

SHAKEN AND STIRRED



Sector Guard 19

Viola Grace

Tosha wanted a nice day off with her cousin, but a homicidal bug wave forces her to expose her talent to the others on her tour. Before her government can lock her up, she is swept off by a tornado and whisked into the stars. Joining the Sector Guard had never been an option, but now it was her only choice. Her name is changed to Shake and her first assignment is a doozy. With Vortex at her side, she accepts the emergency assignment and finds herself facing a proven killer who has no problem adding her to the roster.

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Copyright © 2011 Viola Grace
ISBN: 978-1-55487-858-1
Cover art by Martine Jardin

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Published by Devine Destinies
An imprint of eXtasy Books
Look for us online at:
www.devinedestinies.com

Shaken and Stirred
Sector Guard Book 19

By

Viola Grace

Chapter One

Tosha was breathing heavily as she tried to keep up with her cousin as they brought up the rear of the tour group.

“Whose idea was this anyway?” She was fighting to keep a cheerful attitude while the instruments of a horrific death chased them across the plains.

Alara grinned and kept her speed up. “I think I said we should do something different for a weekend.”

Tosha leapt over a shrub and staggered as she landed. “I think we could have just painted our hair green.”

Alara barked a laugh. “It’s already green.”

“See, huge timesaver.”

Tosha could hear the insects chittering as they pursued the Dalpha Moon tour group. It had been a good idea to tour the moon in the offseason, but there was a reason that most tourists didn’t go into the open wastes. Once a year, for one day, flesh-eating beetles hatched. Today was that day.

A light whirring noise was approaching from above. Tosha kept running, no time for watching to see if the

beetles had learned to fly.

A cliff face was looming in front of her, the rest of their tour group were milling against it like stunned sheep.

Tosha stopped and let her cousin run past her. She turned and faced the field of writhing beetle bodies. They were closing in, less than three hundred meters between them and her. The whirring noise sounded again and Tosha watched a tornado touch down and violently throw the bugs in another direction.

It was good but not good enough. Tosha concentrated and the ground beneath her feet started to shake. A fissure opened in the ground at her feet and ran the width of the field. It widened to a space two meters wide and she sighed in relief.

The bugs that got past the whirlwind ran until they hit the fissure and then they tipped into oblivion.

Alara's hand on her shoulder made her whirl in shock. "Oh, Tosha. I am so sorry."

Tosha patted her cousin's hand. "It's all right. It was time that someone knew. I am sure that life in the labs won't be so bad."

"Maybe the tour group won't report you." Alara's hope was touching.

Tosha looked to the crowd of folks who were watching her with a combination of relief and horror. Talents were welcome on Dalpha, but only if they gave themselves over to the government for experimentation. With this many witnesses, Tosha was only going to have one destiny ahead of her. Life in the lab. Her hidden talent for shifting a planet's crust was now out in the open.

The whirring windstorm lifted off and did the most peculiar thing. It pressed against the wall of the cliff and began to throw dirt and debris from inside the cliff face outward. It was making them a pathway.

With the beetles finally turning around to raid their normal food sources, having lost half their number to the fissure, Tosha and Alara joined the crowd waiting until the wafting air of the higher reaches came through the opening.

None of the previously friendly tourists was willing to speak to her, so Tosha grimly faced her fate as soon as they reached the shuttle and returned to Dalpha.

The whirling windstorm was off to one side, humming idly as it spun. It was not a force of nature but rather one of will. Tosha could tell.

Alara smiled at Tosha. "I think the tornado has a crush on you."

She looked at her cousin and tried to determine if the stress had cracked her mind. "You have to be kidding."

"No, I am not. I called ahead."

Alara J'tak's cryptic words would not make sense to the other tourists waiting to get on the shuttle, but Tosha knew what she meant. "You can't be serious."

"Yes, I can. I think you should be standing ten feet to the left, however. Don't worry, I will see you soon." Alara smiled as Tosha started backing away from her.

Tosha knew that she was not the only talent in the family, but for Alara to go on a limb for her was touching. She would be questioned, but she was ready for it, the surety blazed in her eyes.

The moment she was clear of the crowd, the mysterious whirlwind started moving. Tosha closed her eyes as the wind threw grit and dirt into the air. She lost her breath for a moment before two strong arms lifted her in the air. She opened her eyes in surprise to see a man in the centre of the storm.

"Hello." It was silly, but there was nothing else to say as his solid blue eyes smiled down at her.

"Greetings. Hold tight, we are going airborne."

She held perfectly still as the whirling surrounded them. With her eyes focussed on her rescuer, she kept

herself calm as they passed above the shuttle and into the hills beyond. When they touched down, she was able to breathe again.

Tosha was trembling uncontrollably. “That was...”

He chuckled. “You get used to it. I am Vortex. May I confirm your name?”

“Tosha C’sar. Thank you, but where are you taking me?”

He let out a sharp whistle and a ship appeared in front of them. A shuttle with sleek and graceful lines gleaming in the daylight.

“I am taking you to safety. Your cousin sent an urgent message to the Sector Guard requesting that someone be here today. She was vague, but our own seers confirmed that something would happen here to benefit Teklan base. Here you are.”

The shuttle opened at Vortex’s approach. She was a little surprised to find herself enjoying the novel sensation of being carried. He placed her gently in the nav station and she buckled in out of reflex.

“Not that I am not grateful, but what the hell is going on here?” She turned and faced him.

He laughed as he struck a few keys to start the atmospheric action of the shuttle. They lifted off with no

sound and he filled her in. “You are being invited to join the Sector Guard. But, given the Dalpha propensity for caging its talents, we thought to get to you before they did.”

“What of my cousin?” Their height was now such that she could see the tour shuttle on the ground. One lone figure staring up at the sky with patience.

“She will be seen to but through other channels.” Vortex banked sharply and struck a few toggles. “We are going to stealth now. It makes the ship rather twitchy, but she can handle it.”

Tosha scowled, “What do you mean *other channels*?”

“I don’t know. It is what I was told. You don’t need to worry about her. She will be alive and well in no time. You simply need to have a little trust.”

Her frown increased in severity. “How am I supposed to trust someone I just met?”

“I suppose you will just have to take it on faith.” He hit the thrusters and they shot past the incoming law enforcement.

Her ire died in that moment, fear of the labs in the forefront. She held her breath as they passed those who wanted to shackle her in a cell.

As she watched the stream of ships coursing from the

planet to the moon, she made a decision. “Faith is good. I will take this on faith.”

Vortex chuckled and slammed the thrusters into high gear. “I will take it.”

Chapter Two

The jump was unsettling to say the least. On the ground, Tosha's talent would have gone wild, here, she throttled it back to keep the shuttle in one piece.

Her breathing was audible. The meditation that her mother had walked her through was coming in handy.

"Are you all right?"

"Just trying not to shake the shuttle apart. I have flown in a shuttle plenty of times but never jumped before." Her hands gradually unclenched on the harness and she relaxed into the seat.

"Well, breathe deep. The next jump is in twelve seconds." Vortex's sure hands moved swiftly on the controls and Tosha noticed the halo that crowned his head start to flash.

Twelve seconds later the light was constant and she concentrated on staring at her host as space folded around them.

She took in the width of his jaw, that hypnotizing

curve to his lips and the vibrancy of his eyes as he moved them from jump point to jump point. The broad swath of his shoulders was rather nice as well. She had always been a sucker for broad shoulders.

Blushing, she looked out the view screen before he could catch her staring. "Is saving damsels from their governments your regular line of work?"

Vortex laughed. "You are my first damsel. Normally, I simply arrest and detain. I was working for the Nyal Imperium for years before one of my superiors suggested I join the Guard."

"What species are you?" He didn't resemble any of the races she had seen before.

"A Nyal mix. My mother was a noble and my father was a visiting Oshanic delegate. She went into heat and he cooled her off."

She laughed out loud before covering her mouth.

"It's all right, you can laugh, it is a family joke. My mother had herself altered for life under the sea and she moved to Oshanic to have a family. I was born of two worlds and mastered waterspouts when I was a child." His grin invited her to share in his memories.

"And from there you entered service?"

"After my time as an Oshanic peacekeeper, yes. There

is nothing water breathers hate more than being bound up in an air spout.”

“I can see how that would be a problem.” It was hard not to smile, but she thought of Alara and her grin faded. She went uncharacteristically silent. Not knowing exactly what going to the lab entailed was the most horrible part of it. Alara may be fine, but they may be torturing her for information while Tosha was busy flirting with her rescuer.

He seemed to be tuned into her thoughts. “She will be fine. She promised us she would be fine and knew that you wouldn’t be if you stayed.”

“How did you know I was thinking about Alara?”

“Oshanics are telepathic and I got the empathy portion of that. You were putting out unhappy and guilty vibes.” He looked at her with those incredibly blue eyes and her heart skipped a beat. He smiled. “I felt that, too. I should pick up damsels more often.”

A blush fired her cheeks as she was caught lusting after the man next to her. “I am sure it’s a worthy hobby.”

He flashed slightly pointed teeth and flipped the com on. “Teklan base, this is Vortex. I am bringing in the new recruit.”

“Vortex, glad you made it back. Dalpha is up in arms.

We were afraid they had intercepted you.” The voice was cheerful.

“Nope. We are fine.”

“Excellent. Plant yourself on a pad, you have your choice.”

“Coming in.” He disconnected the link and smiled. “We check in every time, or the guns on the satellites train on the incoming ship. No one in their right mind sneaks up on a Guard base.”

The world beneath them looked pleasant enough, but the base loomed ominously to Tosha’s perceptions.

She replayed the conversation in her thoughts. “Wait. Recruit?”

He chuckled. “I will fill you in when we land.”

That sentence sent her mind into another vein entirely. His laughter was embarrassing, but it was an effective distraction. She tried to think of bland sand and not the strangely addictive feel of being in his arms. Her hormones needed to get under control, or she would never be able to look Vortex in the eyes again.

Tosha dug her nails into her palms when nothing else was working. The pain calmed her and she was able to absorb the reality of being on a Guard base.

There was a pleasant hum of activity on the base.

Ground crews attended to a small gathering of shuttles and a deliberate intensity was everywhere.

Small clusters of houses with quaint yards bracketed the base. “It looks cozy.”

“I am glad you think so. You are the newest recruit for the Sector Guard.” Vortex swung free of his seat and extended a hand to her.

“Do I get a say in this?” She let him help her to her feet.

“Yes. We have removed you from harm’s way, but if you want the ability and the free reign of your talent, this is really your only outlet. Like it or not, your talent is dangerous.”

Tosha opened and closed her mouth before she nodded in agreement. “I will hear you out.”

“Not me. I am merely here to keep you safe. Might will assess and convince you. Have you met any Dhemons before?”

“Yes. A nice family came to Dalpha on vacation once. Lovely colours in their skin.”

The door to the shuttle opened and they walked into reddening sunlight. She kept a tight grip on Vortex as she squinted into the sunset. “Nice sunset.”

He looked a little surprised. “Everything you think

just pops right out of your mouth, doesn't it?"

"It is one of my least endearing qualities." She grinned. "Alara always tells me I have no filter at all."

They headed into the large building that seemed to be headquarters. "So, I was correct when I saw you two quipping as you ran from the beetles?"

"Quipping is a polite term, but yes."

"I see. Do you plan to continue this habit?"

She grinned and swung their joined hands lightly. "As long as I can."

"I don't know what to say about that. This is Might's office. You can also address him as General Brodin if you wish."

The door swung open and a very tense Dhemon was on the other side. "Tosha C'sar, I presume."

"Grumpy Dhemon, I presume."

He paused and grinned for a moment. "I need to attend to an assignment, but I am asking you if you will join the Sector Guard."

She smiled, even her eyes narrowed with enjoyment. "What about the wooing, the convincing?"

"Time is of the essence. You have seen Vortex in action, would you object to partnering with him for the sake of your training and introduction?"

Tosha glanced over at Vortex. He was standing next to her with an innocent expression on his face.

“Um, what would training entail?”

“A complete shakedown of your talents on a safe section of Teklan, uniform fittings, housing and checking you out on all base craft. After that, you will be able to head out on assignments with other teams, helping them to apprehend those who try to run from the laws of their own worlds.” Might gave her an encouraging smile.

Tosha stood for five seconds, not saying a word. The men began to fidget after another ten had passed.

“Fine. Where can I grab a shower? I am a little choked with dust from the sprint across the sand and the appearance of a bug-flinging whirlwind.” She patted her shirt and the puff of dust made Vortex smile.

“Is that a yes?” Her soon-to-be partner was smiling.

Might looked attentive and his pointed ears were almost perked.

“That is a yes.”

Relief filled both men and Might lunged forward to kiss her on the cheek. “Welcome to the Sector Guard, I will see you upon my return.”

He was out the door in an instant, leaving her staring at her new partner. “So...shower?”

Chapter Three

The water coursed over her face and the dust of her day swirled down the drain. She called out, “So, where is Might off to in such a hurry?”

The voice came from the other side of the curtain. “We don’t share assignment information unless we are on the same assignment. Add to that the fact that he is the boss and he can pretty much go where he wishes.”

She chuckled and rinsed her hair before reaching for the shampoo. “I suppose it is a perk of his position.”

Years of casual dating and intimate situations as well as the Dalphic attitude that the body was completely natural gave her a distinct lack of inhibition that had surprised Vortex when she stripped in the bedroom and calmly walked naked to the shower.

He had been hovering in the doorway while she tested the temperature, but as soon as she was behind the curtain, he had come closer.

She lathered up her hair and asked, "So, how long have you been with the Guard?"

"Two years. I started on Station 13 and was sent here after I was trained and pronounced ready for a partner by Commander."

"A commander has to pronounce you ready for a partner?" She got some soap in her eyes and quickly rinsed it away.

"Yes. We go into highly charged situations and we have to depend on the partners we are with. Each of the Guard units is a pair, one male, one female and pronounced compatible by Commander."

With her head clean, she washed out the soap and then scrubbed the rest of her body from top to toe.

"I see. Well, that works out well for the men then, doesn't it?"

"Usually, but they have a devoted attitude to their partners. A male member of the Sector Guard will do anything for his female."

She stuck her arm out, "Towel, please." When the fluffy fabric was placed in her hand, she smiled and said. "You were right. They really will do anything."

Tosha wrapped the towel around her and swept back the curtain, looking up at Vortex in mild surprise. He held

another towel out to her and she used it on her hair while staring into his fascinatingly blue eyes.

He might have been trying to stare her down, but all she thought was, “Pretty.”

Even without the talent of empathy, she was able to feel the heat coming from his body through his suit.

“You really aren’t intimidated by me, are you?” Vortex’s lips twisted into a rueful smile.

“No, not particularly. While you rule the wind, I rule the earth and you have to come down sometime.” She bounced up and down on her toes near him but not touching.

He paused and then laughed. “You have a point.”

“Good, me and my point need to dry off and get dressed. This house is quite nice, is that a pool out back?” It hadn’t taken a genius to figure out that he had brought her back to his place. The covered building with the marks of humidity on the windows was a dead giveaway.

“It is. You don’t seem upset.”

“Why would I be? There is no obligation for me to do anything. I am merely here to try to get some training with this freaking talent and from there, I may actually do some good with it. Now, where can I find some clothing, Vortex?”

He blinked in surprise. “Um, you are correct, of course, and when we are not on duty, you can call me Micix or Mix for short.”

“Mix then. Clothing?” Her smile was beatific.

“Right. This way.” He led her out of the bathing room and into a bedroom that was pleasantly if generically appointed. “This is the guest room.”

She smiled at his awkwardness. “Thank you.”

“The clothing is in the wardrobe. The suits stretch to fit.” He was babbling and she thought it was the cutest thing.

“Fine. Now either back out or stay to watch, but either way, this towel is coming off.” Tosha bit her lip as he backed out of the room and closed the door. She supposed that he had had enough for the day.

Laughter welled up and she opened the wardrobe to find a uniform that was the same pale grey as Vortex’s. Oh goody, they would be dressing as a matched set.

The suit snugged against her every curve. The mirror on the inside of the wardrobe showed her the vee of flesh that disappeared as she sealed the suit right to the collar. A keyhole in a diamond pattern exposed her cleavage. She liked it.

There were boots as well in a slightly darker shade of

grey. They were an almost perfect fit.

The only downer to her look was her hair and as soon as she found a hairbrush, she tackled it. Having Vortex as a partner was going to be hard on her hair. Sighing, she braided her damp hair into an inverted braid that tied the loose ends and tucked them back against her skull. A dig around the dressing table didn't turn up any hair fixatives, so she sighed and left the room.

“Do you have any generic alcohol on hand? And a citrus fruit?”

Mix was looking at her curiously. “Yes. Why?”

“I need to spray my hair. With your whirlwinds, I need to turn this hair into a helmet.” Tosha rummaged in the kitchen and started to look through the cupboards.

He disappeared for a moment and then returned to the kitchen with a bottle from the med kit. “Is this good?”

“Yes. Do you have a spray bottle?”

“I think so. There is fruit in the fridge.”

Smiling, she put a pot on the stove and added water to it. A quick search of the fridge brought the citrus to her hand. “You shouldn't keep your citrus in the fridge.”

“I am often gone, so I can't guarantee that my fruit will be eaten before it goes bad, so I keep everything in there.” He came forward and peered over her shoulder.

“What are you doing?”

“I am making a hairspray. It will lighten my hair a little, but it will do the job.” She sliced the citrus into thin layers and dropped them into the gently bubbling water.

“How do you know how to do that?”

She chuckled. “You don’t really know anything about me, do you? I worked at a bath and aromatherapy shop. I made the hair products, lotions and soaps. This is right in my wheelhouse.”

“We could just get some supplies from the base.”

“It’s more fun this way.” She stirred the pot and smiled at the scent wafting up from the liquid.

“What do you do with it now?”

“I wait for half of it to boil off. At that point, I will strain off the fruit and let it cool. Then I will add the alcohol and fruit solution in the spray bottle and then spritz my head with it. It should lock my hair into place quite nicely.”

“Bizarre. What will you tell me about yourself? We have some time.” He hopped up on the counter and watched her work.

She looked up at him. “Are you sure?”

“Anything you are willing to tell.”

She stirred the pot and mulled over what to tell him.

With an evil grin, she started. “I lost my virginity on my eighteenth birthday. His name was Erich and I had a lot of fun that night...”

Chapter Four

“...and then when I turned twenty-eight, I had my first encounter under a waterfall. It was slippery, but rocks can be quite a good support mechanism.”

She finished straining the liquid and spared a glance to Mix. His hands were gripping the counter so tightly she thought it was going to crack.

“Is that the kind of information you had in mind?”

It took him three tries to speak. “You certainly had an active social life.”

“Dalphic women do enjoy trying potentials on for size. Despite the attitude toward talents, my people are fairly socially relaxed.” The thick syrup was tantalizing, but it would have to cool for at least half an hour.

“I can see that.”

“Have I scared you off yet?” She washed her hands and chortled.

“I am a little spooked, but I am not stampeding.” He

sighed. “Despite the lack of clothing in the cities under the water, we actually are quite straight-laced.”

She laughed. “This is going to be a little awkward for you then.”

He hopped off the counter and smiled. “I will deal with it. I am adaptable. Would you care for some tea?”

“Do you have anything stronger? I am used to a little more of a shot than an average tea.”

“For something more powerful, you would need to come with me to the commissary. Are you up for it?”

She grinned. “This uniform doesn’t leave much to the imagination but sure.”

They exited the house and walked down the neat sidewalk toward the base. There were lights lining the pathway, which made navigating the night easier. “You know, I think I could use a bit of food as well.”

“Good thing we are going to the commissary then. They keep a variety of foods from a selected group of planets designed to appeal to most of the species on base. Of course, a few have special rations, but they get them from the Alliance supply depot.” He held each door open for her if it didn’t open on its own. It was a sweet touch that she enjoyed.

“The base seems quieter now.”

“All the other Guardsmen are off on assignment. It is simply the support staff and us. There isn’t even a medical officer to do your intake.” He shepherded her down the halls.

“I see. Is that normal?”

“That they are all gone? No. That you would be given a full medical, yes.”

“Huh. Well, it has been a while since my last physical. When will the medical officer be back?”

“Not a clue. Whenever the assignment is over, I suppose.” His vagueness was not lost on her. Wherever the entire base complement was, he knew all about it.

The scent of food made her mouth water and she quickened her step. She loaded her tray with vegetables and a few of the foods that seemed familiar. The caf was steaming and calling her name, when she took a seat, the first sip was heaven. “That’s better. I think I would go nuts if it wasn’t for this stuff.”

Mix shuddered delicately. “I don’t know how you can drink that stuff.”

“It’s an acquired taste.” She grinned. “I am just relieved that someone here drinks it. I could drink tea, but this is far more satisfying.”

Mix’s food consisted of a series of fish and some

strange substances that Tosha couldn't identify and she wasn't sure she wanted to.

She took a few bites of her meal and then asked, "So, what is this assignment everyone is on?"

"I don't know. I am not privy to assignments I am not on."

There was an evasive tone to his voice and Tosha narrowed her gaze for a moment. "I see."

"When you go on assignment, you will understand. It is all consuming and you tend to be exposed to privileged information that cannot be shared. This is a highly secretive organization for people who spend their active lives in the public eye. It is only back here on Teklan or other Guard bases that we can be with those who truly understand what we go through." He ate steadily but with deliberation, occasionally flicking his gaze to meet hers.

She ate quietly for a few seconds. "So what did you do before you joined the Guard?"

"I worked on Surath in law enforcement. A Guard recruiter came to my home and offered me a position on Station 13. I spent a year working with Haunt and the others in a law-enforcement capacity before being assigned here to Teklan two months ago."

"Is it fun?" She blushed when she realized it sounded

like a teen girl asking to go shopping.

He grinned. "It can be. Sometimes, those who commit the crimes deserve our pity and not our censure though."

"That makes sense. I certainly hadn't committed a crime by Alliance standards, but by the laws of Dalpha, I had engaged in an unforgivable act by being a talent." She finished her greens and worked on the sandwich.

"This is true. None of our assignments will ever be in the Dalpha sector. They have banned the Sector Guard from their space and we are nothing if not law abiding."

The sneaky look crossed his features and he carefully blanked his face when he caught her staring.

"Something is up, isn't it?"

"I have no idea. I am not privy to that information." He was back to his business-like face.

She took the hint that the topic was closed.

With her first cup of caf gone, she retrieved her second and a glass of water. Sitting back in her chair, she sipped at her caf. The sun had fully set as she watched through the windows. "What is on the agenda for tomorrow?"

"A series of restriction fields have been set up on the far side of the planet. We will head there in the morning. For tonight, I will give you a short tour of the facility and

then we will adjourn to our home.”

Her lips twisted. “Our home?”

“Partners, remember?” He smiled.

She shook her head. “I remember, but that doesn’t mean I won’t give you a hard time about it.”

“Fair enough. Are you ready to go?”

Tosha sighed and sipped her water. “I suppose.” Her yawn caught her by surprise.

He grinned. “It has been a long day for you, what with being hunted by your own kind and all.”

She got to her feet. “Don’t forget the beetles. If that tourist hadn’t kicked that rock, we never would have been privy to the emergence. He cracked their little nesting cave and instead of eating most of their siblings, they came after us. It wasn’t a fun day.”

He laughed and placed her hand on his forearm. “I promise Teklan has no bugs of that variety. We will be quite safe while you do your best to shake the surface tomorrow.”

They walked through the base and he pointed out medical, refreshed her on Might’s offices and then they cruised past administration. His arm was cool under her palm and she noted the difference in body temperature.

“Are you always so cool?”

His lips twitched. "That was a full five minutes before you spoke. Well done."

She sighed. "Answer please."

"I heat up when I am creating a vortex. The cooler body is Oshanic standard." He coloured a little, his skin darkening as she watched.

She smiled. It was nice that she could throw him off a little. "By that clanking noise, I am guessing we are near the gym."

"Yes. You can use it anytime you are on base. We have to keep in good physical condition to carry out our assignments."

She peeked around the corner and winked at a few of the male support staff who were straining in the confines of the machines and a few winked back. A hand on her neck hauled her out of the gym and back into the hall. "Spoilsport."

"Are you going to flirt your way through the base?" His grumbling finally cracked her good humour.

"I may flirt, but I don't screw strangers. Each man I was with I dated for more than six months. They just weren't the right fit."

At his scandalized look, she laughed. "Not like that. Our lives weren't compatible. A few of them came close,

but though I felt deep affection for them at the time, I didn't like them. The stress of being judged and nitpicked got to me with some of them. With others, we simply drifted apart."

They left the calm air of the base and stepped into the night once again. "I think it was the lack of interest in the men I had been dating that finally ground my social excursions to a halt. There ceased to be a point to all of the stresses involved."

Mix's skin heated under her palm. "I can see how that would be a problem. I had an arranged marriage in my own life. Neither of us wanted to go through with it, so she ran off with her lover and left me to explain it to our families. I got sympathy and our engagement was dissolved. It was at that point that I left my home and engaged in a public career."

"Public?"

"I had been a fairly well-kept secret among the Oshanic."

They were at the door to the house. He bowed to her and smiled. "I have to take a swim. Feel free to get some rest. The morning will come soon enough."

Bemused, she entered the house and returned to work on her hairspray. Teklan really needed a boutique of some

kind. She started to smile. A project for her time off. She had always wanted her own shop.

Chapter Five

In the middle of the night, Tosha sat straight up with her body coated with sweat and her heart pounding. In her dreams, Alara was screaming for her help and she was trapped on an island without a way to reach her.

Tosha flung the covers back and draped a sheet over herself to cover up. Micix was too twitchy for her to keep flaunting her nudity. It wasn't nice or fair to tease him.

She pattered out the door and looked to the master bedroom. The door was ajar and even in the dim light, she could see the pristine bedding. He hadn't come inside.

The back door opened soundlessly under her hand and she walked out to the covered pool. It was larger than it appeared from inside the house. She crept outside and looked into the dimly lit water. If she squinted, she could see him twisting slowly under the water.

The sheet she was wearing covered her loosely, so she took pains to hold the fabric clear of the water as she took

a seat on the edge of the pool. While dangling her legs in the water was tempting, this was his private environment and she didn't want to intrude.

It was soothing to watch him swimming slowly under the surface. The pool was deep, at least fifteen feet on either end. Her stomach gave a nervous shimmy as she looked into the depths—swimming had never been her strong suit.

As if her nerves had made it to him via his empathy, Micix turned his head to look at her and he rapidly swam to the surface, breaching in front of her.

“Tosha, what brings you out here?”

“I had a nightmare. I was going to wake you up and chatter incessantly to you, but you weren't there.” She was having a hard time looking at his face. Gills rode the sides of his neck that were normally covered by the uniform.

“Are you all right?” His concerned voice snapped her out of her dazed realization that she was partnered with a man who could breathe water.

“I am fine. A little shaken. It wasn't a fun dream.” She rubbed her forehead and blinked as Micix whooshed out of the water completely nude and sat next to her.

“Do you want to tell me about it?” His hair dripped

slowly onto the broad slope of his shoulders and down the well-defined muscles that were normally hidden by the suit.

She took in a shaky breath and sighed. "I hear Alara screaming. I try to run to her, but I am trapped on an island. Black space is between us and nothing I do can cross that void. Are you sure she will be all right?"

"She told us what needed to be done. We are doing it."

"Why can't you tell me?" Tosha was near tears. She hated being helpless."

He sighed. "Tosha, I know this is hard on you, but your cousin was very specific. You can't know what is going on or the whole plan will fall apart."

Fat, hot tears broke free and ran down her face. "That sounds like Alara. She could always see the big picture even when I wanted to push things into place."

He sat next to her in silence and took her hand. The warmth of his skin was back. They sat in silence until the sun warmed the glass and dawn came knocking.

Her voice was hoarse when she asked him, "Did you get any sleep?"

"I don't always need sleep. A good night in the pool works just as well." He stood and she blushed as her gaze

was drawn to his endowments.

“Shall we get the day started? I am feeling the urge to shake some plates.” She let him pull her to her feet as he slipped his uniform back on. Internally, she whined in disappointment as all those muscles went back under the pale grey suit, but externally, she tried to keep herself calm.

“Back to the house with you. We need to get you dressed and stuffed full of breakfast before you get shaking.” His arm around her shoulders felt right after the hours he had spent at her side.

She carefully arranged her sheet so he wouldn't step on it and left the pool house together in the bright light of morning.

Echoes of unease still ran through her when she thought of Alara, but if her cousin had given those instructions, she had a plan. Tosha would have to trust that Alara knew what she was doing and let fate decide for both of them.

“Back into the uniform?”

“Yes. Back into the uniform. I don't like it either. Your uniform fits far too well.” His low grumble did wonders for her mood.

She laughed and retrieved her suit from the foot of her

bed. In under a minute she had it on under her sheet and he was watching in surprise.

“Where did you learn to do that?”

“I was a teenage girl sharing a room with a younger sister. I can change clothing without an inch showing any time I wish.” She laughed at his consternation. The sheet slid to the floor and she quickly sealed the suit so that only the keyhole neckline exposed flesh.

Mix was staring at her chest with a frustrated look.

“Yes?”

“I didn’t notice how much your...assets were exposed. I believe I will put in a note to Fixer. The next batch should be more circumspect.” He was staring straight down her cleavage.

Snorting, she slapped one hand over the exposed area. “This is just fine. I am going to point out that most men will not be seeing me from this vantage point.”

He opened and closed his mouth a few times before he turned and muttered, “I will let you fix your hair.”

She was going to give him a nasty retort, but she caught sight of herself in the mirror. Bed head had taken over. She sat, brushed her hair out and then re-wove it into a tight cap with no loose ends.

Her hairspray was still in the kitchen, so she applied it

while leaning over the sink. “Why do you have a kitchen if you eat at the base?”

“I have never had a reason to stay home.” He was sitting on the stool at the kitchen counter.

She sighed and spritzed her concoction on her head. The alcohol carried the scent of citrus as it evaporated and her hair locked together. “There we go. Nothing you can do is going to shake this hair.”

Mix smiled. “Is that a challenge?”

Tosha narrowed her eyes, “No. I just hate running around with my hair looking like a haystack with bugs trapped in it.”

“Too bad. It could have been fun. Are you ready for breakfast?” He got to his feet and held his hand out.

She rinsed the spray off her hands and extended her slender fingers to him. “Fine. Let’s go.”

“With that resounding invitation, how could any man resist your charms?” He grunted obligingly as she elbowed him in the ribs.

The base was buzzing with activity that morning. Shuttles with supplies were landing, carpentry was going on somewhere in the distance and a general hum of purpose was everywhere Tosha looked. It seemed the sleepy base of her first night was a thing of the past.

“They certainly do get up early around here.”

“It has become a sort of challenge to get as much work finished while Might is gone as they can. He is an excellent administrator and the staff appreciate it.” Mix held her close as an automated dolly swung near their path.

“How many other Guardsmen are usually here?” It seemed surreal that they were the only two.

“Well, Might, Finder, Frost, Past Tense, Midnight, Mist and Reset, so far. Oh, and Multiple Organisms with his partner, Gravity. It is a fairly well-stocked base.”

“Is that normal? That the base would have that many talents on it, I mean.”

“Yes. Ideally, there should be ten pairs of partners to each base, but they are trying to get a working level on each base.”

He opened each door for her with a casual ease that made her smile. It was definitely something she could get used to.

“So, what will we do after breakfast?” After each door, she re-joined him with a hand on his arm.

His solid blue eyes twinkled. “My dear, I want you to shake things up on the other side of the world.”

Chapter Six

“When did you have time to set this all up?” They were flying over a battery of tectonic-absorption stations.

“Two months ago when Alara sent the message. She was very specific about your needs.”

There it was again, her cousin’s hand guiding her life. In this case, Tosha was pleased. She would be able to let her talent rip on a huge scale, something that would not have been possible back home.

“How did you get your hands on this tech? I thought it was all restricted.”

He laughed at that. “The Sector Guard has been responsible for the majority of the new technology of this nature. It is the rules of the Alliance that restrict it. We simply get to be the testing ground.”

He settled their shuttle on a slab of rock surrounded by the absorbers.

“That is a little much, isn’t it?”

“We want to be able to get home in the same shuttle we came in. If your talent gets out of hand, I can only carry you so far.” He unlatched a chest at the back of the shuttle and withdrew a series of wires with connectors on them.

“What is that?”

“A monitor rig. You will wear it and when your talent is active, it will record all emanations and origins of your focus. It isn’t invasive. You can put it on over your suit.”

She eyed the tangle. “Can you help me with that?”

“Of course. Hands out at your sides. This will only take a minute.” He draped the tangle of cables over one of her outstretched arms and went to work.

She was wired up in a matter of moments, none of the attachments caused her any pain and she still had a free range of movement. It wasn’t too bad at all.

“What do you want to see first?”

He looked as if he wanted to say something inappropriate, but instead, he gestured to the open plain beyond them. “Whatever suits your fancy once you clear the buffers. This is your moment to let your talent out. Enjoy it.”

Tosha took a few steps away from the shuttle, turned to watch him shoo her onward and then she started a slow

sprint that turned into a full run with cartwheels as she picked up speed. Her school gymnastics came out as she flipped, twisted and spun into the centre of the plain.

Tosha looked back at Mix in the shuttle and she started to shake the ground she stood on. Her thoughts began to play her favourite songs and she waved her hands in the air, cutting swaths in the ground as she began to sing along.

The ground trembled, a few volcanoes shot up when she called them and in general, she had a wonderful time. Her muscles were humming pleasantly when she finished turning the plain into a maze of broken stone, new hills and steaming craters.

Her walk back to the shuttle took considerably longer than her trip out, but she did what she could to heal the marks she had made as she walked. The volcanoes ceased their spewing, the fissures sealed up and fine tremors in the ground turned the craters into more gentle slopes.

She was quite pleased with her efforts. The position of the sun told her she had been at it for hours.

Mix sat on the steps of the shuttle with his head propped in his hands like a six-year-old. When she got within twenty feet, he stood up and started clapping madly. "That was amazing."

She gave him a curtsy and a tired smile. "Thank you. That was a lot of fun."

He helped her remove the wires and sensors, folding them carefully and replacing them in the case. "I can tell. The absorbers were having quite the time keeping the impact of your frolics under control."

Free of the wires, she stretched and twisted to get her muscles to unclench.

"There is a transmission from Morganti that we need to take. You can unclench on the way." He ushered her into the shuttle and closed the door behind her.

She yawned and plopped into the navigator's chair. "What kind of transmission?"

"I don't know yet. I only know it is encoded and we have to be verified before it will load the link to Relay." He moved quickly and lifted them from the safe surface of the buffered zone without delay.

"Who is Relay?"

"The commanding officer of Morganti base, same as Might is ours. Relay is hooked into all of the communication networks spider webbing throughout the Alliance and beyond. If there is something that we can do without being asked by any planetary body, she will send us to do it."

“Is that how you guys keep busy?”

He chuckled. “No, most of the time, we are requested by governments and agencies who cannot deal with their issues on their own. We handle raiders, natural disasters, act as arbitrators, even occasionally engage in espionage as well as investigations.”

Tosha whistled low and long. “So, you go where you are needed and do what you can. That is fascinating. I really can’t think of a practical application for my talent.”

Mix smiled and hit the thrusters. “I am sure we will think of something.”

Tosha sat back and with the expression on his face, she was convinced he already had.

Chapter Seven

The woman in the vid screen had very precise features, which were bracketed by a headpiece that extended from the crown of her head down to each cheekbone. “Vortex, thank you for getting back to me so quickly.”

“Not a problem, Relay. This is my partner, Tosha.” He introduced them with a flourish of his hand.

“Shake, I believe, would be suitable for her. Shake and Vortex has a nice ring to it.” The woman’s eyes gleamed.

Tosha scowled. “Don’t I get to pick my own alias?”

“No, but if you find it unsuitable, you can tender an alternative to your commanding officer at a later time.”

It was reasonable, but it still didn’t sit right. Her back got up every time someone tried to control her destiny and the name she would be known by was in that category.

“Pleased to meet you, Relay. To what do we owe this

honour?" She put a bit of sweetness into her voice, but Relay's gaze told her she wasn't fooling anyone.

"There has been an escape on Talimatic, a high-security facility that caters to law-breaking talents. Normally, I would send a team from Udell, but they are busy. You are the only set that is free to handle this."

"Send the info to our shuttle. Does the head of Talimatic know we are coming?"

"I will make sure that they do. The escapee killed three guards and is heading to the wastes. Talimatic is not equipped for this kind of retrieval. He is one dangerous character." Relay's eyes flicked rapidly before regaining focus. "You have all the information. Fuel up and you have complete jump clearance."

"Understood, Relay. We are on our way."

"Thank you. Update me when you are finished. Take care. This is a dangerous assignment. Given a choice, I would not have had it be Shake's first."

"I will take care not to disgrace the Sector Guard. I promise." Tosha smiled. She didn't have a chance to say anything else. The screen went blank.

"Talimatic is one jump away. The shuttle is equipped with a gel shower and a month's worth of rations. Come on, Shake. It's time to meet your destiny." Vortex shoved

her out of the room with a hand on her lower back and they returned to the shuttle just as the ground crew cleared it.

She was boosted into the shuttle without ceremony and took her place at the navigator station. Shake buckled her harness into place and waited. Seconds later, the launch engines whined and she was shoved back into her seat.

“We are taking the most direct route, going in fast and hard.”

She held the obvious remark back and let the seriousness of their assignment wash over her. The sky flew past them in layers as they climbed at a steeper incline than Shake had ever experienced before.

“He’s a killer, isn’t he?” Her quiet words carried over the whine of the engines.

Vortex kept his hands on the controls as the ship shuddered. “Three guards dead to escape? Yes, he is.”

“How can I bring up the file?” She stared at the nav station and tried to figure it out.

He talked her through it and when the stats were displayed on her screen, her normally cocky attitude took a nose dive.

Rumal Nukid, a Tival by birth, homicidal maniac by

choice.

“Read it out to me.” His voice was tight.

“Rumal Nukid of Tival extraction. He engaged in every form of DNA manipulation he could the moment he left his home world.” She swallowed at the next portion. “He joined a raider team and stole young women and men who showed signs of developing talents on developing worlds. He wasn’t shy about killing an entire village to obtain the one talent he was looking for. Once he had them, he sold them on the black market.”

“Bastard.”

“No kidding. His primary talents are elongating fingernails that double as knives and he calls fire. Talimatic has no idea how he got out of confinement, but he used his claws on the way out. Two of the guards had families.”

The low growl coming from Vortex’s throat was not a noise she expected him to make.

“The tracking implants put him in the middle of a salt flat. He isn’t moving quickly, but he is still on their readouts.”

“How was he captured the first time?”

“He crash landed on a water-based world with high-tech restraint equipment. The Solth enforcers

restrained him and he was put in stasis until he landed at Talimatic. He has been there for six years.”

“Apparently, he was tired of it. Is there any detail about his accommodations?”

“He was scheduled for restricted maintenance. Power suppressing food and forced manicures.” She quickly read through the rest of the details. “There is something wrong here. Just a moment.”

She skimmed through the documents and hissed. “I found the problem. I think. I am not sure of the exact details, but I know something about grooming and this looks off.” She shared her suspicion with him as they entered the jump while still inside the Teklan system.

Her assessment surprised him. “You can tell just by reading that report?”

“The reports were identical until a few weeks ago. That was when they changed. It was a tiny change, but at his growth rate, it is entirely plausible.”

“Stupid.”

“It could have been accidental. The only question I have is why he is heading for the salt flats? It seems a peculiar place to run to.” She answered her own question. “Many criminals act on impulse. He could have simply run in a straight line.”

“From his earlier activities, he is a deliberate man. He has a plan. It could be something as simple as that we cannot sneak up on him in the middle of a salt plain.”

They approached the beacons and blockades that marked Talimatic as a protected area.

She was getting nervous as he began to recite the clearances that they had been given. “Do we have any kind of weapons?”

“No, and I am setting the ship to gene recognition combined with psi recognition. Put on one of those halos and let it take a reading.”

She removed the halo that he gestured to and settled it on her head. Her hair crunched lightly as she pressed the metal ring into place. Lights flashed on the board in front of her. They started at lavender and worked their way to a gleaming white.

“You can remove it now. The ship knows who you are. He won’t be able to use tissue samples or one of our corpses to start the shuttle for take-off. If he hacks into the controls, the ship will shut down.”

Shake got the idea that he was telling her this for a reason. “You expect us to die?”

“I expect us to be prepared. We are going up against a homicidal maniac and I am trying to cover our basics.

Nothing is more basic than life and death.” Vortex was trying to bolster her spirits and failing miserably.

“If we manage this, you are so going to owe me.” She took a deep breath and centred herself. “Too bad I worked out this morning. I could have used more energy.”

“You will do fine. We will have him subdued and back in the prison in no time.” Vortex’s attempts to cheer her up almost made her laugh.

“Spa day. Full body massage. Swimming lessons. I think I will deserve them all.” She twisted her head and loosened her neck and the muscles that were tense.

That distracted him. “You can’t swim?”

“I can but not very well. If I had slipped into the pool with only that sheet on, I would have been done for.” She chuckled as he finished the final clearances that would allow them to approach the planet.

He raised his hand. “Interesting. I volunteer for administering the full-body massage.”

“Then we had better survive this. There. We both have incentive now.” She laughed as he took them to the final approach.

He grinned and a gleam of anticipation came to those beautiful blue eyes. She didn’t have the heart to tell him she couldn’t leave without him. The shuttle was far

beyond her abilities to fly.

Once they landed, it would take off with Vortex at the controls or not at all.

Chapter Eight

Tracking a slowly moving Tival on a salt flat would have been easier if a predator hadn't eaten the embedded tracker.

"He carved it out of his thigh, damn it!" Vortex was kneeling on the dirt examining the bird that was limping along the ground.

"Can we scan for species?" Shake was keeping a lookout. She opened her senses to determine the composition of the ground she was standing on and idly worked through the layers. The mineral content gave her some trouble, but she muscled through.

"Yes, but not very effectively. We have some hand scanners that will narrow things down once we get an approximate heading." He left the bird on the ground and turned back to the ship.

Sweeping the area with her gaze, Shake moved back to the shuttle. The tension in the air was incredible. Her senses were on high alert when she came across a slight

problem. There was a thin crust of dirt under their shuttle. The rest was hollow.

“Vortex?”

“Yes?”

“We have a problem.” Her feet were already on the steps to the shuttle so she remained in place.

He looked at her in surprise. “What?”

“Since we landed, something has dug out the ground under our shuttle. We are on a thin layer of dirt and minerals. Nothing else is keeping this shuttle up.”

He closed his eyes and moved slowly to hand her a scanner. “I programmed it for Tival.”

“Okay. Just let me...yes. He is underneath us. The bird was a lure.” Shake was whispering. In her mind, if she could keep the noise down, they wouldn’t collapse.

“Can you do anything with the soil level?” He strapped a scanner onto his wrist.

“Not without shaking us into the hole. Lava would work, but it would take too long to get that much of it here.”

Vortex nodded. “You start on that, I will move the ship.” He moved past her and cautiously felt his way to solid ground.

Shake kept the eye contact with him and nodded when

he was on solid ground. As the wind wrapped around him in an increasingly large funnel, she understood what he was going to do.

She held onto the railings next to the stairs as the wind picked up speed. He focussed his energy toward the shuttle and with a tremendous amount of rocking and screeching metal, it took flight.

The funnel was bending toward her and wrapping the shuttle from nose to tail. He lifted it from the trap and slowly moved it to solid ground. She told him it was the right spot with the universal thumbs-up signal and he gently deposited their shuttle in the safe zone.

She was smiling in relief until a figure shot out of the ground and attacked Vortex.

Shake was out of the shuttle, having hit the door lock, in seconds.

Bloody slashes were appearing on Vortex's uniform as he engaged in hand-to-hand combat with the killer.

Fighting the urge to scream with every thud and impact of flesh on flesh, Shake approached the melee.

She froze when a strike to the head sent Vortex to the ground and the creature they were hunting turned toward her.

“Hello, pet. Are you going to be as much trouble as

this one?" Elegantly long fingers waved toward Vortex.

Rumal would have been considered very handsome if not for the blood dripping from his fingers and the cruel set to his lips. His even features and piercing green eyes combined with his burgundy hair made him both colourful and striking.

"That depends on what you are planning."

"I simply want a ride off this rock. Would you care to assist me in exchange for your companion's life?" He lifted Vortex by the hair and drew his deadly fingers along the neckline of his uniform. Blood welled wherever he touched.

"I would love to, but I can't." She opted for honesty while opening the valves in the earth to send a jet of magma into the pocket he had created.

"Is his life not worth it?" More blood.

Shake kept her gaze locked with Rumal's. "It is, but I can't help you, because I can't fly that shuttle. It is rigged with about ninety different ways to keep unauthorized personnel from taking off with it as well. I am as stranded here as you are."

Waves of heat were coming through the crust behind him. The level of magma was rising gradually, but if she had the nerve to do it, she had the means to end this

exercise.

“So, he is the key to leaving. That means you are a superfluous hostage.” He took a few steps toward her with a dark gleam in his eyes.

She backed away toward the trap she had laid out for him, extending her hands in supplication. “I am completely harmless.”

He barked a short laugh. “I very much doubt that. No one wearing that suit could be harmless. You are doing a number on my blood pressure as we speak.”

His leer wasn't well received. A wave of nausea swept through her. The only thing that kept her calm was knowing that the magma was nearing the surface.

Rumal lunged toward her and pinned her against his body as Vortex started to stir.

She felt his breath on her cheek and tried to stifle the shudder that swept through her.

He whispered, “Once we are in the air, I think we will have some fun, you and I.”

Rumal kept one hand on her throat and the other explored the curve of her hip to her breast and back again.

Vortex opened his eyes and fought to his feet.

When he surged upright, Rumal backed up and pressed his sharpened nails into her neck. “Stay where

you are, freak. You will be flying us out of here and when we have reached my people, you might get to keep your life.”

There was a wealth of emotion in Vortex’s voice. “What about her?”

The hands tightened on her and she fought to keep her expression calm when she really wanted to scream to high heaven.

“She is a cute little thing. I will keep her around to amuse me. It has been a very lonely set of years.” Ruml’s gloating was causing Vortex to tighten his lips and flex his arms. “Bravo on getting out of my falling trap, by the way. Thanks, it will make the launch so much easier if I don’t have to dig it out myself. How did you do it by the way?”

The magma was in place. “Vortex, get to the ship.”

Ruml laughed. “Oh, you give him orders? What kind of law enforcement are you?”

“A new kind. Vortex, get it up.” She tried to put her emotions during her first flight with him into her mind.

A slow flicker of acknowledgement crossed his features. “If I must.”

The funnel lifted him up above the ground and back several dozen feet.

The grip that Rumal had on her loosened and she threw herself forward while shaking the surface.

The ground rippled in a wave that she clung to as it passed her before breaking under the feet of her target.

With a shout, Rumal went flying and landed on his back.

Part of her hoped he would remain flat, but he fought to regain his footing as she shook the ground around him. Vortex was closing in, but she waved him back. Rumal was in charge of his own destiny whether he knew it or not.

“Stay where you are, Rumal. The ground you walk on is not stable.” She was keeping it together as she worked it, but his scrambling to his feet was causing pressure fractures.

“I don’t care, bitch. I will have my freedom whether I have to wait for another team to come and arrest me or not. Your subordinate will have to come down sometime and when he does, he is dead. I don’t let talents determine my fate.” His words were filled with venom and as he took a heavy step forward, it was over.

With a shriek, superheated steam burst through the ruptured crust and blew out into an open crater lined with a pool of magma.

A shattered chunk of rock cut a swath across Shake's cheek as the gasses blew debris everywhere. She felt some smaller strikes on her body, but the suit absorbed them.

He screamed as he struck the molten rock, writhing and twisting for agonizing moments until he ceased.

Shake was lifted off her feet and felt Vortex's arms around her. He took them back to the shuttle and tucked her inside.

Shake felt cold inside, the image of Rupal was seared into her mind. "Have you ever..."

"Once. You don't forget it. You did the right thing. We will report to Talimatic and give them the reports and the recordings."

That got her attention. "Recordings?"

"Our suits record any events where we use our talents. Psycho-reactive." He lifted off and requested permission to land at Talimatic.

"Do you have the prisoner?" a nervous officer asked.

"He was destroyed during the course of the pursuit. I have the required recordings to confirm the demise of Rupal Nukid."

"Oh. That is wonderful. Will you want to determine the method of his escape?"

Vortex looked at Shake and she nodded. He replied. “Yes. We will engage in a quick assessment for your records.”

“Thank you. No one can figure out how he got out to start with. It is quite the mystery.” The officer was relieved, she could hear it in his voice.

“We will be there within the hour. I have the codes for the tarmac.”

“Wonderful. The warden will be there to greet you.”

The communications screen went blank and Vortex gave Shake another look. “Are you sure you can manage this?”

“I am sure. Start to finish—that is how I like it. Halfway was never my thing.”

He gave a short laugh. “Glad to hear it. It bodes well for our partnership and that massage you will be getting. I am not a fan of leaving things half-done either.”

The innuendo in his words lightened her mood slightly, which was a good thing, the prison was looming in front of them.

Shake commented. “Well, when it comes to a personal relationship, I am a fan of finishing as well, but I made no mention of taking my partner with me.”

His snort punctuated their landing.

Chapter Nine

“So you see, we have no idea how he managed to get out of here. He was shackled to the chair most of the day except for the necessary lav breaks, which were done under guard.” The warden was with them in the high-security wing.

He escorted them to the cell that had been Rumal’s home. Blood spattered the walls and made Shake a little ill. It was bad enough that Vortex was still wearing the slashes Rumal had given him and the sight made her angry every time she looked at him.

The prison vibrated slightly under her feet and she breathed in and out through her nose until she was calm.

She heard the warden whisper to Vortex, “Is she all right?”

“Yes. She had to defend us from your convict and she is trying to keep control.”

Ignoring them, she started looking at the floor near the

chair where he had spent most of his time. “Scratches here.”

The warden scuttled closer. “What?”

“Scratches in the floor. What kind of shackles was he in?”

“Standard metals, reinforced for his enhanced strength.” The warden was kneeling beside her and eyeing the marks. “What does this mean?”

She leaned back on her heels and rubbed her forehead. “He had forced manicures, did he not?”

“Yes, every week. The clippings were measured to confirm that they had been cut appropriately and logged every week.”

“Who did his feet?”

The warden’s face blanked. “What?”

“The previous officer assigned for the cropping did both hands and feet. The nails were measured and weighed. Six weeks ago, the records changed dramatically. One quarter the normal weight was missing.”

Vortex was leaning against the wall. “So he used the enhanced cutting strength to work through the cuffs and when your men came in for the daily ablutions, he used the four day’s growth on his feet to carve them up. I am

wondering why he didn't call fire while he was here?"

The warden was a little shaky. "We put a suppressor in the food. The electromagnetic shielding on the planet activates it. It stops psychic emanations. It wears off after three days, so it was the reason for the urgency behind our request for help. While I am sorry for the trauma you were exposed to, I am very happy not to have to deal with him in this facility anymore."

Shake shuddered. "I know what you mean. He was creepy."

"And a heartless bastard," Vortex added.

The warden nodded. "Is there anything else you need?"

"Yes, why was there a change in his grooming routine?" Shake got to her feet and looked at some of the slashes on Vortex.

The warden got to his feet and a blush crept under his skin. "I hired a new groomer for this fiscal period. I will speak to him."

Shake smiled showing most of her teeth. "May we accompany you?"

He looked as if he wanted to deny them, but he nodded. "I will have him sent to my offices."

"Send some first-aid supplies as well. I don't like the

look of those wounds.”

She checked Vortex’s temperature and he seemed warmer than he should have been. “How are you doing?”

“Looking forward to returning home.” He leaned on her as they left the blood-spattered room and followed the warden to his office.

She paused for a moment as she thought about home. It used to mean her apartment on Dalpha, but now that tidy house on Teklan gave her a warm spill inside her.

“I am still entitled to my spa day, by the way.”

His laugh was soft, but it relaxed her as they took seats in the warden’s office and waited.

The supplies arrived first and she dabbed at his wounds, cleaning them as best she could before wrapping them.

“Don’t forget the cuts on your neck. He marked you as well.”

Shake touched her neck and found small slashes and trails of blood. “I didn’t feel a thing.”

He grimaced. “I did. The moment your blood started to flow.”

“I suppose I was distracted.”

They shared a look that communicated beyond words. They had shared a joint moment of terror and it had been

for the wellbeing of the other.

When the groomer arrived, his muscular build and hostile attitude set Shake on alert. The warden was cowed and took his seat with a sigh of relief.

“Groomer Nuris, these are the Sector Guard members who took care of our Rimal problem. They have some questions for you, please answer them.”

“Yes, Warden.” The man had a military bearing that took on a position of respect.

Shake got to her feet and faced the man who towered over her by well over a foot. “When you were assigned here, what were your instructions?”

“My instructions were to get in and out with a minimal amount of time spent on any of the talented prisoners.”

“What about his feet?” Shake smiled grimly.

“What about them? I was told to do a manicure only and to get out in under half an hour, or I wouldn’t be paid.”

The warden was whitening in his seat.

“Is this accurate, Warden? It was a matter of budget cuts?”

“Talimatic is a prison with some of the most dangerous men in the sector. We need to maintain a strict

budget.” The warden was stiffening with indignation.

Vortex sat up. “There is no budget for Alliance detention facilities. You are pocketing the money. We sent a message out before we landed. They are sending a replacement immediately.”

Shake asked him, “What happened to the other groomer?”

Nuris answered. “He was dismissed because of the fees required to keep him here. Getting an incorruptible groomer is harder than you would think.”

“I can imagine. You are privy to everything that comes through a being’s head while you work. Do you do massages as well?”

He blinked at her in surprise. “Yes, but there is little call for those skills here. I merely trim claws, teeth and tails.”

“If you ever want to leave Talimatic, contact the Sector Guard. I am sure a man of your skills would enjoy the challenge of working with so many different races.”

Something brightened in his eyes. “My appearance would not put them off?”

“Some are much scarier looking than you. There are several bases and I believe that you could engage in a challenging new life. Elsewhere.” Her pause was pointed.

“That’s...well, it’s the first time anyone has considered me worthy of such a post. Thank you.” His smile was genuine and exposed teeth that were pointed to a dangerous degree.

The warden was slumped in defeat. He wasn’t even trying to worm or explain his way out of their accusations.

Shake began a detailed chat with Nuris about services that he offered while Vortex relaxed.

The outgoing warden ordered some food for them, but at a slight headshake from Vortex, she had Nuris follow her to the landing pad for safety and she retrieved and heated ration packs for all three of them.

Nuris carried the water pouches and food and they made their way back to the warden’s office without incident.

Vortex consumed the food with focussed intensity and she realized it had been several hours since they had eaten. Shake had simply forgotten that her body was hungry. It was a bad habit that she thought she had shaken.

She continued a quiet conversation with Nuris until a chirp on the com warned them that another ship was en route.

Their relief was here and now they could go home.
Teklan waited.

Chapter Ten

Vortex gave her flight lessons on the way home. They used the proper jump corridors and it took them a little longer, but she took the controls for at least half of the time.

“I heard what you told him. You knew you couldn’t leave without me and yet you left the safety of the shuttle.” His *non sequitur* made her blink.

She thought about her answer for a moment. “Yes. Yes, I did. It wasn’t a choice. It was a conscious decision. You weren’t safe and he would have killed you if there were no reason to keep you alive. The fact that it was the truth just helped him believe it.”

He opened and closed his mouth, so she leaned over, flicked the com and sent the landing request to the surface of Teklan.

“You have no idea how relieved we are that you are back alive, Shake. Reset is standing by to treat the

wounds that an Officer Nuris reported.”

“Great. We will head straight to medical. Is Might back yet?”

“No. He had some organizational work to do. He is returning tomorrow. Welcome home.” The com officer had a smile in his voice.

“Thank you.” She disconnected the call and listened to Vortex’s low tones as she brought them in for a landing.

A ground crew and a pale woman in a Guardsman uniform was waiting for them when Shake brought them to a halt.

“You can open your eyes now, we are home. Vortex?”

He was grey. His body slumped to one side. She shook him and when he didn’t respond, she ran to the hatch and swung it open. “Is one of you medical?”

The woman nodded, her navy hair swinging around her. “I am Reset. How badly are you injured?”

“It isn’t me, it’s Vortex. He isn’t moving and his colour is bad.”

Reset came in without another word. She was at Vortex’s side and laying hands on him in an instant. “Aw hells. Help me get him out of here.”

Reset took his torso and Shake took his legs as they moved him to the exit. He was heavier than he looked.

“Mist! Get your ass over here!” Reset hollered and a cloud shot out of the base and came toward them.

The cloud wrapped around Vortex and lifted him from their grip, straightening him and gliding him at full speed to the interior of the base.

“Shake, pleased to meet you. Come with me. I am going to need your help with him.” Reset started to jog after her patient and gathering her strength, Shake followed.

The cloud deposited Vortex on a medical bed and Reset shooed him out. “We have to strip him and I need to cauterize those wounds. The Oshanic are far more susceptible to infection than standard races. If he wasn’t altered for water breathing, I would be able to give him direct healing, but he is, so I can’t.”

Shake followed Reset’s lead and helped her shuck the suit off him. The wounds were swollen and angry. His skin burned to the touch.

“I may have to tank him, but we have to drain and seal these wounds first. If you assist me, I will be able to get this done a lot faster.”

Mute, Shake nodded and took the instrument that

Reset handed to her.

“Now, when I lance the wound, you sluice it out. His body will absorb most of the fluid so don’t be shy. You are hooked to a ten-gallon pump.” Reset took a short breath and sliced open the first of four wounds on his ribs.

Shake mechanized her motions, ignoring his whimpers and moans as each slice exposed muscle and bone. She had to do it, so she did it.

She was shaking with fatigue by the time he was cleansed and Mist returned to lift him into the tank.

Reset smiled at Shake. “Well done. I have rarely had an assistant who could handle an irrigation rig like that.”

“Thank you. I guess. Doesn’t he need a breather?”

The healer smiled. “He will actually do better without one. Oshanic immune systems are only triggered when you remove most of their oxygen. Can I fix the gouges in your neck?”

“Oh. Are they still there?” Shake turned to Reset and the woman’s features grew hazy.

“Yes. Hold still.”

Reset’s hands closed over Shake’s neck and tingling warmth flowed over Tosha. A small burst of energy got her moving as well. “I think I need a sandwich.”

“I think you do, too. You are running on empty. Wish

Vortex a speedy recovery and we will get you fed.”

Tosha walked to the tank and pressed her hand against the plexi. She put every emotion she had been feeling in the forefront of her thoughts and when a hand mirrored hers from inside the tank, she smiled. She broadcasted her hunger and he nodded, eyes still closed.

“Okay, we can go now. I am Tosha, by the way.”

Reset took her arm. “I’m Gralial. Call me Gray. Come on. Let’s get you something to eat.”

“Funny that your name is Gray and that is the colour I am wearing.” Tosha was babbling again.

“You don’t have to talk.”

“Oh. I wish I could stop.”

Gray laughed and hauled her into the commissary. She dragged her over to a table where other men and women were sitting. “This is Shake, but off duty, she is Tosha. She has been injured and is in desperate need of food, so don’t quiz her before she has a chance to eat.”

Numb, Tosha sat with the strangers. Two of them bore species similarities to Relay. “Hello.”

One of the men looked behind him. “Where is Micix?”

It was all it took, she burst into tears while one of the women hissed, “Esur, what did Gray say about

questions?”

A comforting arm was around her shoulders as she sobbed out her stresses of the last few days.

A bowl of soup appeared under her nose and she sipped at it in between blubbering episodes.

Her eyes were puffy and swollen when her episode ground to a halt. “I am sorry.”

“Don’t be. We were trying to get the guys to leave us to girl talk anyway.” The speaker was the woman who had been sitting with the gold-coloured Drai.

The petite woman across from her smiled with gold-green eyes. The woman extended her hand. “I am Drahali or Gravity when I am on duty.”

Tosha took her hand and accepted the greeting. “Pleased to meet you.”

“I am Roxanne or Finder when on duty.” The woman next to her smiled and extended her hand.

Tosha finished her greeting and the final woman winked. “I am Past Tense on duty, Mayden when I am relaxing. I am a Reader, so don’t shake my hand unless you want to share your history with me.”

With nothing to hide, she extended her hand to Mayden and let the woman make the decision. When the warm fingers closed over her own, she smiled. “Pleased

to meet you, Mayden.”

Gray laughed. “All are introduced, now eat.”

Feeling the peculiar lightness that followed an emotional outburst, Tosha started consuming the food that Gray had selected for her. She got stronger with each mouthful and the women around her carried on a low conversation until she was finished.

Mayden gave her a strange look, “Okay, I have to ask...are you really trying to get a groomer here?”

A little drowsy but otherwise fine, she felt like sharing. “Yes. I used to work in a natural-cosmetics shop and I am really feeling the lack. I confused the heck out of Mix the first night when I worked on making my own hair fixative.”

Mayden reached out and touched Tosha’s hair. “It looks like it held.”

She shrugged. “I do good work. If I had some supplies, I would be making up some skin lotions. I find the process cathartic.”

Roxanne looked interested. “But what about the groomer?”

“Oh. He was working at Talimatic and just seemed to have an energy that didn’t really match the facility. He needs a challenge and I think massaging the Sector Guard

could be that challenge.” A cup of caf arrived in front of her. She looked up to see Gray smiling. “Bless you, doc.”

The caffeine hit perked her up immediately, she didn’t realize it had been so long since she had one. “Oh, that’s better. Anyway, Nuris is a talented groomer. Everything for every species commonly encountered in the Alliance. He let me read his file while we waited.”

Roxanne cocked her head. “I have never been to a male groomer. Is he a fan of the same sex?”

“I have no idea. He looks like he could bench press a Draï if pressed, so I don’t think it matters. If he wants to sleep with it, it might not have a choice.”

They erupted in laughter and began to discuss everything from manicures to the last time they had their hair trimmed.

“I don’t know about you, but I didn’t agree to ignore my personal grooming just because I agreed to the Sector Guard.”

The table burst out in a round of, “Here, here!” that drew the attention of some of the support staff.

Tosha turned to the nearest woman in a Teklan-base uniform. “If you had a chance to go to a groomer on base, would you?”

“Hell yes! I use all of my leave time just going to the

spa when I am back home.” Her grin split her grey skin, her black eyes gleamed with energy.

She smiled and gave a thumbs up before returning to the other Guardsmen. “See? I just have to wait until Might returns and then I will start nagging him to let Nuris set up shop here. He already has the clearances. He works at Talimatic after all.”

Before the ladies could comment, Tosha yawned. “I am sorry. I haven’t slept in...two days?”

Gray nodded. “Something like that. Do you want me to wake you when Micix wakes?”

“Can I stay in the medical bay? I won’t get in the way. I just want to be there when he wakes up.”

The ladies sobered, their faces serious. It was obvious that the pain of losing one’s partner was not something that any of them took lightly.

“Yes. By all means. I will get a bed for you and you can sleep there. Come on. You need to lie down before you fall down.” Gray helped her to her feet.

Tosha waved goodnight to the other Guardsmen and walked back to medical with Gray’s support. The bed was comfortable and was calling her from across the room the moment that Gray wheeled it out.

“Here you go. Have a good night. You won’t be

disturbed unless there is some kind of emergency.” Gray boosted her onto the bed and helped her cover herself with the light blanket.

She had been alone for a few minutes when she extended her hand to press it against the tank. With the surrogate contact, she let herself fade into a deep, restorative sleep where her dreams featured her man with his totally blue eyes and very little clothing.

It wasn't a bad night at all.

Chapter Eleven

Water was dripping on her and she wiped it off, pulling her sheet over her head.

“Wake up, Tosha. Time to go home.” A gentle hand pulled the sheet away and she was looking up into Mix’s eyes.

She squeaked and lunged up to hug him.

He caught her in his arms and laughed. “I am fine, Tosha. Don’t worry.”

Tosha frowned up at him and squeezed him tightly. “I can’t help but worry. How are your wounds?” She released him as if he was hot when she realized where her hands were. “Did I hurt you?”

He laughed. “No. I am mostly healed.”

The door opened and Gray came in with the cloud from the day before. “Morning, Micix. Step into the scanner and then put on this suit. Tosha, this is Canil, my partner. Also known as Mist.”

The cloud formed into a column and that column formed into a man. He appeared to be Kozue, but with his other form, it wasn't likely.

"Pleased to meet you, Canil."

His gaze was focused with a scowl on Micix and her partner simply walked onto the scanner pad and had a focussed beam assess him from head to toe. The moment it beeped in completion, he took the suit from Gray and stepped into it. With Mix's genitals covered, Canil turned his attention to her.

"I am pleased to meet you, miss. I hope you enjoy your time in the Sector Guard. It can be rough at times, but it has its benefits." He bowed low and cast a quick glance to Gray. It was obvious that he considered her a benefit that he truly enjoyed.

"We have to be getting back to the house. Tosha needs a shower and then we will return for breakfast. Will you join us?" Mix put his hand on her waist to shepherd her out the door.

Gray laughed. "Yes, we will join you. See you in an hour."

There was a certain feeling of full circle to the steps back to their house. For the first time in her life, she didn't want to speak and ruin the silence between them.

The shower called her just like it had the first time and as her hair came clean, she sighed happily. Her hands stroked the places where Rimal had had his hands, scrubbing as hard as she could until her skin was bright and painful. She must have been making noises because Mix pulled the curtain back and caught her in his arms.

“It’s fine. We made it and he can’t do any of the things that he was planning to do. You stopped him and he will never hurt anyone again.” He knelt with her under the hot spray until she stopped moaning and rocking against him.

His kiss came as a surprise. She opened her eyes and they crossed as she tried to meet his gaze with her own.

He laughed and backed away. “Come on, we are going to have breakfast with Gray and Canil as well as any of the others who are around.” He lifted her to her feet, turned off the shower and wrapped her in a towel.

Sighing and wanting to pursue the kiss, she held herself back and went to the dressing table to work her hair into a smooth cape. It took a while and by the time she finished, it was almost dry. She opened her wardrobe and pulled out another uniform.

This was going to get very old if she didn’t have a chance to get some new clothing issued to her. The

uniform was fine when she was on duty, but she felt that even though it had been her first assignment, she needed a day off.

Covered and ready for breakfast, she went in search of Mix. He was outside doing something on his knees.

“Are you ready for breakfast?” She stayed far enough away not to startle him.

He turned and rose with a handful of flowers in his hand. “These are for you.”

Tosha opened and closed her mouth as tears welled in her eyes. “Me?” The word came out as a squeak.

“Yes. I wish to begin a formal courtship with you. If we were on Oshanic, I would bring you shells. I am improvising.” There was a sensitive shyness to his actions.

She took the flowers from him with a smile. “I accept. Let’s go to breakfast.”

He grinned and leaned down to place another kiss on her lips. This time, she leaned up and cupped the back of his neck to steady herself. The kiss was fairly chaste, but her heart was pounding like a drum when she let herself drop back to her heels.

She quickly ran inside and put her flowers in water. They were too pretty to dehydrate while she was in the

base.

When she returned to him, he placed an arm around her waist and they started their short walk to the base. A shuttle was coming in and as it landed, Tosha had a peculiar feeling.

“Whose shuttle is that?”

“Might’s. He has one of the shuttles designed by a Draï based on Morganti.”

“Can we go greet him? See if they need help like we did?”

He looked at her strangely. “Might flies alone. He doesn’t have a partner.”

“There is someone else on that shuttle.” She began to move toward the shuttle and she left him to trail after her.

She broke into a run as the door opened and when the figure of the Dhemon emerged, she paused, a crippling disappointment running through her.

He stood on the final step and extended his hand to someone inside the shuttle. When the pale hand came out and rested in his, Tosha’s heart stuttered in her chest.

The woman exited the shuttle and stood on the tarmac looking around. When she caught sight of Tosha, she screamed and came running.

“Alara!” Tosha met her halfway and swung her

cousin around with all the strength she possessed.

“Tosha, I am so glad you are safe,” Alara sobbed.

They were both sobbing with relief and it was only when Brodin and Mix separated them that they realized they weren’t alone.

“Alara, have you had breakfast?” Eagerness to be with her cousin was unmistakable.

Alara looked to Brodin and he nodded.

“I will be joining you for breakfast. You can tell me how your orientation has gone. Brodin said you were not on full duty yet.” Alara smiled.

“It has been interesting, but I think part of it has to be told to Brodin as a debriefing. He can catch up when he gets back to his office.”

They linked arms with their partners and themselves. The foursome walked back to the base with smiles and a swing in their step.

Tosha’s favourite cousin was back with her, safe and alive. Anything else could wait until after she was settled in.

Tosha gave Mix a glowing grin and he smiled. She had a future here now and while Alara could give her a window into it, it didn’t matter.

Vortex and Shake would do what they had to in the

hopes of making the Sector a safer place. Who knew, it might eventually be fun.

Author's Note

Okay, big tease. Alara's tale will be told in *Echo in Time*. We will learn where all of the Guards have been and what they have been up to.

Thank you for joining me in the Sector Guard. I look forward to telling the tale of Brodin and Alara, or Might and Echo in Time, if you prefer.

Oh, and yes, you really can make your own hairspray with citrus. Google it.

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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.