his arms, carrying her back to the shower and then the bed.

This time, they curled together, damp and exhausted while he cupped her breast and the curve of her hip. It was a restful, restorative sleep.

The smile was still on her face when she woke.

"Guardian, may I send a message to my

family?"

Breakfast was being mixed with the debriefing and all Guardsmen on Udel were up and listening to the steps that Digger had taken to save the hostages.

Guardian smiled. "Excellent stroke, destroying the explosives."

"Honestly, that was an accident. They just positioned them immediately below my drop zone."

He chuckled. "Never underestimate an accident. They save our lives more times than not. Luck is on our side frequently."

"I am glad. I could use the help." She chewed and swallowed a forkful of pancake.

"So, what did you do after the initial drop?"

"Well, I deflected the sniper rounds, landed on the roof and dropped down to the first level below me. I then took several steps to the left, dropped down and then a few steps to the right before continuing my journey." She rubbed her neck.

"Honestly, I created a booby trap with a hole in the floor just beyond the door and lured the first guard into it. The second, I pulled through the wall and he and I dropped through a few floors, which is probably where I broke the electronics. I ran through the halls, locked several doors between me and the guard and then made climbing holes to get me to the next floor and the floor beyond that.

After that, I merely led the hostages to the stairwell by walking in a direct diagonal line through the offices and up the stairs. You know the rest."

She finished her pancakes as he matched her statement to the data that the sensors had recorded.

"You booby trapped your exit?"

"I got bored while waiting. The stairs were lace work when I was done."

Guardian nodded and entered his thumbprint on the file. "Your first official report is done. Now, you need to take a few days off. Look into ordering a wardrobe or perhaps Flame could take you shopping on Morganti. You could meet Fixer in person and discuss the belt's capabilities."

Digger smiled and looked to Flame.

He sighed. "Yes, but I will also be using the trip as a teaching event. You need to learn how to drive and fly a shuttle."

She finished her plate and pushed it away. "I am done. Can we go now?"

Guardian sighed. "First, leave a message for your parents, then we can let you go shopping."

"Yes, sir, oh base commander, sir."

With a grin and a hop, she skipped to the communication centre. They had a holo scanner and were willing to use it.

* * * *

Guardian turned to Flame. "How do you think she will do?"

"Digger is creative, willing to defend herself and think under the pressures of the situation. And she makes my heart hum with happiness. There is no doubt of my thoughts on the matter."

Razer grinned. "I had Commander's information, but I was on my own when I sought out Ilsa and she was hardly in any shape to be my mate. And yet, I still felt the draw."

"My mate was radioactive, but I still kept on training her to restrain the energy. And I knew she was the one."

"So, you could all feel it before it was completely confirmed. Excellent." He tidied his data pad and looked up the next listing. "Now, Flame, we need to name your shuttle."

They got into a detailed discussion of the possibilities and when Digger returned from her recording session, Flame rose from the table and took his leave.

EPILOGUE

Jenaik looked at the Alliance messenger in front of him. "I have a message here from Digger of the Sector Guard. It is for your parents and yourself."

Jenaik called his parents in, dreading that the announcement that must be coming from the Alliance.

When they were all gathered, the messenger slid a disk to the centre of the room and activated it.

An unfamiliar woman stood there, a tight bodysuit wrapping her upper body in a radiating silvery grey pattern. Her thigh-high boots were unlike anything that a woman of Wael would wear and it was definitely a woman.

Mom, Dad, Jenaik. I am well and my new designation is Digger of the Sector Guard. All my time wandering through walls and stone is finally paying off.

I just wanted to send you this message to assure you that I am doing well and that I will be sending money home as soon as my pay becomes regular. All of my needs are met here and I have even engaged in my first official

assignment, which was successful and resulted in my rescuing a dozen hostages.

I will be careful in the execution of my duties, but I do not go into them alone. I have a partner. Flame. He is the one that healed me on Wael and he is far more to me than a simple partner. I look forward to visiting you and introducing you to him one day.

Jenaik, if you still want me at your wedding, I can be there.

Anyway. I can't think of anything else to mention at this time, so hugs. I love you all, take care.

The messenger handed them a credit slip. "Ninety thousand credits, courtesy of Digger."

Jenaik sat down. "That is more than enough for us to live for a decade."

"She was aware of that. She giggled as she loaded the slip." The messenger grinned. "Is there any message in return?"

Jenya's parents looked to each other and then back at the messenger. "We love her and we are very proud."

"And we need to see her at the wedding. Here is the invitation, please make sure she comes." Jenaik handed him the envelope and bowed low.

The messenger left with a grin and a light step.

The family of the Sector Guard members were always happy to have news of their loved ones. He loved his job.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This one was a tricky write. I couldn't tie the name to the characters until I realised that the flame was still in her body. Yes, she is, for all intents and purposes, a zombie, but Digger is adapting well.

The next book will find Guardian with his match. His talent for selecting the right Guardsmen for the right job is muddled when Pax comes in and is invited to stay.

Having a woman who generates peace at a battle base is going to throw his tactics for a loop.

Viola Grace

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

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

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

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

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