

MULTIPLE ORGANISMS

A woman in a black jumpsuit is running towards the right, her body angled forward. She is positioned in the center of the frame. The background is a vibrant blue with numerous bright white light streaks and starburst effects radiating from various points, creating a sense of high speed and energy. The overall aesthetic is futuristic and dynamic.

Sector Guard 18

Viola Grace

Drahali has lived her life as a freak, a woman who was far more than *one of the guys*. Her strength was limitless, but it doomed her to a life alone until the day the Sector Guard recruiter arrived and offered her a chance to be his partner and possibly more.

Remar suffered the same fate on his home world with his body able to split into multiple incarnations of the original. Meeting a woman who was petite, adorable and could snap him in two would have frightened a lesser man, but he could be more than she could handle any time he wished.

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Multiple Organisms
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Multiple Organisms
Sector Guard Book 18

By

Viola Grace

Chapter One

Drahali shifted and dug her heels in. “I don’t care how much weight you think I can manage, help me pull!”

The mill wheel was moving up the side of the cliff with glacial slowness, but the workers that would normally be hauling the two tons of stone were sitting to one side, placing bets as to her ability to pull the rock up by herself.

Dra grunted and pulled until the very edge of the rock was tipping and then stopped. “Get over here. Now.”

The men snickered. Hestin smirked and sauntered close. “Why do you need our help? You seem to have it well in hand.”

“Because if you want it in one piece, you will hold it while I sneeze.”

That got their attention and they took places on the ropes and braced the wheel.

Dra thanked the nine deities and let go as she sneezed. The men groaned as the weight came fully onto their arms. Dra’s head spun as she caught her breath. “That

was one good sneeze.”

Hestin was digging in his heels and he glared at her. “Anytime, Dra.”

She stretched leisurely and then resumed her place on the rope. With a few sharp tugs, the millstone tipped over the edge of the cliff and she hauled it toward the new structure next to the village.

“You know, if I wasn’t a freak, this would be a lot of work for you.”

Hestin chuckled. “If Mother and Father didn’t have five children already and wanted a sixth, you wouldn’t be here. There are a lot of ifs in the world.”

She glared at him but was unable to stare down the eyes that were reflections of hers. Green and gold in equal measure surrounded by dark lashes. Women fell at Hestin’s feet with a simple bat of those dark lashes.

“Don’t you flick those eyes at me. This job belongs to the men of the town and not a single woman.” Her grumpy tone was one he was well familiar with.

“You know you are the best woman for the job.” He kept pace with her as she made it all the way to the mill house.

“Story of my life.” She finished hauling the stone into place and then squatted to lift it to its edge for

manoeuvring up the ramp and into the mill.

Men stood by to steer, but it was all Dra pushing that got it across the creaking floorboards to its final resting place. When it slid home, she was sweating but cheerful. A few hours of work that saved others the possibility of injury.

The men clapped her on the shoulders as she left the mill and they got to the work of putting in the upper grinding stone that would contact the huge wheel she had put in place. Just one of the guys. She was always just one of the guys.

Her bare feet blew up puffs of dust as she walked the half mile to her family's home. The sprawling ranch was inviting, but she knew better than to try to enter without a shower. After she stripped her clothing off, she walked up the raised tile steps leading to the shower space and as the solar-heated water washed off the dust of her exertions, she scowled at the image in her mind of a life of endless menial tasks for the town. She would live with her parents and die a virgin. None of the local men would come near a woman who could break every bone in his body with a casual move.

When the water ran clear, she took a towel from the cupboard and wrapped herself in it. She pattered to the

back door and sauntered toward her room.

“Drahali, can you come in here for a moment?” Her mother’s voice was raised and the pitch indicated she was not alone.

“I need to get a change of clothing, Mama.”

“That can wait, dear. Come in here.”

That tone Drahali was familiar with. She turned on her heel and walked into the formal room, wearing nothing but a towel covering her from breast to mid-thigh.

There was a man in a strange uniform sitting on the guest couch and Dra’s mother was refilling his tea. “Yes, Mama?”

“You remember that call that your Papa answered? The one about exceptional talents?”

Dra felt her gold skin bronze slightly as the man on the couch looked at her. She carefully kept facing her parent. “Yes, Mama.”

“This man is here from the Sector Guard base on Teklan. He wishes to assess you as a possible recruit.” Nrahali Delnin smiled and it lit up her face. The glow came from under her flesh, her phosphorescence giving a soft light to the room.

“Excellent. I will just change clothing and be right

with you, sir.”

He got to his feet and came toward her. He took her hand in his own and bowed over it. “Pleased to meet you, Drahali.”

The deep tenor of his voice made her smile and his towering height almost made her laugh. “Nice to meet you too, Guardsman. I will return in a moment.”

He seemed reluctant to let go of her, but he released her hand and she walked quickly to her bedroom, putting on another trouser and tunic set. She left off the shoes. She rarely needed them here on the farm.

A quick glance in a mirror showed her tawny skin, brown hair and the same eyes that half of her family wore. Her wet hair was in a thick braid down her back and brushed the edge of her tunic. This was as good as it was going to get.

Dra didn’t know why a man not of her species was getting under her skin, but she wanted to make a good impression on him. Anything was bound to be better than the towel.

Her feet pattered on the tile as she returned to the formal room. The guard was back on the couch, dwarfing it with his size. He shot back to his feet the moment that she entered the room.

“Sir, you wanted a demonstration? What did you have in mind?” She used the manners that her mother insisted on.

“I have a shuttle parked over the ridge, in the authorized zone. Nice blend of technology you have here.” He was stumbling over his own words.

Her mother puffed up with pride. “We left the city for the joys of the land. When the city opened up spreads for ecologically friendly family farming, we jumped at the chance. Now that we are situated out here, I think it would be good for Dra to see some sights among the stars.”

Drahali blinked at the swift turn of her mother’s comment. It wasn’t like Nrahali to be that direct. Like most of the Eorghani, she was the soul of etiquette and decorum.

“That may be a possibility. Shall we?” He gestured to the front of the house and she preceded him.

The spot he mentioned was fifteen minutes away. He drew even with her as they marched to his shuttle. “You don’t wear footwear?”

“Not much call for it here. My soles are tough enough to take most punishment and my talent seems to protect me from most damage.”

“How long have you had this talent? Does it strictly have to do with strength?”

“No. I can also do this.” She hopped up on a rock and stomped one bare foot. The rock shattered beneath her sole.

“Is your talent constant, or do you trigger it?” He seemed genuinely admiring.

“Constant. Is yours triggered, or is that too personal a question?” She blushed when she realized that she might have passed on a taboo.

“Considering that I am about to ask you every involved question I can think of, you have the right to reciprocate.” He smiled at her and her stomach flipped. “My talent is activated. I operate under code name, Multi.”

“That brings several images to mind, but I suppose I will learn.” She skipped along and when his shuttle came into view, she whistled. “That is gorgeous.” She gushed. It was all sleek lines and glossy metal.

“It is also extra dense with the defensive panels. I would like to see how easily you lift it.” His challenge was down.

Rubbing her hands together, she shifted until she could get a grip on the edge of the shuttle. It lifted off the

ground and she grunted as she heaved it into the air, using her back and finally her arms to raise it in the air above her head.

“Where would you like it?”

The man looked down at her diminutive form and laughed. “Back where you found it, please.”

She shifted and returned it to its place. When she was out from under the hull, she smiled brightly at him. “What next?”

“You passed. You are everything that your father described. When can you leave?”

Blinking in pleased surprise, she told him. “As soon as you meet my family.”

Chapter Two

The Delnins lined up outside their family home and they looked at the newcomer with calm gazes. Dra introduced him to her father and her brothers.

Her mother asked her, “Did you pass?”

“I did. I am guessing that I leave right after father finishes interrogating him.” Drahali watched the males of her family circle around the stranger, asking questions. None of her brothers was taller than the stranger’s shoulders, but they bristled with protective instincts.

Multi answered each of their questions in turn, stopping the circle more than once with his responses.

“Honey, you know you have no future here as anything but a packhorse for them. You will never have a family of your own out here. This is your chance to do something with your life, to be part of something greater than an ecofriendly village on the edge of civilization.” Nrahali’s voice was intense.

Dra looked into her mother's eyes and saw the truth. Her mother wanted her to leave.

"If I am going with him, I think I should pack a few things." She fought her tears as she ran inside the house.

"Drahali!"

She ignored the call and sprinted for her room.

Dra closed the door behind her and tried to get her composure back. A series of deep breaths and she was able to collect her travel bag and place it on the bed. Now, what to take with her?

Extra shirts and trousers went in without thought. She really hoped there would be a way to make money while she was in the Guard, because she went through clothing with alarming rapidity due to her activities.

Remembering his comments on shoes, she packed three pairs and then assessed the space she had left. A knock at her door got her attention. "Yes?"

She wasn't expecting to see Multi, but he was standing in front of her with a concerned look on his face. "Are you all right, Drahali? Your mother seemed upset by your departure."

Dra snorted. "I doubt that. She just told me that I have no future here and I should go with you."

He nodded and sat on her bed. "It is true and you

know it. It is the same reason your father offered your name for consideration to the Guard and then pressed it with weekly updates of your exploits. Your parents are proud of you, Drahali, but they know that you can do greater things if you leave your home and family.”

“Every week?” She quickly retrieved her library and tossed it into the bag.

“Every week. Considering the Eorghani bias toward protecting their daughters, it came to our attention rather quickly. If they were willing to have you leave, you had to be exceptional.”

She snorted. “Your words are kind, but freak is more apt. I can turn any of the men of my social circle into dust with just one swing of my arm. No one wants to chance a bride like that.”

She picked up her figurines and put them gently down. Taking them with her was out of the question.

She sighed and looked around her room. The only things she could take were the hair combs she had gotten for her twentieth birthday. Nothing else would survive a trip into space.

“Perhaps an Eorghani male is not suitable for you. One of the Guardsmen is the best matchmaker in the Alliance. I guarantee you that he will find you a match

who is suitable for you in every way. You may not see it at first, but it will be the right match for you.”

She cocked her head. “I could really meet this matchmaker of yours?”

“Of course. As a Guardsman, you have access to all of the resources that the Sector Guard has to offer.”

She wiped the tears that kept welling up. “I suppose that it would have its bonuses. It just...I didn’t know about any of this until today.”

“Ah. That would explain it. Do you have anything else to bring along?”

“No. I am done.”

He smiled and closed her bag. “Excellent. Then, I think you should speak with your family and then we can go. This is a chance for you to start a new life. You can communicate with your family as much as you would like and have a full wardrobe as well as a hefty income. The contracts will be in three-year increments.”

“That seems reasonable.” Drahali still felt weepy, but it did cheer her to know she could keep in touch with her family.

She slipped on a pair of shoes and led the way back outside. She stopped when she was on the deck surrounding her family home. Multi was still talking to

her parents, but he was also behind her. She whirled around to confirm it and he raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, Drahali?”

“How can you be in two places at once?”

“It is my talent. I am able to break into multiple organisms to complete tasks or talk to many witnesses of an event at once. It is a good ability and is a lot of fun at parties.” He smiled and nodded to her brothers as he passed her to walk up behind himself and the entire clan watched him merge into himself with only a light crackling of the air between them.

“Have I satisfied your curiosity?” he asked it of her family at large. Her parents hesitated to agree, but her brothers nodded.

“Multi says that I can contact you as much as I want, so when I settle on Teklan, I will send you a message.” Dra smiled at her parents and was lost in a group hug as her family rushed her.

Her mother’s tears were what finally got Drahali moving. She swiped at her own eyes and freed herself from those who loved her. “It is now or never and now, I have a ride.”

Her family laughed and they let her go. She nodded to Multi and he led the way back to his shuttle. When he

opened the door and she stood on the steps, he let her have her minute to pause and look around.

She took in the vistas of her home, the new village and the city with all of its tech bustling far beyond. Drahalí committed the scene to memory and then moved inside the shuttle. She kept out of Multi's way as he locked the hatch with an ominous click.

"You can take the navigator station, the one on the right. I will just stow your bag." He opened a small hatch and her pack was unceremoniously stuffed inside.

She let a small smile creep over her lips as she sighed in relief for not bringing anything breakable.

The navigator station was a well-cushioned chair, with a harness attached, facing a series of screens. "I don't know how to do anything here."

"It isn't necessary. It is simply more convenient to have you here while we take off. If you haven't travelled by shuttle before, it can be a little unnerving. Can you put your harness on?"

She sat carefully and shifted until she was comfortable. Dra pulled the harness on with attention to not crossing the straps. Multi was watching her until he saw her click the clasp and settle with her hands on the arms of her chair.

“Are you ready?” His tone was polite.

“Yes. Quick, before I change my mind.”

It seemed to be all he needed to hear. A few deft flicks of toggles and the ship powered up and began to hover as he took them from her home and off to a new world where she would have many new adventures.

Her hands dented the edges of the chair as they soared higher and higher. She forced her breathing to stay normal as they cut through the layers of atmosphere. The moment that they reached orbital height, her distress faded away and she stared in fascination at the view of the stars without clouds or gas layers to get in the way.

“I never knew that the stars were so bright.”

“Some of them live and some of those have avatars. A few of those avatars are Guardsmen.”

He managed to program and fly while he spoke, so she began to ask questions. By the time they hit the jump point, she hadn’t even gotten through to his assignment on Teklan.

When the jump engine whirred to life, she froze mid-chatter.

Chapter Three

Being in two places at the same time was the strangest feeling. Drahali had heard of jumps but had never been in one before. She swallowed heavily. “How many more of those do we have to do?”

“We are going to have you assessed and outfitted on Morganti, so this is the only jump you will have to worry about today.”

“Assessed? I thought that you already did that.”

They were rapidly approaching a green and blue orb that spun cheerfully in the darkness of space.

“This is a different kind of assessment. These scans and tests will determine how your power is generated and what its nature is. Morganti is the best place for this as they have the best tech available. Teklan is coming along, but until we have a full complement we won’t be able to do this kind of scanning.”

Drahali was nervous. Morganti was the flagship of the

Sector Guard, even with new branches filled out regularly, each with their own specialty. The information was new in her mind, but it was undeniable. Morganti held some of the most powerful beings in the Alliance and it was Drahali's first stop.

She kept close to Multi as they left the shuttle. Her mind kept ringing with the descriptions of powerful beings that he had given her on final approach.

Two small creatures ran out of an open hangar and immediately climbed Drahali's legs. Wearing the little girls, she looked helplessly at Multi while he stifled a laugh.

"They are very fussy about those who carry them. You should consider yourself chosen by two very powerful little girls. These belong to Fixer and Shade. Starbreaker and Kale have a daughter, but she is still with her mother at all times."

Surprised, she stopped on her way to the hangar. "The Guardsmen can breed?"

"You mean have families? Yes. It changes the nature of their assignments, but adds to the overall morale of the guard base. Why? Did you think we simply lived for the job?"

She started moving again and the little girls with rainbow hair squealed and giggled in her arms. “I never thought about it.”

Inside the dim expanse of the hangar, a woman with long rainbow hair was welding.

Multi called out, “Fixer! I believe these are yours?”

A shadow detached from the wall and formed into an exceptionally handsome man with skin in a soft midnight and hair to match. “And mine. The little critters love to greet newcomers. I am Isabi, by the way, or Shade if you prefer. Hello, Multi.”

“Shade. Drahali is here for her assessment and we were told to come straight to Fixer.”

“Yeah, she is waiting. She has never seen a gravitational talent before. I am pleased to meet you, Drahali.”

She would have extended her hands, but they were occupied carrying his children. She tried to put them down, but they poked up and clung to her. “Ladies. I can’t carry you forever. Well, I could, but then I couldn’t eat and that would be bad.”

The girls pouted, but then nodded. Drahali lowered them to the floor and they took her hands as she walked toward their mother.

She introduced herself to Fixer and the woman greeted her graciously. After a few preliminaries, they went behind a screen and Mala started to attach a series of monitors to Dra's skin.

* * * *

"I have never seen Mabi and Isala so attached to a stranger." Isabi was watching his children while Remar fought the urge to send a version of himself behind the screen.

He could see the faint outline of Drahali's body through the panels, but he craved the details. "Do you ever regret being matched to Mala?"

Isabi gave him a knowing look. "Never. Even the caretaking I have to do for her brings us closer. Why?"

"Drahali doesn't know yet. I don't want anyone here to tell her either. This is not a situation that she entered into lightly or gratefully. Her family basically threw her into the arms of the Sector Guard and I don't want to push her." Remar scowled.

"How did you feel when you met with Commander?"

Remar remembered his meeting with the Azon. It had been less than four weeks earlier.

Remar was relaxing on Teklan between assignments. The summons to attend Might's office had come by surprise.

As he passed the unfamiliar shuttle in the bay, he read the call sign, Class One. The ship belonged to Pilot and Commander, the first Sector Guard team in existence.

"Multi, so glad you could make it. Please be seated." Commander had the typical Azon features, feline eyes, tawny skin.

"Commander. What can I do for you?"

"I believe we have found a match for you. You have been quite the challenge, you know." Commander pulled up documents and began flashing data on the screens.

"I know that my species isn't compatible with many." Virgoths were not well known at any time in history, but with the expansion and colonization of many planets in their system, they could no longer hide. Remar's talent made him unable to find a match with a woman of his own kind, so he had come to the Sector Guard in the off chance that they could find him a match in exchange for his service.

"I have a candidate and my talent tells me it's a solid match. She is an Eorghani. They don't get out much, but

her family has placed her into consideration for the guard. She will need a lot of training to move in the Alliance and you will need a lot of patience.” Commander’s eyes took on a far-off look as if he was seeing something that no one else could.

A peculiar eagerness started in Remar’s mind. “Can I meet her?”

“You will be assigned to pick her up. I will recommend that you take her to Morganti for testing. I have a thought that her talents have something to do with gravity, but until she is tested, we will not know for sure.”

“When can I go?”

“Might has you on an assignment with Frost and Finder as soon as we are done here, so after that, I will send the information to Might.”

He cleared his throat. “What if she doesn’t want me?”

“Eorghani are accepting of matchmakers. Bring her to me and I will confirm the match. Either way, you will know for sure.”

Remar licked his lips. “Do you know her name?”

“Yes, but you will know when you go on assignment. There is no use tempting you with knowledge of her name when you will be so far from her.”

It was the last thing that Commander would say on the

matter and soon, Multi was on a shuttle with Finder and Frost, seeking out traces of information surrounding a terrorist event on a distant world.

Blinking, he snapped back to the present when Drahali emerged from behind the screen. She was straightening her loose shirt and trying to dodge the little ones who were trying to regain her hands.

Her green and gold eyes were striking, her hair with its mix of gold, rich chestnut and black strands made him want to unravel it with his fingers. The golden tone of her skin just added to the rest of her attractions.

Fixer led her to the weight gear that had been set aside and Multi watched as his soon-to-be partner went through the motions of lifting tons of weight with no signs of exertion. Lesser men might have been uneasy at being with a woman who could spin them over her head, but Remar had to admit, it was quite a turn on.

Chapter Four

Drahali smiled as Fixer shooed her offspring away.

“Sorry about that. They are not usually so underfoot.”

“Don’t worry. I used to be the favourite babysitter in my neighbourhood until we moved out of the city.” She lifted the weights that Fixer had given her and raised them above her head.

Off to one side, Multi and Shade were watching her with amazement. At least Dra thought it was amazement on Shade’s part, there was something more intense in Multi’s eyes.

“Well, I think we need to take this outside. Your power seems to be gravitational in nature, but I can’t pinpoint details. I think we will need the doctor’s input on this.” Fixer made some notations on a keypad. “Would you be interested in a uniform? I have something that I believe I can alter to fit you.”

Dra blinked. “That would be nice. I go through

clothing rather rapidly.”

Fixer chuckled. “I can understand why. Just a moment.”

She watched while Fixer walked to the workbench and opened cupboards. She extracted a pile of cloth that reshaped and turned a dark bronze at the contact. “Here we go.”

Fixer handed her the pile and it shook out into a bodysuit similar to the ones surrounding her. Dra went behind the screen and stripped out of her regular clothing, sliding the new suit over her limbs and the monitors.

“It’s sort of baggy.” She didn’t want to expose herself until it looked all right.

Fixer popped around the corner and lightly stroked the wrinkles in the fabric. “I will take care of that.”

As Fixer stroked and tugged at the suit, it became a spectacular piece of craftsmanship. The bronze highlighted with black and gold.

Fixer popped away and came back with boots. “Here you are. These should do until we can set you up with some Masuo.”

Dra slid her feet in, laced them up and knotted the laces. They felt all right. “How do I look?”

“You would look less tense with your hair down, but

you look lovely.” Fixer was honest.

Shrugging, Drahali unravelled her braid, the locks ending at her waist. “Better?”

“Wow. Those colours are lovely.”

“You are one to talk. How do you get that rainbow to fall so straight?”

“Genetic manipulation on my father’s side. My little ones have it as well, so it seems to be a dominant trait.” With that grin, she was Mala again. Fixer was in the background.

She stepped out from behind the screen to face Multi, but a newcomer distracted them all.

A Wyoran came into the hangar with a data pad in his hand. “Welcome to the Sector Guard, Drahali. I am the base physician, but you can call me Effin.”

“I am pleased to meet you, Effin.” She bowed as she had been taught and he nodded in return.

“Well now, shall we see what you can do near an uninhabited mountain range?”

Multi was at her side in an instant, bristling with hostility at Effin’s casual attitude. “Yes, *we* will see what she can do.” An instant later, Multi surrounded her on all sides.

“How many times can you split yourself?”

“Twenty has been my limit to date.”

To her surprise, he put an arm around her waist and led her to a small, open-air transport. Fixer and Effin joined them while Shade held two wailing little girls. Multi returned to a single incarnation and Effin steered their merry band toward a large range of mountains.

To Dra’s consternation, Multi did not remove his hand. He kept his arm curved around her waist as they flew to see what she could do with unlimited range. To her surprise, she didn’t take umbrage. It felt perversely right to have his touch on her.

Her parents would be shocked. That thought left a smile on her face that continued as she used her fists to smash rock, her feet to pulverize and her strength to lift huge boulders.

When Effin called a halt and requested that she come in for scans, she agreed readily. They were already telling her more about her talent than she had ever known. Why would she want to stop now?

Multi kept himself next to her as Effin returned them to base. As he stayed at her back, she was getting used to the wall of body heat that he put out. Racking her brain, she had been unable to come up with his species, but she supposed that she would be able to ask him some time in

the future.

The interior of the base was well lit and the people were cheerful. Medical was well organized, but it had more high-tech gadgets than Dra had seen in the last five years. “Wow. This is a lot of high-tech gear.” She couldn’t keep it in.

Effin nodded toward Fixer. “Mala has the unique talent of being able to create things from description of the result we want.”

“Do I have to keep the monitors on?”

“No, you can remove the tabs that Mala stuck to you. There is a restroom over there.” Effin gestured as he started to prepare his scanners.

“Do I put the suit back on?”

“Yes, please. I don’t think Multi would handle it well if you were unclothed.”

With that peculiar sentence hanging in the air, Drahalí went to the restroom and peeled off the tabs that were recording her physiological data. A few were in hard-to-reach places, but she managed.

The mirror showed her every inch of golden skin and she turned a few times to make sure she had removed all the tabs.

Mala had been correct, her hair loose was much

prettier than all bound up.

“Are you all right in there?” Multi’s voice came through the door.

“Just a moment. I was making sure I had gotten all the tabs off.” She quickly pulled her suit up over her hips and back into position. With her bronze suit sealed and everything back in place, she gathered up the monitors and brought them out with her. “Sorry it took so long.”

Multi blinked in surprise. “I didn’t realize that there were so many monitors. My apologies.” He took her burden from her and Effin showed her how to stand on one of the scanners.

The next two hours were spent going from machine to machine, having everything from her DNA to her skin texture analyzed.

She was exhausted, but she waited patiently for the diagnosis.

She was disappointed when Effin said, “I am forwarding this information to Reset. She will be your attending physician on Teklan. If you leave now, you should be there tomorrow afternoon.”

Multi nodded and took her arm. “We will be. Thank you for your efforts.”

“I enjoyed it. It was a pleasure to meet you, Drahali.

May your works in the office of Guardsman be impressive and wise.”

He bowed over her hand in Eorghani fashion and she covered his hand with her own. “Thank you.”

“I will be in touch. Your talent is too fascinating to see only once.” He winked and Multi immediately escorted her out of the room.

Sleep threatened to swamp her. “Don’t you ever get tired?”

“I don’t sleep. A peculiarity of my species. You can rest on the journey. There will be two jumps between here and Teklan.”

He kept an arm around her waist and led her back to the hangar where she made her goodbyes to Mala, Mabi, Isala and Isabi. The little ones were sniffing, so she promised she would be back soon.

“Bye, Drahalí.” The light voices chirped her name and she grinned.

“I didn’t know you spoke.”

“Mama tells us to listen and talk only when it is needed. Otherwise we get into trouble.” Mabi smiled, showing tiny teeth. “We will see you when you come again, Drahalí. Will you play with us?”

“I will. Be well, tiny ones.” She kissed each of them

on the forehead and returned to the shuttle.

“Do children always react to you like that?” Multi locked the shuttle door and Dra got into her chair.

“Usually. I have no idea why.” She sat in the navigator’s chair and blinked. “She fixed my chair.”

“Yes, it has been reinforced to handle your strength. Fixer is fussy that way. She didn’t want you mashing the armrests into nothing.”

Dra rolled her eyes and buckled in.

Multi did his checks and they were off.

This time she didn’t panic. Too much information had come into her mind since the first take off for her to be unsettled.

She watched the stars come closer and when they had made the first jump, she settled back for a nap. She trusted Multi. He would wake her when they landed.

Chapter Five

“Time to eat something, Drahali.” A hand shook her awake and she rubbed her eyes. She was seeing double, but that was to be expected. There were two of him after all.

He unbuckled her harness and helped her out of the seat. She stumbled drowsily to the back where he had dropped a table from the wall. She sat on a bench seat and propped her head on her fist. A yawn came out of her mouth and she covered her lips with her hand. “Must be nice not to sleep.”

“It has its moments. Would you like breakfast?”

“Sure. Do you have tea?”

“Yes.”

A cup appeared under her nose and the familiar aroma perked her up a little. “How long to Teklan?”

“Six hours. After you eat, you can have another nap if you wish. I know that those tests can really take it out of

you.” He was bustling at the food-prep station and she noticed absently that his suit was now a reverse of hers.

“When did your suit change?”

“When yours were created. We will be working in a team, so it makes sense to coordinate.”

Something about the Sector Guard and teams rang a bell, but she was too sleepy to remember.

The tea helped to wake her and the tray of rations was filling. As soon as she was finished, he helped her over to a bunk that he unfolded from the wall.

“I will wake you before we are on final approach.” He ran a hand over her hair and that light touched soothed her back to sleep.

There were three of Multi in the shuttle. One was making another meal. The other two were at the command and navigator stations.

“Are we there yet?”

The one at the galley turned and grinned. “Still an hour to go.”

He turned and he had a platter of sandwiches in his hands. “Snack time. Due to the lack of sleep, I tend to eat frequently.”

“So, you normally travel alone?”

“I have only been with the guard for a few months and they have been sending me on assignments with other teams. Finding me a partner has been difficult.”

“Do you have a real name? One outside the term of Multi?” She took one of the sandwiches and stared down at her fingers.

“I am sorry. I forgot. My name is Remar. Remar Ilkish of the Virgoths of the Nyal Imperium.” He bowed formally.

“I am sorry. I have never heard of your race, but pleased to meet you, Remar.” She extended her hand and he took it in his own.

Warmth spread through her extremities at the contact. She felt her skin start to glow as they maintained their casual touch. His eyes were the dark blue of the oceans of her home. She tried to speak, but she kept her thoughts to herself as she slowly withdrew from his grip.

She nibbled at the sandwich and watched him scarf down the rest of them. “Why did you join?”

“There was nothing for me on my home world. I am an oddity, even for my race. Telepathy is normal on my world, this sort of thing,” he gestured to his body. “This is unusual.”

“It seems we have more in common than I thought.”

She smiled shyly.

He grinned and put the platter away. “That is the same thing I thought when I met your family. They reminded me of my own. They love you and want what’s best for you, but they know that it is not with them. That they could let you go proves how much they want what is best for you.”

She leaned back on the wall and stuck her feet out. “I know. It is just a bit of a shock when it came at me so suddenly.”

“Time was a factor. I can only get away between assignments, so as soon as it was confirmed that you were accepted into the guard, I had to come and get you.” He locked down the implements of their snack, letting the other Multi at the navigator station join with him.

“Does that hurt?”

“Not really. More of a snap, like cracking your knuckles.” He shook his shoulders and stepped into the body in the command chair.

She got out of the bunk and folded it back, locking it into the wall. She slid into the navigator seat and buckled in.

“When did you know?” She knotted her fingers together and put them in her lap.

“Know what?”

“That you were different, that you would never have what everyone around you seemed to find so easily.” She kept her gaze focussed out the view screen, watching moons get closer and a planet loom beyond.

He didn’t speak for several moments. “I was ten or so, at a friend’s birthday. We were playing hide and hunt and I split into six. I can shield my mind, but my friends found me anyway. Then they found me again, and by the time I walked out of the woods in my sixth body, parents were looking at each other in concern and my friends were being taken home.”

She didn’t say anything. She knew the looks in those faces. Condemnation, fear, contempt, Drahalí had seen them all.

“The next day, my parents took me to a genetic specialist and determined that I was a naturally occurring mutation. A random event.”

Dra muttered, “I hate being random.”

His laugh surprised them both. “Me, too. After that, I finished school and went into public service as an emergency responder. My talent copies whatever I am wearing, so I was a one man crew.”

“How did the guard find you?”

“I applied.” He held up a hand and flicked on a com. “This is Multi requesting landing access on Teklan.”

“Multi, good to hear from you. Spot is open on the tarmac for you. Greet Grav as well, would you?”

“Will do. Grav, is it?”

“We will discuss it when she arrives, but yes. Gravity sits beside you.”

He disconnected the call and turned to her. “Our commanding officer has spoken. You have been given the call sign of Gravity. I wonder what the scans turned up.”

“You are wondering? I am going wild with curiosity.”

Their shuttle continued to hurtle through space until he brought them down on a glowing, living world. Dra gripped her hand rests but watched the base get larger and larger. Until they skidded to a halt on the tarmac.

“Is this it?”

He took a deep breath and announced in serious tones. “This is Teklan.”

She burst out laughing and he joined her. They were still laughing when they emerged from the shuttle and walked to the base.

“Remind me that I have to call my mother.”

He wrapped an arm around her waist and gave her a

light squeeze. “Call your mother.”

She elbowed him in the ribs just as a Dhemon came toward them.

Chapter Six

“Gravity, please to meet you. I am General Brodin or Might if you prefer. I understand that we share a talent for strength.” He extended his hand and Drahali allowed him to kiss the back of her knuckles in Dhema fashion.

“Apparently, but you know more about my talent than I do. All I know is that I have not run across anything I could not lift.” She smiled politely, but Remar’s arm around her tightened.

It took her a few seconds to recognise what was happening. He was jealous. She froze in shock while General Brodin led them to his offices. Her feet moved along on automatic as she absorbed the realization that Remar was acting in a possessive manner and it was not subtle. She had seen her brothers acting in similar manners at matchmaking events. Usually, the women moved away, but occasionally, one stayed in a male’s grasp and let him press his suit.

Dra wanted to see how enthusiastically he pursued her. She was beginning to enjoy the anticipation and she knew it was a bad sign.

“Is there a way for me to call my parents? I promised them I would make contact when I arrived on Teklan.”

“Of course, as soon as we go over your medical stats.” He tapped a data pad and the door opened behind him.

A pale, elegant woman came in, her suit armoured with panels. She had a thick cascade of navy blue hair and a pleasant demeanour.

The general smiled. “Reset, so glad you could join us. This is Gravity and you have met Multi, of course.”

Reset took a seat in the third seat positioned next to the General’s desk. “Of course. A very interesting talent. Drahali, I am very pleased to meet you. So, what do you want to know about how it works?”

“Um, everything. Why can I lift so much weight?”

“Your body produces a gravity cancelling field. If you can touch it, you can lift it.”

“Why can I smash things?”

“You can also increase the effect of gravity against your skin, pulling things to you or causing them to collapse under their own weight.”

Wow, that made sense. Dra tried to come up with

another question. "Can I do it so that it lasts longer than my direct contact?"

Reset grinned. "We can do some experiments if you like. Has Multi explained the name thing to you?"

"No. aside from us all having two of them. That is all I was told."

Reset looked at both men in the room and scowled. "Of course. We go by our given names when on base or in between assignments. I am Gralial, but you can call me Gray. Our names are to keep our friends or families back on our home worlds safe."

"That makes sense. If they don't know who we are, they can't hunt our families."

"That is the idea." She smiled and the genuine expression made something inside Drahali's chest ease a little.

"Some of the guard wear masks and we could install one if you like."

"I don't think that is necessary. Eorghani aren't really that uncommon." She shrugged. Her people had dozens of worlds across the Alliance.

"Fair enough. Remar, do you want to come with us to experiment?"

"No. I will discuss a few things with General Brodin

before I restock the shuttle. He mentioned sending us out in short order.”

“Okay, we will make this quick then. First to the com centre and then to the gym.” Gray held out her hand to Dra and she smiled as she took the pale digits.

Up and out of her chair, she only had time to give a quick look behind her before the door swung shut and Gray was pulling her through the halls. True to her word, the com centre was their first stop.

Drahali took the position that the officer left open for her and began to place what she knew would be a very long call. “This will take a while.”

“Don’t count on it. Everything we do is routed through the relay network.” The com officer smiled.

A chime announced that her call had completed, as quickly as the speed of thought.

Nrahali Delnin smiled on the other side. “Hello, Dra. How are you doing? Is everything going well?”

“Yes, Mama. I am on Teklan and getting used to the uniform. It feels strange and I have to wear shoes, but everything is going well.”

“Excellent. I will tell your father. He and the others are shifting that mill wheel for some stupid reason. When will you call again?”

“I don’t know, Mama. I have heard something about an assignment that I am to go on. I will contact you after that. Know that I am well and keep an eye on Papa. He shouldn’t be lifting things like that.”

“He isn’t. He’s supervising. Have a good day, love. We are proud of you.”

Tears pricked her eyes and Drahali took a deep breath. “Thank you. I will try to be worthy of your pride. Have a good day, Mama.”

She disconnected the call and sat back, getting her emotions under control. Gray gave her a moment before placing a hand on her shoulder. “Come on. Let’s do something to take your mind off it.”

Knowing a good idea when she heard it, Dra got to her feet and followed the base physician to the gym.

“Now, we don’t need a lot of weight, but we do need the reinforced floor. This should do it.” Gray lifted a small hand weight and placed it on the floor near the weight bench. “Try to make it heavy from where you are standing.”

Drahali frowned at the weight, but Gray lifted it without trouble.

“You pick it up and put it down. That might be it.”

Two hours of trial and error later and Drahali

managed to get the hand weight to stay put with the equivalent force of a thousand kilos while she was standing fifteen feet away.

Gray squealed happily and hugged her. “You did it!”

Dra was grinning. “Now, we just need to see how long it lasts.”

They started testing it with Gray trying to move it every five minutes. It lasted twenty-five minutes before Drahalí’s influence wore off.

“That is the neatest thing. I never would have thought to try something like that back home.”

“That is what the base medical officers are for—to figure out your talent and help you use it to your utmost. That and we patch up boo-boos if you get injured.” Gray giggled.

“You are too funny.”

Her new friend smiled. “I am now. I used to have a different name before I got my soul back. Hard hearted.”

“Ouch. What do you mean ‘got your soul back?’ A soul can’t be removed.”

“It can if a minder is involved. Every dream, hope, bit of laughter and joy was drained from me and kept in an orb on my family’s ship. Mist helped me get it back.”

“Mist?”

“My partner. Canil Warks. Code named Mist. He forms a sort of tensile fog that can get through the teeniest cracks or form a fog bank for cover.”

“I see. I have noticed that most of the Guardsmen that Multi told me about are all in mating pairs.”

“They are. It is how Commander picks our partners. The girls are usually the last to know.”

“Is there a way I could meet with Commander?”

“Of course. I will make the arrangements.” Gralial smiled.

A throat cleared in the doorway and they both turned to face Multi.

“Our assignment has come through. We should be going. The shuttle is refuelled and supplied.”

Drahali hugged Gray and smiled when the taller woman returned it. “See you soon.”

Having made a female friend for the first time in her adult life, Drahali walked out of the gym with a spring in her step. It was time for her first assignment.

Chapter Seven

“So, we have to act as guards at the Alliance summit on Jorkilo?” She was too busy reading the assignment summary to get nervous about the take-off.

“And make sure that the data crystals don’t leave the boardroom. Are you up for this?”

Gravity thought about it. “Of course. I can’t join the guard if I don’t take assignments. Why us?”

“The officers of Teklan are more circumspect than those of the other bases. We are just classier.” He grinned at her and to her surprise, he winked.

“You compete with the other bases?”

“No. But all of the bases have specialities. Morganti has a reputation for negotiation and crowd control. Udell is the battle base. They answer for violent hostage situations and raider attacks. Station 13 is a science base with an interest in conforming planets.”

“And Teklan?”

“Investigations. Investigations so far have included thefts, assassinations and derelict ships that could be leaking radiation. Reset and Mist handle those.”

“They are impervious to radiation?”

“More or less. Reset can simply fix herself and Mist...well, Mist’s people are rules unto themselves.” He punched in their destination and turned in his chair. “How did you enjoy your first bases?”

“They were fine. I really enjoyed meeting Gralial. I don’t think I have made a female friend in years.” She devoured the specs for the building and measured distances in her mind. “It looks simple enough. How long will we be there?”

“Until the conference is over. Could be three days or three weeks.”

She looked up and blinked in surprise. “I don’t have enough clothing.”

“Fixer made you five suits. They are in the storage bay at the back. We will also be assigned quarters in the area so that you can rest as you require.”

A trill of relief ran through her. “I don’t have to stay on the ship?”

“No. They provide us with lodgings.” He got up from the command chair and went to the back. “I almost

forgot. This is your credit band. It will lock into your cuff if you put it on. You currently have your first year's wages on it."

"All at once?"

"Our jobs are dangerous, you know. There has to be time to play and you now have received enough credits to play on any Alliance base or planet."

She took it with shaking fingers. "Can I buy presents for my family?"

"It is your money. Your clothing and food are taken care of by the guard, as is your medical care and transport. You won't want for anything." He helped her tuck it in to her cuff and the suit snapped in around it. "When it comes time to pay, simply swipe it over the data pad and press your thumb to the plate and your total will be deducted."

"That easy? Back home, we have a card or cash system."

"That easy. Morganti also has a wonderful seamstress of l'nal extraction who enjoys making clothing for the members of the guard."

"That sounds like fun. I would like to see Mala and the little ones again. Maybe one day." She smiled. "For now, what do I need to know about this summit?"

Remar grinned and sat next to her, laying out his plan for the shifts he would take and the places he would position himself. She would be in the summit chamber with one of his incarnations and keep an eye on the data crystals used to record all of the data.

If anyone tried to take the crystals out of the chamber, she was to stop them by any means necessary.

She had no idea what *any means* entailed, but she got the idea. The data crystals would contain sensitive information that would be worth a fortune and it would be her job to keep them safe.

She just hoped she was up for it.

“These are your rooms while the summit is engaged.” The Azon councillor was showing them to their rooms. Tiergar vi Ranith was a pleasant man, charming with a calm that belied his fierce features.

“Thank you for your hospitality, Councillor Ranith.” Multi inclined his head.

“It is nothing. My wife insists that all members of the Sector Guard be treated as champions of their races. They risk their lives so that others can live without knowing danger.”

Gravity smiled. “Your wife sounds like a wise

woman.”

“She was the first champion for her race, so she holds the ideals of reward for action dear to her heart.” He bowed and his robes of state flowed around him. “I will leave you to get settled. Relax, have a meal. We would be pleased if you joined us for dinner.”

Multi gave her a look, then nodded. “That would be wonderful.”

“Excellent. Kyra will be delighted to have new races to talk with. She does get bored with nothing but Azon dignitaries at dinner.”

Gravity smiled. “Perhaps it would be more appropriate after the summit, rather than before. Should anything happen, I wouldn’t want you held culpable.”

“Thank you for your consideration, but since it was I who invited you here, I would be considered culpable nonetheless. We will see you at dinner.”

Knowing a command when she heard one, she took her small duffel into the rooms that was to be hers and Multi’s for the stay. “Wow. It is almost as big as half my house.”

She explored, but one detail kept her tense. “Is there another bed?”

“I don’t sleep, remember?”

Relief flooded her. “Right. Sorry, my silly pedestrian paranoia kicking in.”

He looked as if he wished to say something, but he held his tongue. “What would you like for lunch? There is a bathing chamber as well if you would like a soak. I know for some women, baths are important.”

She had perked up at the thought. A bath. It had been years since she had had more than a shower.

Before he could say anything else, she grabbed a clean uniform and darted into the bathroom. The size of the tub made her swoon. With a little trial and error, she got the hang of the taps and soon, the water was climbing the tub, scented with oils that the hotel provided.

Her fingers were trembling as she unlaced the boots and stripped out of her suit.

Drahali stifled a moan as she slid into the water and let her skin feel the warmth and the silky softness of the oils. As soon as the level was high enough, she shut the faucets off. Her soak let all of the tension out of her system. She slid down to wet her hair and let the warm water caress her face. The smile would not leave her face.

It was a pretty good start to her first assignment.

Drahali was dozing off when Remar came into the

bathing room. “Pardon my interruption, but you stopped making happy noises, so I thought to rouse you before you drowned.”

He didn’t ask but lifted her out of the water with a whoosh. He held her with one arm while another of his bodies separated and picked up a towel.

Her maidenly sensibilities were pushed aside at the feeling of being cared for. Dra was still sleepy from the water and the relaxation, so she simply let him pick her up and carry her into the other room while she continued to doze.

He split again and his other body pulled back the covers so that she could be tucked in without her towel. Naked between the sheets, she relaxed and drifted off to sleep, her mind going blissfully blank when she felt a body curling around her own.

She would deal with it when she woke up. At this moment, she simply felt content not to be alone in a strange place. She had no idea how she would feel when she woke up, but in that moment, she didn’t care.

Chapter Eight

“So, how long have you been in the Sector Guard, Gravity?” The pleasant woman had features that Drahali knew from news clips a few years earlier. Kyra didn’t look like she was a fighter, but there was a readiness to her, a stillness that you only noticed with time.

“This is my first assignment. I just finished my medicals and assessments.” She wasn’t looking at Multi. She couldn’t look at him, knowing that he had seen her naked and hadn’t reacted at all.

Rejection was the worst.

“My daughter Alsa wants to be in the guard when she grows up. It gives Tiergar white hair or the Azon equivalent.” Kyra smiled.

“I can imagine. My parents pushed me into the guard, but I am enjoying it so far. Though, the constant reminder that I am risking my life is beginning to get tiresome.” She smiled and pushed her food around a little before

hazarding another bite.

The flavours were unfamiliar and she was worried about how her stomach would receive them.

Multi leaned over and whispered. "Try the bread, then some meat, then the orange vegetable. That should work."

"Don't you like Azon food?" Tiergar was concerned.

"I have never had it before. This week has been full of new things and I suppose I am reaching my quota." She tried Multi's suggestion and was relieved when the flavours blended into something she could tolerate.

"Understandable. I feel the same when I travel, which is why I have been only too happy to leave that to other, unencumbered, dignitaries." He grunted as Kyra elbowed him in the side. "I mean, men who are not as blessed by the stars as I have been."

His wife smiled and sipped her drink. "Nice recovery."

"Thank you. Years with you has taught me that swift words or swift actions have to be taken often and frequently." He gripped his wife by the neck and pulled her in for a kiss.

Kyra's hand on his wrist tightened for a moment before she relaxed.

Gravity watched them, amazed that they still showed passion after years of being together. Her parents still showed affection but nothing on this scale.

“Pardon that. The Azon believe in showing whatever emotion is called for. With Kyra at the table, I am frequently moved to display.” Tiergar smiled and flashed his sharp and pointed teeth.

“What about you two? I have heard that most of the Guardsmen are paired due to compatibility.”

Multi sprayed some water to the side. “It has not come up yet. We will tackle it when it is time.”

Tiergar and Kyra shared a look. Kyra blushed. “I apologize, I don’t have much tact.”

“It’s fine. We just have not discussed any of that sort of thing and my people require the intervention of a matchmaker.” Dra smiled and pushed the vegetables around her plate, picking out the orange ones. “I have already put in a request to see the Sector Guard matchmaker, so for better or worse, I should know soon enough.”

“A sensible approach, much better than being tossed into a cage with a rutting Azon.” Kyra smiled and winked.

“That sounds horrid.”

“And yet it is a story that our four little ones can’t get enough of. How Mommy and Daddy met.” Kyra’s grin wouldn’t fade.

“It was nice to see someone pleased with the way life had turned out. Back home, many couples resented each other after a few years. It seems like you two are finding new adventures together.”

Tiergar lifted his wife’s hand to his lips, “Every day.”

The conversation turned to the summit and the other races that were attending. With good wishes for the night and a time to report for duty, Multi and Gravity left arm in arm, taking lifts and moving walks to get them to their rooms.

“That was a nice evening out. It did turn a bit tactical at the end though.” Gravity tried to keep the tone light.

“It is an occupational hazard in the guard. We tend to focus on the matter at hand. Mind you, when I am back on Teklan, I enjoy helping Harusk build his home for Mayden. According to his traditions, they are not officially wed until he creates a home for her.”

“That’s a good hobby. I used to weave, but since my talent got attention, I haven’t had a chance.”

They moved through the halls, talking in low tones. He held their door open for her and followed her inside.

She had to know. If there could be anything between them, she had to know. As they passed the bed, she hopped up and leaned down to kiss Multi.

She was clumsy and her first attempt was awkward, but it told her what she needed to know. The press of his body against hers added to the intimacy of a kiss, sent her pulse pounding.

“Thank you. I needed to know if there was a future possible for us.” She leaned back and bounced on the bed, leaving him standing, stupefied by her actions.

She flipped back the covers, crawled under them and peeled off her uniform without saying another word.

Drahali was amused when he stood in front of her and dropped to his knees.

When his frowning face blurted out one word, she knew the feeling was mutual. “Well?”

“I will tell you after I have spoken with Commander.”

She rolled over and was quite surprised when he rolled her back. “Now.”

He pressed a kiss to her lips that spoke of loneliness and desperation. She raised her hand to his cheek and he gentled his touch. With the covers and his uniform separating them, she wove her hand through his hair and responded to every touch he gave her, in kind.

When Remar lifted his head, his eyes shining, she smiled. “Answer enough?”

“It will do for now.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I am glad to know I can make you glow like that though. Phosphorescence is a nice indicator of mood.”

She chuckled. “Well, unlike you, I need some sleep. It has been in short supply lately, so if I can indulge myself, we can torment each other tomorrow.”

He laughed and levered himself away. “Deal. But don’t be surprised if one of me holds you in your sleep. I can’t resist.”

She sighed and snuggled under the covers. “Whatever gets you through the quiet hours of the night, Multi. Just stay above the covers.”

He chortled and one of his bodies curled around her while another went to work on the data unit. “Get your rest, tomorrow you face your first day as an active Guardsman.”

She smiled as a kiss pressed against her temple, the room filled with a soft glow that came from under her skin as she closed her eyes to drift off until it was time to go to work.

Chapter Nine

Sentry work was boring, but the moment that the summit broke for meals or breaks, Gravity touched the unit on the marble table and created data crystals that weighed over a hundred kilos each. Anyone trying to steal them at that point would have crystals that would tear their way through any clothing.

Each time she touched them, she counted them and memorized their appearance. If anyone of the nine delegates tried to steal any of the conversations, she would know about it.

“Time for our food. We will eat in the outer room.” Multi escorted her into the foyer in front of the meeting room and they took the trays provided by the Azon staff member.

“Councillor Tiergar was very specific.” He bowed and made sure that Gravity had the tray meant for her.

She laughed when she uncovered familiar foods. “I

thank you for the attention to detail.”

He bowed again and backed away.

Eorghani cooking may not be the most flavourful in the Alliance, but it was a nice change of pace from the guesswork of her last few meals.

She was finishing her food and reaching for her water when a crash from the conference room sent Gravity and Multi to their feet.

The doors to the conference room swung open and Multi split into six, sweeping the room with arms extended. There was nothing out of place except the open lid to the crystal storage. When body number four stumbled, five and six lunged to pick up the invisible creature.

“I have an idea.” Gravity grabbed one of the spare chairs from the corner and five and six pushed the creature into the chair. She reached out to touch the invisible creature and as her fingers encountered scales, nubs and warm dry flesh, she shuddered. “You can let it go. It can’t get out of the chair.”

Multi sent one of his bodies into the hall. Six informed her, “I am asking for a few things from the kitchen that will make finding the identity of this creature easier.”

Gravity nodded and walked to the data crystal set. One was out of position, but it seemed to be the same one that had been there before. "I can't verify that this is the right crystal. Can you search it?"

"Yes, but you will owe me one."

Multi came back in through the door with some small shakers. "Orfir are sensitive to salt. It disrupts their ability to keep the invisibility. If this is what I think it is, this should work."

He snapped into two bodies and one shook the salt while the other watched. A crackling hiss came from the creature in the chair and as the salt fell, a being out of Gravity's nightmares took shape.

Nubby skin, fangs and a completely nude body with the exception of a belt made of the same skin as the rest of its body, studded with small pouches. Steeling herself, she reached out and removed the belt. A quick search revealed a blank set of crystals. The count was complete. The crystals had not been switched.

Gravity sighed in relief. "He didn't have time to switch them."

Multi grinned. "Good. I will call security and have them take him away."

His other body wandered into the hall and made the

call. The room they were in was proofed against transmissions and telepathic eavesdropping. Multi had an additional skill that she hadn't known of. He was a telepathic static generator. Not a skill she had imagined would go with a man who split into pieces.

The creature in the chair tried squirming, but he was just too heavy. "Mine. It is mine."

She realized that he was talking about his belt. "I will let them take you with it. Just a moment, though."

She left the room, opened a storage area in the foyer and dumped the contents of the belt into nine different compartments. She put a seal on it that would take a crowbar to break and returned.

Six different secret compartments were emptied one by one also. Grav smiled as it seemed a side effect of her talent to detect what things *should* weigh. When she thought she had gotten it all, she returned to the summit room.

The captive was almost catatonic. His eyes were rolling in his head and froth was appearing at the corners of his mouth. "Here is your belt."

She dropped it on his lap and his eyes widened and he glared at her. "Contents were mine."

"Contents will be returned to you after they have been

determined not to be a threat.” She smiled and it was not a pleasant smile.

The security officers came cautiously into the room and Multi split into eight to keep the men from approaching the data storage.

One of the officers looked frustrated, but he grabbed for the belt before reaching for the spy. Other officers didn’t have that problem. They grabbed the spy and started tugging before Gravity remembered to release him. Suddenly three of them shot backward, but they quickly restrained the spy and marched him out of the room.

The officer with the belt looked as if he wanted to say something, but his companions shoved him back out the door.

Multi sent one of his bodies to stand in the doorway and he turned to Gravity. “Can you do a sweep for bugs?”

She nodded. This had been covered in her briefing on the flight in. Between sessions and before sessions, she was to check for any and all protrusions on the tables, chairs and any fixtures.

There was one bug near where the officers had been standing. She crushed it in her palm. Two others she found under the spy’s chair. She crushed those as well.

The systematic cleaning continued with three more devices placed under the delegate's chairs. Gravity was shaking her head as she exited the room with a handful of destroyed tech just in time to watch the councillors come back.

Multi stood beside her as she discarded the listening devices with one of his incarnations guarding the door. "Battle stations, Grav. Prepared to be bored."

Three gruelling days, nineteen bugs, two infiltrators and one attempt on Tiergar's life that ended in a very violent death when Kyra grabbed the assassin's weapon. They had been meeting for tea after the summit and the Terran had leapt to her feet to meet the attacker head on.

Grav wanted to sign up for hand-to-hand combat training in that moment. All she was able to do was create a perimeter until the officers of the city showed.

Anyone who tried to enter the scene quickly found themselves on the ceiling. She had learned that trick on day two of the assignment when one of the councillors grabbed her backside.

He had been on the ceiling for nearly an hour when Multi had returned and talked her into letting the man down.

“Come on, Gravity, our work here is done. Now we go back to base.” Multi put his arm around her waist as he had been doing during their down time.

“Fine. What kind of accommodations will I be treated to?” Drahali was getting the hang of this. It was going from place to place with only one constant in her life, Remar.

“There are nice houses with a link to the supply station, but we take our meals in the base for the most part.” He was steering her onto the walk that would take them back to the shuttle bay.

The officer that planted the bugs stepped in front of them and he had a weapon in his hand. “Do you know how much I was going to get if I got that information?”

Multi tried to push her aside, but she increased her density and glared down the officer. “I don’t care. You agreed to uphold the law when you put on that uniform and I didn’t mention to anyone how you planted the listening devices. If you attempt to execute us, there will be another strike against you.”

He snarled and raised his weapon. Gravity started to move toward him and the crowds scattered. She kept his attention while Multi split into twenty men at her back. The first two strikes on her uniform slowed her, but as he

continued to fire with the energy weapon, she surged forward into the blasts. Before he could take aim at Multi, she touched his weapon and his hand, and he struck the floor. He lay there, twitching, while she slowly crushed his weapon and the spare on his belt.

The moment they reached the end of the sliding walkway, Multi got her to release the officer who was now so heavy he could barely breathe.

They handed him over to the shuttle bay officers, Alliance representatives who took peacekeeping seriously.

Multi spoke to their captain. "Take a look at the walkway footage. It will be enough to press attempted murder charges until we can send you the footage from our suits."

"Thank you, Guardsman. It is nice to know that you can do more than babysit the councillors." The captain shook Multi's hand and the officer was cuffed and escorted to a holding cell.

Gravity was still edgy. While everything seemed wrapped up, she wanted to pursue that officer to find out whom he was working for. To leave now seemed wrong somehow.

Multi came up behind her and wrapped an arm around

her waist again. This time, two of him walked in front of them, two behind and one on her open side.

She was surrounded by a sea of the same male. It was strange but had the power to make her smile.

Tucked into the shuttle and back in her navigator station, she fidgeted while Multi ran a scan that he hadn't run before. "We are clean. No new tech has been added or removed."

"Will you let me run my own scan?"

"Certainly, we are not on a clock."

Grav sat quietly and let that peculiar sense run across the ship. "There is something in the exhaust port. The weight of the back of the ship is off."

Multi nodded and sent one of his bodies out to check. It came back, shaking its head. "You were right. Heavy explosive devices in the ass end. Good catch."

She raised a hand and continued her sweep. "The rest of the ship weighs what it is supposed to. We can go now."

"You are going to tell me how you do that one day." Multi re-joined himself and started the pre-flight checks.

"A lady needs her secrets." She snorted and gripped the arms of the navigator's seat as they rolled out of the hangar and into daylight.

She felt lighter than she had in years as they lifted off the surface and headed home. It was strange to think of Teklan as home considering she had never even slept there, but it was Remar's home and he was her partner. Where he was at home, she was at home.

Chapter Ten

Her palms were sweating as Teklan came into view. She was flying as fast as the ship would allow without going into jump, but it was still not fast enough for her. “This is Gravity requesting a lot of clearance on the Teklan tarmac.”

Even having been warned that she was coming in hot, the com officer sounded nervous. “Gravity, I didn’t know you could fly.”

“I can’t. This is a horrible dream that Multi will let me wake from any minute now.”

The com officer tried to reassure her. “Reset is standing by. Has he really been poisoned?”

Grav fought tears. “They were trying to get me. They poisoned the Eorghani tea that Multi had on the shuttle for me. They had no idea I was going to try and learn foods one culture at a time.”

“Reset will meet you on the tarmac. She will have him

reset to perfect health in no time.”

“If we don’t die in a fiery shuttle crash before then. Okay, here goes. Entering the atmosphere.”

Grav was running through the instructions she had been given, holding the controls in her hands and praying that she could walk herself through it. Multi was strapped to the bunk and trying not to distract her. Under Reset’s instructions, she had given him the sedatives from the kit, but being alone in a shuttle was freaking her out.

She boomed through the atmospheric layers, the ship shuddered under her hands. Grav turned the nose to aim it at the base and began to decelerate.

“Keep it straight, not too slow or you will drop out of the sky.” Commander Brodin was on the com. “Stay calm, this is under control and Multi will be fine. I swear it.”

“Excellent. I will just let you take the controls and you can do this.”

“I would if I could. Midnight is going to be shadowing you immediately. Let me know when you—”

“There is a dragon on the roof.”

“Oh, good, he made it. Now, he will help you decelerate and you can go as slow as you like, he will steer you in.”

Grav started landing gear and braking procedures. “Fabulous, just make sure he doesn’t let go.”

“You are doing fairly well on your own for someone who has never flown before.”

“I remembered everything the com officer told me, plus everything Reset told me when she was walking me through the medical emergency.”

“Good. We are ready to jump into action the moment you touch down, which by my calculations should be in the next thirty seconds.”

He was right, the ground was coming up to meet her and she was breathing heavily while pulling up on the controls. The first shock forced a moan from her passenger, the second was lighter and the sound of the heavy beating of wings filled her ears.

She looked through the view screen and saw the base, the hangar and the tarmac, all where they should be. “I think I am down.”

“Not quite. Turn your gravity on. Midnight is trying not to let you float away.” Brodin’s voice was coming through her suit microphone.

She released the controls and let gravity take its course. The ship settled with a soft thud.

Grav was shaking with relief when the door was

wrenched off and Reset catapulted through the door to Multi's side.

"Is he..."

"He will be fine. This poison was designed for your physiology, not his. He would probably have recovered on his own if there was no other interference."

Drahali wanted to cry. Since the moment that Remar's face had paled and he began to clutch his abdomen, she had been in a complete state of panic. To have it relieved by Reset's focused contact with Remar's skin was as much of a shock as the first discovery.

He started to stir in less than three minutes.

Reset turned her head, "Canil, can you lift him out of here?"

Grav unbuckled and stumbled to the back. "I can carry him."

Reset smiled. "I'm sure you can, but it will be less of an injury to his pride if Canil does it. You can help peel Harusk off your roof. I don't think he has ever been so scared."

Gravity smiled and left the shuttle behind the floating body of her partner. Tendrils of Mist carried him into the base.

Drahali walked far enough away from the shuttle to

turn and see the dragon perched on the roof, claws imbedded in the metal. "Hello, Harusk, is it? I am Drahali and I promise to leave you to the regular effects of gravity."

The dragon's claws released, one at a time. He flapped up and landed in front of her, shifting into a Drai.

"You are the one they call Gravity?"

"Yes, my name is Drahali though."

"They named you well." He extended his hand and she shook it. "Is Remar all right?"

"Reset says he might have been fine without my frantic flight to return to Teklan." She shifted from foot to foot, eager to follow Remar and the others.

"Go, attend your partner, but I look forward to introducing you to my mate, shall we meet over dinner?"

"That sounds nice. I look forward to it." She turned and sprinted toward the base while ground crews looked at the shuttle. General Brodin seemed to be apologising for the torn door.

She moved through the halls as quickly as she could, finding medical by virtue of her memory.

Reset was wiring Remar into a series of drips and monitors.

"I thought you said he would be fine."

“He will be. We just need to flush the toxin from his system. That means fluids and plenty of monitoring. Don’t worry. He will be up and around tomorrow. Back to duty fitness in a week.”

Drahali tuned her new friend out as she went to hold Remar’s hand. “I am sorry about the tea. Maybe we should stick to fruit juice in the future.”

His face shifted until he was smiling. “I like tea. I think we will just stick with sealed containers from now on.”

With his lids closed, he still looked pale, but better than when he was convulsing behind the controls of the shuttle.

“That is a sound plan. You should rest. You look like hell.” She brushed the hair away from his forehead and pressed a kiss to it.

Reset tapped her on the shoulder and pointed toward the door. General Brodin was waiting for her.

“I am summoned.”

“General Brodin probably wants you to debrief. You will have to recount everything that we saw and did including when you used your talents.”

She patted his arm and said, “I will be back as soon as I can. Don’t go anywhere.”

He smiled. "Funny lady."

She was smiling when she joined General Brodin and let him take her to the debriefing room adjacent to his office.

* * * *

As soon as his partner was gone, Remar opened his eyes. They had been reset to their natural scarlet and he didn't want to scare Drahal.

Reset hissed and applied drops to them.

"Just keep up with the healing, Gralial, and I will recover."

"When are you going to tell her you have your telepathic abilities back?"

"How did you know?" He looked at her through eyes that were the red he had been born with.

"You knew that Brodin was there without opening your eyes. That is the big clue."

He sighed. "You know that I was altered so that those abilities would not work. It was dangerous or considered dangerous."

"I understand. Do you still have your blocking ability?" She was making notes on her data pad.

“Yes. Don’t worry. I will be back to full duty and then some as soon as we get the rest of this poison out of my system.”

“Yes, sir. Here we go. Hold still.”

As Reset repaired the acidic damage to his organs, he thanked whatever star watched over Drahali that she had stopped consuming her people’s food. It wasn’t comfortable for him to suffer through the healing, but her death would have torn a hole in his heart that nothing could have filled.

She now had a food tester whether she wanted one or not.

Chapter Eleven

The debriefing took hours. Every day, every incident was compared with the official reports that Remar had sent in. Brodin asked, delved and quizzed her on every event and every time she had used her talents.

It was exhausting.

Brodin had a snack and water brought in, but by the time they got to Remar being poisoned, Drahali was relieved. She went through selecting meals from the ration selection and her deciding to plunge into Alliance foods so that she would be able to manage social situations more easily. Remar asked her if she wanted tea, she declined and took water instead so that the acids present in the tea of her homeland wouldn't affect her taste buds.

“And you know the rest. I contacted the base, snivelling like an idiot when he started convulsing and Reset walked me through the emergency med kit.”

General Brodin bent his head and studied the data streams before nodding. “Yes, that’s everything. Would you like to see the home you will share with Remar?”

“Um, about that. I was told that I would be able to speak with Commander before I share anything with anyone. Matchmakers are the heart of Eorghani.”

He smiled. “He will be here within the hour. The Class One is on final approach.”

She smiled brilliantly. “Then I will stop by medical before I find the commissary. I think I need a little socializing.”

“Excellent idea. When he arrives, I will have him seek you out.” He smiled and inclined his head, her dismissal obvious.

“Thank you.” She nodded and left the room. Pausing to catch a staff member in the hall, she asked for directions to the commissary and he offered to show her. She waved him off and told him she needed to stop in medical first.

Entering medical, she came to a halt when Remar smiled at her entrance. Surrounding his blue eyes was a dark well of red. No white was visible. “What happened to your eyes?”

It was the reset. My eyes had been altered for the

comfort of those around me. Do they frighten you?

“No, but you look different...wait. Did I just hear you in my head?”

Yes, another part of the reset. My people deactivated my ability to read and project thoughts when I sprouted multiple mes.

She felt a light touch on her mind. “Can you stop that? It’s weird.”

Reset was nowhere to be found.

“Where is your physician?”

“She’s off having dinner. Are you hungry?” He walked toward her and she was craning her neck to keep eye contact with his altered orbs.

“Yes, I was coming to ask you the same.”

“Drahali, you are going to get a crick in your neck. I promise you can stare at my eyes later.” He turned her around and wrapped an arm around her waist.

“How are you feeling?”

“Much better. Just having you next to me again is making me feel much better.” He gave her a squeeze.

They walked quietly to the commissary and she was amazed at the array of food that was available, including a few of her favourites. She made her selections and carried her tray toward the seating area, smiling as

Harusk waved her over. He was sitting next to a lovely woman who seemed friendly enough.

Drahali sat across from the woman and Harusk introduced them. “Mayden, this is Drahali. Drahali, this is Mayden, also known as Past Tense.”

“Hello, Drahali. How are you enjoying life in the Sector Guard?”

“It has its moments.”

Remar sat next to her and their companions blinked at him in surprise.

Mayden exclaimed, “Remar, your eyes!”

“It’s a reset problem. All Virgoths have them. I had mine altered when I entered Alliance space so as not to scare small children,” he explained ruefully while settling in to eat his dinner.

Drahali took the hint and started to explore her selections. Conversation at the table turned to the house that Harusk was building and before she knew it, Drahali was volunteering to help. “I used to work on a lot of large projects.”

Mayden frowned as if she was loathe to let another woman strain herself.

Harusk put his hand over his wife’s. “Don’t worry about it, Mayden. Trust me on this. She can lift just about

anything she puts her mind to. I found out the hard way.”

Drahali laughed and Remar demanded to know what had gone on when he was unconscious.

Harusk was two thirds of the way through his tale of clinging frantically on top of the shuttle and having to push it down to the ground rather than lift it up when an Azon and another Terran came through the doors.

“Mayden, Harusk, good to see you. You would be Drahali?” The Azon extended his hand. “I am Hyder or Commander if you prefer. Would you care to come with me for a few minutes?”

She nodded and took his hand, smiling at Remar as she left him. “Back in a minute.”

Hyder led her to the centre of the base, a huge conservatory filled with flowers and trees. “Now, what can I do for you, Drahali?”

“My people depend on folk like you. Matchmakers. I need to know who my ideal match is.”

Hyder smiled and stroked her cheek with his fingers. “Remar, also known as Multiple Organism. I told him as much weeks ago.”

She blinked. “He didn’t tell me that.”

“He wanted you to get your own answers to put a cork in your doubt. Without a doubt, you and Remar are

complementary in the best of ways.” He chuckled at her expression and started her walking through the greenery again. “The first time I saw Helen in my dreams, I went into denial. There was no way I was going to pair myself with a woman from a new race just because she appeared to be compatible, but it turned out to be exactly what we both needed and now we are planning a family.”

“I still don’t understand how a person can be a guard and be a parent.”

“It isn’t easy, but each base has those who don’t leave it and are willing to act as nannies and babysitters. Lodgings are easy to expand and we have the best medical care in the Alliance. Give it some thought. Your base physician can suspend your cycles if you wish her to.”

“I will give it some thought.” She felt giddy. She wanted nothing more than to experiment with kissing again, but Remar was in the commissary.

“Have I rested your mind?” He was steering them back to the doors.

“Yes, thank you. I can at least tell my parents that I saw a matchmaker now. It is more important than you can imagine.”

He smiled and patted her hand. “I do understand. You

are not the first, nor the last, that I will have to speak to. Remar is a good man, you won't regret it."

She laughed. "I may occasionally regret it, but I will never undo it. That I promise you. Now, I believe I need to experience the variety of desserts available."

"Then let us not waste a minute." Hyder took her back to the commissary and Remar.

Her partner stood up as she approached and she grinned at him. "That settles that."

He looked warily from her to Hyder. "What is settled?"

"You are stuck with me, you red-eyed multiplier. Now, get down here for a minute." When he leaned close, she went up on her toes and she planted a sweet kiss on his lips in front of everyone in the dining area.

His red eyes almost pulsed when he drew back. "Is that a yes to being my partner?"

She sighed and stepped up on a chair so she could reach him. "Yes." She kissed him again and this time, his arms came around her, supporting her as she dangled in the air. Clearing throats and laughter broke them up.

Hanging from his embrace, she flushed and started to glow, causing more giggles and exclamations throughout the room. "That's enough for now, I think. What's for

dessert?”

Remar ruefully set her down and went to make some selections for her.

She watched him move with open fascination. Finally, she was going to have a man of her own and he was just as thrilled with her. This was going to be interesting.

When he returned, the six of them talked shop, about the vids that were being requested for the Alliance Archives and what kind of poses they wanted to be in.

The Sector Guard was getting its own instalment in the history of the Alliance and that history now included Drahali.

Looking around her, she couldn't help herself—she glowed. She was gaining friends, had a job, was making money and now had the possibility of love on her doorstep. Her mother would never believe her.

Epilogue

Nrahali Delnin followed the directions on the package and gathered her family. At her touch, a hologram sprang to life and stood in front of them. The male was obviously of Dhema, but he wore the same type of suit that Multi had worn when he came for their daughter.

“Delnin family. I am Might of the Sector Guard Base Teklan. The following clip is a document that is filed in the Alliance Archive and it displays all of the Guardsmen who have performed admirably in the line of duty. Grav and Multi thought you would enjoy the display. They look forward to visiting you soon.”

They watched as couples were displayed. Some wearing masks, but all in uniforms, stood in their formal room.

The moment that Drahali was displayed with Multi's arm around her waist, Nrahali cried. Her daughter was proud, head high and chin up. Her long hair flowed loose

to her waist and while the bronze uniform did not leave much to the imagination, Multi's contrasting uniform made them a striking couple.

Hestin swallowed, "Do you think they are...you know...a couple?"

Nrahali remembered the look in Multi's eyes when he first saw her little girl. "If they are not, it is not for his lack of trying."

Her husband looked resigned and as she froze the display so she could look at her daughter's face. She whispered, "It was the best thing for her."

He kissed her cheek. "I know, but it is still hard. She is my little girl."

"And now she is a hero. She can be both. You have to let her be both."

He sighed and tilted his head to look at the hologram. "She is definitely a woman now. I just wish it wasn't on display."

"Better on display than wasted in manual labour. I could not be more proud. She has my eyes after all."

Her husband squeezed her waist, "I just wish she didn't have so much of your figure. Multi must have quite the hard time keeping his mind on the job."

She blushed. "Compliments like that will get you

everywhere.”

Even though the hologram was paused, Nrahali could have sworn that her daughter just winked.

Author's Note

Thank you for reading this little story, *Multiple Organisms*. The title tickled me from day one and I love to mislead my readers when it comes to titles.

In this book, we met characters from my first Champions book *Arena Station*, as well as the good folk from *Freak Factor* and *Past Tense*.

Hard Hearted's main characters showed up and offered what help they could. All in all, a fun romp through the Sector Guard.

Drahali was an interesting character for me to write. She isn't completely tech-savvy and that is a hard quality for me to put down on the page. Remar was easy and had issues that echoed his partner's, a strange situation.

Thanks again for joining the Sector Guard.

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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.