

Chapter One

Zisa propped her legs up on the table in front of her. The Sargent's lounge was the one place she could relax without fear of interruption from the officers who insisted on riding her hump and the lower ranked enlisted who tended to act like they didn't have a clue. Pulled from both sides, it tended to wear her out.

Finally able to relax, she sighed as she rubbed the inside of her rifle with a soft cloth. She studied the black carbon scoring that smeared on the white rag. Regular weapon maintenance was the hallmark of a good soldier, for it ensured the safety and reliability of their rifles. But that along with a whole bunch of other things had been put off to the side.

Won't have to worry about that any more.

“Hehehe, can you imagine being replaced by mechans and gebeds?” Garr asked raking his hands through his hair. Turning up a container of mouthwash, he sloshed the liquid around inside his mouth in between gargles. He leaned over the washbasin and spat into it. Automatically the water turned on, he cupped his hands allowing the liquid to pool into it. He splashed water on his sand and grit covered face, removing most of Retaya's sandy

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ground. "Those things couldn't hit a target if it was placed right in front of them."

"I've heard that talk before, it's nothing," Zisa replied.

"I don't know, times are a changing," he said wiping his face with a towel.

He continued studying his face in the mirror. In his late twenties, he appeared even younger. Like most soldiers, who were superstitious, he was a creature of habit, believing if it worked the first time then it must be good luck. And obsessive grooming a mission was his.

"You still look the same don't bother checking," she smirked having no such routine. For her, either good things happened or it didn't. There was no such thing as luck. It was clearly evident in her choice in men.

"You're right, just as beautiful as ever."

She snorted, chuckled, and went back to wiping down her weapon.

"As I was saying," he said walking over to a chair and picking up his shirt, "lately the Electorate has been hinting of a change. All they do is sing the praises of mechans and gebeds, saying how efficient and good they are. You know they are no fan of the independent security forces. They think we are a bunch of hired guns."

Even though he carried a pleasant disposition, he always said he had a severe allergy to crap. Whether it came out the front end or the back, he wanted no parts of it.

Zisa mouthed a toothpick. She had no use for politicians or their useless ideas. She was born and raised in the Borders, an area just on the edge of the known galaxy. It was known for its own version of civil law. In the Borders, a person's word was the rule of law and if they didn't live by it, they died.

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Life was so different in the Central Systems, she noted shaking her head. “Nariseerons are hired guns. We are trained professionals. Not a bunch of mercenaries out for a bounty. We are legitimate members of the Security Guild which means we are tax-paying citizens with ties to the Collective. We provide an important service for the galaxy.”

“Mainly the central systems. There's a whole lot of empty space out there. And most of it is untamed. You of all people should know that.”

“Same thing. And I'm not talking about the Borders or the Barrens either. That's a whole other conversation. Before we could even think about going out there as a guild, we need more people from the Collective to move out there and set up governments. It's lawless out there for a reason.”

“There you go singing their praises again. You know you ought to be a lobbyist.”

“Me? Why?”

“Because you're a conformist.”

“Garr look around,” she gestured at their cramped lounge. A boxy room with one window, two couches, a table and some chairs, it was the only place in the entire base where she and the other non-commissioned officers could relax. “You make a living maintaining the system.”

“Correction, I make a living protecting others.”

“Semantics, six in one and half-dozen in the other.”

“I still think your time with those gebeds of yours warped your mind. They made you soft.”

She tried not to wince at his sharp remark. Though she was not one to gab about her

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life, it didn't take long for people to find out she was involved with a gebed. They had a reputation of being scrawny book nerds with a penchant for reading your mind. Claiming to do it only to facilitate the search for knowledge around here every body believed it to mind control with an obsession for information. Second only to the Political Guild, the gebeds held the most power in the galaxy.

"If anything I am wiser," she stated. "Besides, unless the electorate expands their mandate, gebeds will stick to their jobs- assimilating the knowledge of new colonies and enforcing the Collective's Code and we will do our maintaining the peace. As for mechans, they may be cheap but they're not skilled warriors. No mechancan replace a real thinking person. In short we have nothing to worry about."

"By the way, have you heard from them lately?"

She frowned. "Where did that come from?"

"Answer the question."

"No. Why do you care? You don't even like them."

"Do you think you will?"

She rolled her eyes. Sometimes he reminded her of a meddling parent. "No."

"I just need to know in case I have to bell your ass out of another booze soaked self pity party."

"Screw you."

"You're not my type."

"Whatever," she said hating that he was right. In fact, he warned her about dating best friends. Never mind the fact, that the other one for all she knew had dropped off the face of

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the galaxy, refusing all communication. "Is it a heavy burden being the smart one?"

"It has its moments," he grinned.

"You are too much. You really are."

Two short knocks at the door silenced their conversation.

"Could you get that?" she asked.

"What are your legs broken?" he asked walking by her.

"I'm busy," she said gesturing to her disassembled weapon. "I got to keep it cleaned."

Garr placed his hand on the door and leaned. "What do you want?" he grouched.

"Message for Tech. Sgt. Daroh," the man replied.

Garr glanced her way. "Are you home?"

"Who is it from?" she asked attaching the last section.

"Who wants to know?" Garr asked.

"Visitors."

"What kind?"

"They won't say," the man replied.

Zisa shrugged her shoulders and replied, "You know the drill."

As a rule, she didn't respond to messages from people who couldn't identify themselves. She aimed the rifle at the wall in front of her. She pulled the trigger, it responded with a sharp click.

Perfect, she thought smiling.

"She ain't home," he replied opening the door then slamming it in the man's face. He strolled toward his belt and pistol on far right table. "You know that could have been

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important.”

“Whatever.”

Another knock on the door, caused her to roll her eyes.

“What is it?” she and Garr yelled.

“They said their message was urgent and that she should come immediately,” the man replied.

She scratched her head. Placing her rifle aside, she stood up and sauntered towards the door. “Thanks but I got this.”

Bowing graciously, Garr sat down.

“What kind of visitors?” she asked standing in front of the door. It was late and she was in no mood to receive visitors.

“Diplomatic I believe. They look like gebeds,” he replied.

Her heart skipped a beat. Feeling a bead of perspiration form on her brow, she glanced at Garr. His lips curved into a twisted grin.

She sighed and closed her eyes.

Just when things were starting to get back to normal, they decide to come back.

She wiped her brow with the back of her hand and considered her options. She could ignore their request and go to her quarters or she could speak with them. It had been a long time since their last meeting and after wards she swore to herself she would never deal with them again. Losing them was a hard lesson about love that she had to learn.

Still a part of her ached for them, to be with them once again. Strolling back to the chair where she had sat, she gathered her things from the table and headed towards the door.

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"I'd like to tell you not to go but I know you won't listen," he said.

Gebeds. The words echoed in her mind. "Do me a favor and put away my rifle," she replied.

"Will do. And Zisa?"

"Yes?"

"Good luck," Garr replied.

"Thanks I'll need it."

Chapter Two

Zisa stared at her reflection in the lavare's mirror. Her long deep chestnut tresses were coiled in thick intricate braids firmly affixed to the crown of her head. Her deep blue eyes sat back in a full round face covered with fair skin. Hints of red burnished her cheeks, evidence of her life as a soldier on a desert planet. She licked her full lips hoping to soothe the chapped and cracked skin.

"Damn," she said washing her hand and splashing water on her face. Looking back in the mirror, she was only marginally pleased with what she saw. She wished she had lip balm.

Only twenty-seven years of age, she felt like she'd lived twice that because of the things she had experienced. War, famine, and strife were nothing to courting a gebed. Monks, scholars and warriors, gebeds held the highest esteem in the Collective, second only to members of the Political Guild.

But life with Doyen Kellam Vachel and Senior Gebed Feran Jurah had been anything but easy. Best friends since childhood, they did everything together. Except date. Sure, it wasn't uncommon for there to be triple courtships. But when that happened everyone knew

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about each other and agreed to it ahead of time.

She closed her eyes and recalled the horrific day on Botheeine in the gardens at the Gnosis' Guild's chapel. Two friends who loved each other like brothers fought over her angry at the other's betrayal. If the other gebeds had not intervened, she did not think either would have made it out alive. It was a mistake, she swore, she would never make again.

Maybe seeing them is not such a good idea.

She exited the washroom and walked down the hall. Not eager to see them, she knew their visit would reopen old wounds that just recently healed. Feeling her hands quiver, she decided to go her quarters instead.

"Turn right," she heard a voice say.

As clear as if someone had said it right next to her, she looked around. There was no one in the corridor but her.

"I must be tired," she said. "I'll be fine in the morning."

Her field of vision blurred. A haze dropped over her mind dulling her thoughts.

Turn right, the voice said again.

Compelled to obey she turned and walked towards the door leading outside. Stepping out into quadrangle, the warm night air hit her like heat coming from a cookery.

Enter building C.

Doing as the voice commanded, Zisa turned toward The Spousal Visitation Center. The two-story structure was home to a few offices dealing with soldier affairs and quarters for service personnel and their visiting spouses. Everyone called it Conjugal Heaven. She knew why but had no cause to use it for herself.

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She was greeted by a rush of cool air as she entered the building. A few personnel walked by with their faces buried in files as she skirted passed them.

Meeting room 5B.

The voice instructed hypnotically. Walking down to the end of the hall, she stopped in front of the door.

Zisa enter.

Waving her open palm across the interface, the door opened. She walked inside feeling the fog in her head lift. She blinked.

Two men in long floor length dark grey cowls stood in front of her. A mixture of emotions swirled inside of her. Hurt, angry, scared, lonely and in love, she did not know what to do.

“Doyen, Senior Gebed,” she said shifting her stance uncomfortably. “Thank you for the mind games. I thought I was the only one skilled in that area. Or so you both claimed.”

Stiffening his posture, Kellam folded his arms slipping them into the sleeves of his robe. “I’m sorry but I did what was necessary because we needed to talk.” The older of the two, he always did the talking for the both of them whenever they were together. Whether this was by Kellam’s insistence or Feran’s natural acquiescence to Kel’s personality, she did not know, it worked for them.

“We’ve done enough talking. And you were right the first time. What I did was a betrayal and I’m sorry. That’s why I vowed to never see either of you again,” she replied feeling a lump grow in her throat.

“My words were harsh that day but I was hurt,” Kellam said trying to mask his

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anguish. "I see things differently now, that's why we are here."

Tall and strong, Kel's taut muscular physique complimented his nearly two meter body height. Along with his silky shoulder length chestnut hair, which fell loosely to his shoulders, she recalled why there was an immediate attraction.

Six feet two, Feran was a man of intense passion and a brusque personality. Lean and muscular, his caramel colored skin perfectly contrasted his wavy, neck length, jet-black hair. His fierce gaze and brusque disposition added to his intensity.

"That's nice for you. But I still recall the pain I inflicted on you both and I have no desire to relive that."

To love both men, best friends, was a costly mistake. That date made in the cantina blossomed into a wonderful romance, which Kellam quickly dropped after realizing he'd be unable to nurture it fully. During your final date, his exact words were, "My work will not allow me to give you the life you deserve." And then he left.

Though she sent message after message to the main sanctuary begging to speak with him, he refused. And when she managed to get him to agree for one last meeting, he insisted he could make no promises.

And he was right for telling her that, for on that date he sent Feran instead. The man you thought that hated you from the start. After a curt greeting, he gave you Kellam's final departure message. "Friendship only and best wishes."

Feran spoke with her for hours on that fateful day. Filled with sadness he stayed with you. Though nothing happened at first, the relationship developed. Dinner. Lunch. Flowers. Holding hands. A tiny kiss. Then a trip to Tundoloth. She spent her entire leave with Feran

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and discovered that he was not the heartless machine she thought him to be. Love was inevitable.

Stoically she turned and headed towards the door. In a flash, Feran was behind her. His tall and lean body pressed against hers as his hand kept the door from opening.

"Please stay," he whispered his desert clan accent clipping his words.

No! You've got to stop this. You've got to pull yourself together. She closed her eyes.

Tears formed, trying to hold them back, she failed. They streamed down her cheeks.

She sniffled and opened her eyes. Feran gazed at her. His mahogany eyes were filled with a love. She missed his touch, his strength, his heart. She had to hear them out.

Stepping out of his way, Zisa turned around and leaned against a wall. "All right speak."

"We have talked," Feran said nodding to Kellam. "And we acknowledge that we both love you. But we do not know do you still love us?"

She sniffled and swallowed. The lump in her throat refused to go down.

I am so tired of crying over this. "We've covered this," she growled, "There's no in need picking old sores,"

Kellam stood. His muscular six-foot four-inch frame was formidable in spite of his gentle nature. "Little one--," he said his face full of worry.

Her heart melted as he called her by her pet name.

"Please, we must know. Do you?"

"Yes," she replied quietly. "And that's why I won't see either of you. I can't have you both, so I chose neither of you."

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Sensing a flood of tears, Zisa decided it was time to go. The last thing she wanted was to let her fellow soldiers see her crying like a baby. Feeling the urge to drown herself in a bottle of whiskey, she closed her eyes and sighed.

She heard Kellam approach. He gently caressed her cheek. "Says who?"

Zisa opened her eyes. They felt itchy and sore from the tears filling up within them. Kellam leaned forward and tenderly pressed his lips to hers. Responding just a little, she pulled away conscious of Feran's stare.

She looked at the men who had captured her heart. They smiled and gazed at her.

"Can we try?" Kellam asked softly.

Chapter Three

Garr stood outside the guard post and gestured for another vehicle to pass. The steady stream of teleskiffs had not stopped since he and Zisa started their shift.

Checking the occasional clearance, she played with her scanner and stared at her bare ring finger. A yellow auranite band would soon be there because she was to be bonded with two men.

“Alright Daroh, entertain me,” Garr said stepping aside. He picked up his canteen from its place on the small table, opened it up, and took a swig. “I want to hear about the clusterfuck that is your love life.”

She glanced up at the night sky. Two moons shown down, one smaller than the other, illuminating the dark night. She had been on Retaya for six long years and not once had she considered bonding with gebeds. After all their kind was rarely seen around these parts and now, she had two of them.

“What do you want to know?”

“So they asked you to bond with them.”

“Yep.”

“Where are you guys going to hold the ceremony?” he asked leaning out the door to

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see if more skiffs approached.

“At the guild's sanctuary on Tundoloth.”

The sound of that scared her. She was born and raised in Border Regions where no governments ruled and people took the law into their own hands. After the expansion of central system rule, only now had society begun to think about taming it. And now she was to go to headquarters of the most powerful guild in the collective and become a life-mate to two of their members? Was she supposed to change her views and become just like them? She became a soldier to protect the innocent, enforcing Collective Law came with it-- becoming a book nerd synthesizing every codex that came into her hand in the relentless search for knowledge was out of the question. She stopped going to school for a reason, so she wouldn't have to do homework.

“Are you sure you want to do that?”

She had mulled it over in her mind. She loved them deeply. She couldn't breathe without them. To be without Kellam or Feran would be death for her soul.

“I'm sure.”

“Okay. You know you're my best friend and I'll support you in whatever you do. It's just that I don't want you to get hurt.”

“I know,” she said smiling. Never the one to brag, he always let his modesty and good sense lead the way. That's why she considered him a good leader and friend.

“But we've overcome a lot of that,” she replied grateful for his comfort and friendship.

“I'm not talking about that. I know you said that it's in the past, I don't happen to think it is, but that's for another discussion.”

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“What do you mean?”

“They're guys. I don't care how much philosophical training they've had, they're still men and there will be trouble.”

“Triune bonds have happened before.”

“Yeah but with other monks. That stuff is dangerous. That's why the other guilds won't celebrate a bond like that.”

“I think you're wrong. Kellam had a long talk with his doyen as did Feran and they are certain the guild will allow it.”

He waved her off, “Whatever but back to my point, you're going to have to give up a lot. Think about it. You are a Tech Sargent. The youngest in the history of the security forces, you're even up for a slot at the academy. That all ends the day you so 'I do.'”

She furled her brow in disbelief. “That's ridiculous. They know my job, they know who I am. They won't stop that. Plus they'll be gone all the time.”

“Oh my poor naïve and might I add virginal Zisa.”

She rolled her eyes. “What does sex have to do with it?”

“A lot. Which explains your lack of knowledge. Let me explain something,” he said leaning in close, “you haven't given them any. That's why they're so nice now. But once you do, that's it. You are there's. And things will change. They will change. I can promise you that.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Because I would. Any guy would especially if he loves her.”

A skiff pulled up in front of the booth. He stepped outside and greeted the occupants.

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She considered his words. Yes, she had caught a hint of their jealousy but that was only because they had not known about each other. Everything was different now.

“And there is the whole thing about non-gebed bonding with two others in the Knowing. It's dangerous,” he said ducking back inside the booth.

She heard the rumors too. She did not know much about the Knowing, only a few things she picked up from people around her. All she knew was that it gave them the ability to synthesize much knowledge taught them how to apply the knowledge they had. Including the use of psy abilities. Not everyone had access to this gift but those who did were quite powerful.

“So I've heard,” she said chewing her bottom lip.

“Hey,” he said leaning in close, “did you hear me?”

“Hunh?”

“I said I didn't mean to scare you.”

“Oh I know that.”

“Good cause I only wish you the best. By the way, where will you guys live?”

Still considering the gravity of the situation, she leaned back in her chair. Suddenly she was scared.

“I don't know. Here on Retaya I think.”

“Excellent. At least we'll be able to keep in touch.”

She glanced at him. “Yeah, we will.”

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