

# KNOTTED

A woman with blonde hair styled up, wearing a black halter-neck gown, stands in a desert-like landscape. The background is a vibrant orange and yellow, featuring a large, textured planet or moon on the left and a bright sun or starburst. The overall scene is dramatic and high-contrast.

VIOLA  
GRACE

A woman with a green thumb is married by proxy to a noble who has a secret life commanding shadows. Gardener versus Guardian.

Rowen went along with her niece to apply for the Volunteer project, and when she is asked to participate, she has to decide if the stars are for her. When they offer her an entire world full of gardens, she is hooked. There is only one problem, no alien can work on the surface of Irudan; they must be married to a local to work there.

Skorin Nakkua wants to get his

family to stop asking him to get married, so when a marriage of convenience is requested by the Alliance, he agrees. His wife will live on Irudan and take on his social responsibilities with the community, leaving him free to focus on his life as Walking Darkness, the head of the Irudan Guardian Base.

He had never expected their paths to cross while he was on duty, but the new Lady Nakkua is far more than he imagined and the convenience of their marriage begins to chafe.

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**Knotted**

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Knotted  
Terran Times Second Wave

By

Viola Grace

# Chapter One

Rowen Hathaway sat in the waiting room with her niece and the three friends she had come with. The Volunteer Centre was busy, but with the applications filled out, Lori and her friends were smiling at the prospect of a life in the stars.

Watching the twenty-year-olds and their excitement at the possibilities that lay within the stars, Rowen felt far older than her twenty-five years.

A voice called out, "R. Hathaway?"



Lori stood and smiled, "You mean L."

The man shook his head. "Rowen Hathaway."

Rowen stood with surprise and put down the pamphlet on what made a good candidate for transport to the stars. She smiled at Lori. "I am sure they will call you next."

Lori looked perturbed for five seconds before she grinned and gave a thumbs up. "Go get them, Aunty!"

Rowen grinned at her niece. Nothing perturbed Lori for long. It was both endearing and annoying

in turn.

With her shoulders back, she headed into the rear offices of the Volunteer Centre.

They passed several doors before the man with her turned a corner and pressed a keypad before ushering her inside. "I apologize for the delay. It took a while to get this testing ground together."

She walked in and covered her mouth with her hand. Laughter spilled out anyway. Every sick potted plant in the building had been crowded onto a desk.

"What do you expect me to do?"

"Whatever you can do. No one

here will judge or threaten you. If you can do what your application hints at, you will be welcomed into the project.”

She rubbed the back of her neck. “I really just came along for Lori.”

“Your sister?”

“Niece. I was an afterthought and she arrived when I was five.” She was babbling but her eyes were on the plants. She needed to touch them, to heal them.

He inclined his head. “Take as long as you like. Someone will come when you are finished.”

She ignored him and walked toward the desk. “Hello, my

lovelies.”

She touched the leaves and watched them flare and fill out again. Rowen was never happier than when she was working with plants, and the plants delighted in her company.

Hathaway Horticulture was a family concern that had flourished in the last fifteen years. It had done well before, but now, its reputation for plants was unparalleled for fifteen counties. Folks drove half a day to get their bedding plants in the spring, and while Rowen didn't care for the people, she loved the young shoots and seeing them go to

good homes.

She caressed the plants one by one until they all glowed with health. Smiling, she continued to stroke them carefully, making them stronger.

“You are quite skilled at that.”

She continued her work. “It is a calling more than a skill. I have minimal interest in people. The plants, however, are always attention getting.”

“I would prefer it if you looked at me.”

“And I would prefer to be back at the greenhouse, but I drove into the city for this meeting or, rather, for

my niece to have this meeting.”

“She is being interviewed as well. She has amazing people skills and resilience.”

Rowen turned and blinked slightly. The man in front of her was shorter than she was by several inches and had taut skin with a silvery finish. His eyes were wide and black on black, his exposed teeth had dagger-like edges.

“Hello, I am Rowen Hathaway.”

“Recruiter Norz, at your service.” He bowed and extended his hand.

She shook his hand carefully.

“Miss Hathaway, I would like to offer you a position in the stars.”

She cocked her head. "Not interested."

Rowen walked to the door, but when she touched the doorframe, she heard, "We have a position for you in the largest garden in occupied space."

Smiling, she turned and looked at him, crossing her arms over her chest and leaning against the door. "I am listening."

He sucked in a breath and laid out the scheme of things.

One hour later, she waited for a grinning Lori and she nodded in support while her niece bubbled over with enthusiasm for her

upcoming training. The other young ladies were excited by meeting actual aliens. Rowen simply kept her mouth shut and drove.

Lori had her date of departure and Rowen had hers as well. It was a conundrum. Should she tell her niece about the deal she had struck or should she spring it on her later? She decided that honesty was the best policy, even if Lori became irritated at sharing the joy. The irritation wouldn't last long, it never did.

It was difficult for her sister, but



within the month, Rowen and Lori were packed, and Lori's shock had turned to enthusiasm when Rowen had explained that they were not only going to different worlds but different societal structures. The only thing they were sharing was the shuttle to the moon base.

"Are you excited, Aunty?" Lori was nearly vibrating with energy as they walked through security with their bio scans letting them pass.

"I am. It will be weird, but I have been shown images of the gardens, and I can hardly wait until I get my hands into that soil." She rubbed her hands together.

“I can hardly wait to work with the Citadel and get the training they offered for channeling my mood.” Lori hugged herself.

They walked forward with half a dozen more trainees and filed into a shuttle. The adventure was about to begin.

Rowen's training at the moon base was short. A few days of combat training and weapons management and she was slated for her position on Irudan, far off in the Nyal Imperium but known for its gardens and sought for herbal remedies to just about everything. There was only one catch, Rowen

needed to be legally married to accept the position. It was a detail she hadn't shared with her family.

At dinner with Lori, she stated, "I am leaving tomorrow."

Lori paused, "That soon?"

"I don't need the same training you do. The more I can do my thing, the stronger I get, and I have already put all the plants here into the pink of health." She put on a pompous look and placed her hand on her breastbone. "My work here is done."

Lori reached out and put a hand on the table, palm up. Rowen covered it with her own. A wave of

worry and hope twisted up her arm.

She smiled. "You need to work on that, Lori. Your worry came through with the hope."

"I will work on it, Aunty. Will you be in touch?"

"As well as I can be. I will be on Irudan, so when you are at the Citadel for your finals, give me a call."

Lori leaned back. "How did you know I was going for final polishing at the Citadel?"

Rowen tapped her palm. "I told you, you gave me more than you thought with that touch."

“So, you just get to slide into a gardening position on Irudan?”

Rowen rubbed the back of her neck. “Not quite just. They have strict immigration guidelines, and I have to be married to work alone for some reason. I need to be wed to an Irudan citizen. The Imperium has found someone willing to give up his freedom on paper. I am going to the administration offices after dinner to get my wedding band.”

Lori stared. “What?”

“Proxy wedding. I agree and I get a band on my wrist. He agrees and he gets a band on his wrist. We get

on with our lives. Easy peezy.”

“I am coming with you.”

“Fine. I suppose you can be my bride’s maid.”

Lori was quiet for the rest of the meal, but when it came time to go to administration, she said, “I will catch up.”

Rowen sighed and she got to her feet, putting their trays in the cleaning slot.

Alone, she headed to the administration office, and to her surprise, Lori met her there with a bouquet of flowers from the oxygen farm. “Every bride needs flowers. Even a proxy one.”

Rowen batted tears from her eyes and smiled as she took the bouquet from her niece. "Thank you, Lori."

Administration Specialist Twonai smiled, and it reached all six of his eyes. "Welcome, Rowen. The flowers are lovely. Do you offer your life and honour to the grace of Irudan? Do you promise to work to make it flourish and bring honour to the name of your husband, Skorin Nakkua?"

"I do."

"Then, with the knot of the Nakkua family, I hereby bind you to Irudan and its population." He gently took her left wrist and tied it

with a silvery band that solidified and began to writhe against her skin.

She watched, and the simple silver tie stretched and twisted until she was wearing a three-inch band made of knots that she could never unravel.

“Lady Nakkua, your ship awaits.” He smiled. “If you are not ready in half an hour, a guard will be sent to fetch you and bring you to your new home. He has made the arrangements needed for you to begin work immediately so there should be no delay.”

“I thought I was to leave



tomorrow.”

“You were told you would leave after the ceremony. That moment has come.” His smile was gentle. “It is all right. We will take care of her from here.”

Rowen sighed and turned to Lori. “I guess this is goodbye for now.”

“Bon voyage, Aunty.”

Lori took the flowers but handed one back. “Take this with you and press it into that book you keep. It is exceptional and should be remembered on this day. It was a good day, and Mom would flip if she knew that you got a guy without even meeting him.”

“Lori, it is a marriage in name only. He has no interest in me, nor I in him. I am sure our paths won’t ever cross. It is a big planet after all.”

“I don’t think so, Aunty. You have a way of drawing people to you, even though you aren’t interested in them. Don’t underestimate the man you just tied yourself to.” Lori smiled.

“How did you get so wise all of a sudden?”

Lori wrinkled her nose. “Training with a Minder. They give you a different way of seeing the world.”

Twonai cleared his throat.

“Twenty-five minutes, Lady Nakkua.”

Rowen sighed. “Which launch bay am I heading toward?”

“Bay five.”

“Fine, Lori, would you walk me there?”

Lori linked arms with her. “Of course, Aunty. I will carry your flowers, so it is the last thing you see before leaving.”

Rowen thanked Twonai and walked down the hall while he registered her union with a man she hadn't met. “Lori, I want your face to be the last thing I see on the moon base. The flowers are dead;

you are alive. I will have you be my last sight from Terra.”

Twenty minutes later, with a bag full of horticultural books, a data pad with Nyal plants, and a few spare grey uniforms, Rowen hugged her niece goodbye and stepped onto the shuttle with the pansy from the bouquet pressed in the pages of a book.

It was time to view the largest garden in the known worlds.

# Chapter Two

Irudan was green. Its defining characteristic was the cover on its surface. There were lakes and oceans and rivers, but the world itself was green with only a few cities to mar the expanse.

“Lady Nakkua, are you comfortable for landing?” The taller of the two guards smiled politely.

“I am. All strapped in and ready. Thank you.” They had refused to give their names, and she hadn’t pressed them. They were servants of the Nakkua family and they had

travelled to retrieve his proxy wife. They had no interest in her beyond following their instructions.

She had gathered that her status was an annoyance by the subtle comments the guards had given her. They had wanted a proper wife for Lord Nakkua and this arrangement was not approved of.

Rowen wasn't good with people, but she knew hostility when it was directed at her. This was one of those times.

They landed precisely on a tarmac, and others were waiting to greet her. The guards handed her her bag and brought her out into

the strange new world that smelled blissfully green.

The two prominent figures carried the colours of a Russian olive tree. Grey-silver skin, pale silvery green hair and paler eyes.

“Hello, I am Head Gardener Liahnarika Gez and this is my husband, Gardener Ilo Gez. Welcome to Irudan, Lady Nakkua. Would you mind?” She gestured to Rowen’s wrist.

Rowen extended her wrist and showed the bracelet. One of the quiet folk from behind the head gardener emerged and took an imprint of the band.

The head gardener smiled. "That is how we register aliens on our soil. Since you have to be married to a citizen to work here, we confirm that there is no one else with this pattern registered to it. It only takes moments."

The person checking the registry smiled. "All is good. The registration is confirmed as viable."

Rowen slumped in relief. She had had a momentary flicker that her invisible husband would denounce her and she would be expelled from the world.

Ilo chuckled. "Now that that is out of the way, come with us.



Quarters and clothing have been arranged for you. We don't use uniforms, but we do tend to favour a practical manner of dressing."

Liahnarika smiled. "We understand that you are a plant healer. We have a greenhouse full of sick plants in this area alone. Do you do diagnostics as well?"

"Sometimes I can feel what is wrong. Sometimes it is just the standards of light, water and mineral content."

Liahnarika looked at her sideways. "Would you be able to offer a demonstration before you settle in, or are you tired?"

“I am tired, but I also need to touch something living. If you wouldn't mind, I would prefer the demonstration.” She had slept on the shuttle, but it had been difficult to relax with the cold attitude of the guards around her.

The couple smiled brightly and the cut of their sleeves seemed designed to show off the pattern of silver on their left wrists. The pattern did match, so she was in the presence of a mated pair.

Rowen didn't even feel her band anymore. In the two days it had taken to get there, she had forgotten that it was there until she

saw it.

“It is just the aliens that require a spouse to work here?”

Ilo shrugged. “We deal with dangerous and amazing plants. Someone has to be accountable if one goes wrong.”

That opened another thousand questions, but their path was taking them to a tube system that zipped along under the surface.

“Most transport is done by underground tube. Irudan is geologically stable for the most part, so they can take you around the globe in hours without disturbing the surface.” Ilo grinned.

“We are very proud of our infrastructure, and we take pains to protect it and the plant compounds that are our greatest export.”

“How?”

Liahnarika smiled, “We have the planetary shielding, but we also have a Guardian outpost. They aren’t called upon often, but when they are, they arrive with force.”

Rowen nodded wisely before she had to give up and admit she didn’t know what the woman was talking about. “What is a Guardian?”

\* \* \* \*

“Your wife has touched down, Lord

Nakkua.”

Skorin Nakkua looked up from the financial reports for the base, and he scowled at the face in the com unit. “Good. I hope she will be happy here. Do you have the fuel usage reports from last month?”

Devnin grinned and sent him the file. “You are not even curious about her?”

“Nope. I have wed according to my family’s demands, and now, they can shut up because it is done. They just said I had to get married, not live or sleep with the female.”

The second in command sighed. “There is more to life than

defending the weak. You can have a life and still do your duty to your world. Many Guardians do.”

“Since when did you become such a nag, Devnin?”

“Since I am curious to see the female you knotted yourself to. Tell me you aren’t curious.”

“She has just arrived. She hasn’t settled in and the formal gatherings she will be required to attend will be soon enough to meet her. Oh, I don’t think they mentioned that to her. Well, she will learn soon enough. The Gezs will sort her out.”

Devnin laughed. “You didn’t tell

her that she will have to attend a minimum of three events a month?"

Skorin shrugged. "I haven't spoken to her, so no. She gets to be here in the gardens and she will pay a price for it."

"That seems a little cold."

Skorin looked at his second in command. "This isn't a job for people who can't keep their personal and private lives separate, Devnin. You need to remember that."

Devnin sobered. "You need to remember that there is more to life than duty, Skorin."

Skorin stabbed at the com unit and shut it off. His mother had been furious when he announced his formal union via proxy, but it was done. The woman was on Irudan and that was the end of it. He hoped she enjoyed her career in the gardens.

\* \* \* \*

Rowen was almost humming with excitement as she walked into the greenhouse filled with alien plants. The Gezs led her to an enclosed space.

Ilo said. "This is where we put the sick ones."



“Where do you want me to start?” Her hands curled and uncurled eagerly.

Liahnarika smiled. “The plant down at the end is toxic, but the sap has restorative properties to some alkaline species. Can you work with it?”

Rowen set her bag down and walked to the shining sapphire shrub with hinds of emerald. She stroked her hands over the surface, not quite touching the plant. The leaves rustled and Rowen caught onto the difficulty the plant was having. “The pot is too big.”

Liahnarika stared. “What?”

“For it to grow the way it is designed to, it needs a smaller pot. This is a mountain plant that likes tight roots. I can revive it for now, but it needs to be downsized into a pot with at least a ten-inch decrease in diameter. It doesn’t like much soil at all. The toxic nature comes from the struggle to rise through the stone.”

Ilo was grinning. “I believe that you have passed the test. Restore the plant to health and the transplant will be scheduled for tomorrow, Gardener Rowen Nakkua.”

Rowen touched the plant and it

plumped out, resuming an even sapphire sheen. She rubbed her hands on her bodysuit. "I am not affected by plant-based toxins. Never have been."

Liahnarika looked grudgingly impressed. "We will show you to your quarters in the manor. First meal will be served at dawn, second at noon and third at dusk. You can always get your own meal from the dispensers."

They were walking back through the greenhouse and Rowen looked around longingly.

"Where will I be working?"

Ilo looked at her. "We will begin

you here for a few weeks and then consideration to putting you out in the great gardens will be given. Many of the trees are old and they can suffer illness that needs to be addressed in days. If a situation of that nature occurs, you will be sent for immediately.”

Rowen nodded. “Understood. Thank you both for your time.”

Liahnarika smiled. “The Nakkua family are good friends and we are aware of your situation. You might not be thanking us when you have to attend the first formal function as Lady Nakkua.”

Rowen chuckled. “No one here

knows me, I am hardly likely to be invited anywhere.”

Ilo rolled his eyes. “You do not understand Irudan society. You belong to the family, so when they accept, you have accepted. I am guessing that Skorin married you to satisfy his family’s urge to have him representing them. You will be his proxy whether you like it or not. He is a very clever man.”

Rowen felt nerves rise where joy had just been. She had been conned, and if she ever met her husband, she was going to kick his ass.

# Chapter Three

The first week was spent going to and from the greenhouse. Rowen met with other gardeners and discussed the needs of the plants as well as the seasons that they would be facing once they were back in their proper place in the gardens.

Every time she realised that she was working in a plant hospital, she smiled. She spent her days grinning.

She was encouraging a pallet of new arrivals to steady after a soil imbalance when she heard Liah all

her name.

“Rowen? I have someone here who wants to meet you.”

Liah and her friend were in the maze of plants, but Rowen stood and wiped her hands on a towel as she wandered toward the calmly chatting voices.

Formality between her and the Gezs was gone after her first four days at the greenhouse. They were no longer able to just supply the local area of the gardens, but also plants from across the continents. She had gained them more funding and social standing for their greenhouse. She was now Rowen

and they were Liah and Ilo. It made things easier.

She came around the corner and an older Irudan woman with eyes like a hawk's fixated on her.

"Rowen, this is Akadeel. Akadeel, this is Rowen." Liah looked nervous.

Akadeel looked her over from head to toe. "Turn around, child."

Rowen slowly turned, and when she faced Akadeel again, the woman smiled.

"You are biddable, that is good. I was worried that my son had picked a half-wit or a riot waiting to happen, but you are very



presentable for an alien.”

Rowen frowned and then caught on with a sinking feeling. “Akadeel Nakkua.”

The woman extended her left hand and Rowen took it, placing her hand under it as was appropriate for meeting a social superior.

Her mother-in-law smiled. “Rowen Nakkua. Your work here is done for the day. We have a benefit this weekend and I know that you are not suitably attired. You require clothing and I need to learn more about you. This needs to be as seamless as possible for the family’s

sake.”

Liah looked nervously at the matriarch before she asked Rowen, “How far did you get?”

“They are ready for transport, I was just chatting with them to give them a boost for the journey. They can go.”

Liah smiled. “You are a wonder.”

Rowen smiled. “I am doing what I love.”

Akadeel cleared her throat. “With me. Now.”

Rowen followed her and tossed the cloth onto a workbench as she passed. It seemed that she was going shopping.

She cleared her throat. "I can't actually afford anything, madam."

"You are a Nakkua now with all that entails. I will see that your accounts are set up and you have funds for whatever you wish to pursue." Akadeel slowed her stride when they exited the greenhouse.

They paced together for a moment before Akadeel asked, "Do you always get so dirty at work?"

Rowen chuckled. "Only if I am doing it right. Should I change before we go, perhaps grab a quick shower?"

"No. We will take care of that at the salon. They are waiting for you

and a quick solar shower should do wonders. My pilot is waiting.”

Rowen was suddenly nervous. “Pilot?”

“Indeed. We can’t get what I want here in town. The salon is two prefectures over. They are opening exclusively for us.” Akadeel smiled with a definite tilt to her chin.

Akadeel liked throwing money around and liked being exclusive even more.

Rowen rubbed her neck. “I am not sure if you know about the situation, but I am not trying to insinuate myself into your family.”

“I am aware of it. My son thought

it would be an amusing out to wed an alien by proxy and carry on with his own affairs. I am not amused, but you are not objectionable and are bringing our research department a lot of fanfare in the community. Without meaning to, my son chose well. That amuses me.”

“I have only been here a week.”

“And yet, the ill plants are being returned to the soil and leaving room for more needy vegetation. You know your stuff.”

The pilot was indeed waiting outside the manor house. The vehicle was tall enough to get into

comfortably and to sit upright.

“In case you haven’t ridden in one, that is a skimmer. Timor is my pilot and he will take us where we need to go.” Akadeel was beginning to brim with energy.

Rowen had been reading up on talents and psychic energy, and if she wasn’t mistaken, Akadeel had a talent and it seemed to be directed at shopping; either that or shopping was an intimate act for her and Rowen was just along for a very uncomfortable ride.

Timor nodded to them. “Countess Nakkua, Lady Nakkua.”

Rowen smiled and bobbed her

head.

She sat next to Countess Akadeel and took up a prim pose. A moment later, they were in the air and zipping through pathways and switchbacks on a cushion of air.

“Do you often travel like this?” Rowen felt it necessary to break the tension. The world was moving past too fast for her to orient herself.

“Above-ground permits are only issued to certain few. Why have one if you are not going to use it?”

That seemed to sum it up. There were first class tubes down below that could be used for a modest fee,

but if her mother-in-law wanted to use her permit, then they would use it.

Rowen was already familiarizing herself with the means to travel. Eventually, she thought, she would save enough to take a holiday in the grand gardens spotted all over the world.

Irudan held thousands of possibilities for her and she was only just beginning to recognize them.



# Chapter Four

The shopping had gone off without a hitch and the clothing was being delivered the day before the party. Rowen wasn't comfortable with Akadeel, but they had reached an understanding...she thought.

Rowen finished her work for the day, logged the plants that were clear for returning to their point of origin and headed home. Akadeel had the next day filled with trips to a groomer, but for tonight Rowen could be grubby and drink a glass of wine in front of the vid screen

while she went through boxes.

Her apron had pinged just after lunch, and she had checked her small message server. Her new clothing had arrived.

She walked to the manor house and headed up the stairs to her rooms. There was something exciting about opening the clothing that she had only the faintest memory of. Rowen had tried on dozens of outfits, and Akadeel had approved fourteen for this season with matching shoes and underpinnings.

Rowen desperately wanted to frolic in the clothing, but she

needed a shower first.

After the speediest shower she could manage, she put on a loose robe and opened the first box. Her hair was swinging in the way, but she flicked it over her shoulders before she opened the pressed cardboard box. Smiling, she lifted the gown out of its transport and she held it up to her chest. For a girl who never went to prom, this many formal gowns were dizzying.

One by one, she waltzed the gowns into her wardrobe until her ensembles were all accounted for and all that was left was a strange crate that was not made of the

recyclable cardboard of the others.

A note on the box was rather cryptic. *Open to see your destiny.*

With curiosity rampant, she flicked at the latches until she could remove the outer plate. "Oh my."

She heaved the portrait out and couldn't stop looking at it. It was both attractive and creepy. Rowen set the portrait at the foot of her bed, climbed onto the sheets and stared at it.

A man with the skin tone of an Irudan was embracing a woman who was obviously Rowen. She reached out and traced the heavy tattoos that marked his back and

shoulders, the narrow waist and ended at the upper curve of his buttocks.

The lines were similar to a vine and she knew that pattern. She shifted forward and the light caught the wedding band on her arm. She jerked back. "Holy crap."

According to the portrait, that muscled body belonged to her husband, or at least one of his relatives.

Asking men to display their backs was probably not going to be an easy thing to do.

She stared at the picture and her pulse sped up. The Rowen in the

image had her leg draped over the man's hips. His face wasn't visible but hers was, and Rowen was positive that she had never seen that particular expression in a mirror. Her eyes were half closed, lids heavy, and when she analyzed the tension of his buttocks, she blinked rapidly. The couple in the image were having sex. It explained the swollen and parted lips that she was pressing to the side of his shoulder.

Rowen shivered and shifted her shoulders so that the fabric of her robe wasn't touching her nipples. They had suddenly become tight

and ached. She stared at the image until her entire body throbbed. She flipped a sheet over the image and set it against the wall.

She breathed slowly until she was calm and went to the dispenser for the glass of wine she had promised herself. Without dinner, it burned through her veins and gave her the sleep that was preferable to staring at the portrait.

Why want a man who didn't want her?

She winced as the groomer went after every speck of dirt under her nails. The soaking, oiling and scrubbing had still left traces of her

work on her body. The groomer was out to get every last bit.

Akadeel was nearby and watching with a narrow supervisory gaze. Rowen waited while her toenails were painted a delicate pink and her nails tinted a dark rose. Her hair was already up in a slick twist and time was ticking onward.

Her makeup was applied by expert hands after six hours of supervised preening and plucking plus a surprise waxing job that had caused her to switch from Nyal Common into plain old English cuss words.



Under the expert hands, she was tucked and dressed until Akadeel nodded her approval.

“Come with me, daughter. As the hosts, we need to be there when the guests arrive.”

Rowen inhaled against the constriction of her gown. “You didn’t mention that I am expected to host it.”

Akadeel patted her hand. “I know, dearling. I did not want you to run.”

They arrived at the hall via skimmer and Rowen stuck close to Akadeel and did as she said.

A tall man was waiting for them

inside, and he smiled. "Worth the wait, darling."

He walked up to Akadeel and kissed her soundly. She squawked and slapped his shoulder until he righted her.

She quickly checked her lipstick in a nearby mirror and left Rowen with the man.

"Hello, daughter. I felt we should meet before the event began, as my son will not be at your side. I am Drimal Nakkua and you are married to my son, Skorin." He bent over her hand and kissed it warmly. There was nothing creepy about it, just a love for everything

around him.

He had an open heart and it glowed brightly through his olive green eyes.

“Rowen...uh, Nakkua?”

“With more conviction next time. You are Lady Nakkua and you are hosting this event to meet our pocket of society here. For this season, you will be able to confine your social activities to our little pocket of green, but next season, you will be asked to travel far and wide for the family to attend anything that Akadeel does not wish to.”

“So, I am not only Skorin’s

whipping boy but Akadeel's as well? What fun." She wrinkled her nose.

"You have a sense of humour. I do think we will get along fine."

Akadeel returned from fussing with her makeup and sighed as she took her husband's arm. "Don't do that again. I don't want to look a fright."

"You could never do that, love, and you are my countess, you are mine as I am yours. Remember that." There was a playful hint of steel in his tone and Akadeel deflated a little.

Rowen tried not to smirk at the

bully of the afternoon turning into a charming lamb. She was going to have to face the wolves, so having a lamb on her side wasn't going to help much.

# Chapter Five

The ballroom was filled with those who wanted to meet the new Lady Nakkua. Rowen smiled, shook hands and chatted with the gardeners in the mix.

She kept her smile fixed and her conversation light. Describing her home became second nature, and trying to quantify her skills was her polite chitchat of the moment. If they asked, she told them, but aside from that, she tried to keep to herself.

After the ball dwindled and

Akadeel whispered that she had been a complete success, Rowen headed out onto the wide paved deck and down into the garden of the manor.

She wandered between the hedges and trees, caressing them lightly as she walked. She smiled as she got in touch with the reason she was here. The medical gardens were already scrambling to get her in.

Rowen looked back toward the lights of the ballroom and sighed. Tomorrow, she could play with plants again. Tonight, she had to return to the social setting she had

dropped herself into.

\* \* \* \*

Skorin used the satellite link to zoom in on the woman in the gardens. Her features showed resignation and he knew that look. He saw it in the mirror all the time.

It wasn't until she raised her left hand to check her hair and her cuff gleamed that he realised who he was looking at. He had found his wife, and he hadn't really been looking for her.

He sat back and sighed when she returned to the ballroom. "This is not good."



His body hummed with awareness. Just seeing her had increased his heart rate and begun a slow rise in his cock. It must have had something to do with possession. She was his in the eyes of the law, and he was a tremendous fan of upholding the law.

He scowled and shut down the satellite feeds. He had seen her walk the garden, and even through the telescopes, he could see that they had flourished at her touch. It made him wonder what else would spring to life when she touched it.

Growling, he got to his feet.

“Devnin!”

“Yes, Skorin?”

“Do we have a mission?”

“No. We have the night off. Uadon is communing with the rock and Pleska is staring into the sky and watching night butterflies.”

Skorin scowled.

Devnin said carefully, “Why don’t you put in an appearance at the ball?”

Skorin let his shadow free and lifted him up toward the ceiling. “Repeat that?”

Uadon came in. “We have a mission.”

Skorin dropped his second in

command. They sprang into action and got into their suits. Once they were geared up and Devnin was behind the controls, Uadon handed out their missions.

In a brilliant example of bad taste, armed men in body armour had stolen a member of the nobility from a local benefit.

Skorin had a sick feeling. "Who was the noble?"

They checked the file and all went quiet until Devnin said, "Lady Nakkua."

Skorin shook his head and crossed his fingers. "Please let it be my mother or aunt Cressina."

They put their faceplates into position and headed for the ballroom. If they needed to track, it had to be from the point of origin.

Count and Countess Nakkua were waiting for them in the ballroom. A few of the guests had been beaten and they were clumping together in little frightened groups.

Walking Darkness approached his family. "Count and Countess Nakkua, are you all right?"

His mother nodded but looked furious. "They took my daughter-in-law. I require you to return her to me."

His father was busy stroking his wife's shoulder. "If you don't, Akadeel will go in search of her. The girl is special and new to Irudan. To be hauled off for the podders to try and get an accelerated crop isn't fair to her. We would ask that the Guardians retrieve her before they can damage her in any way.

Walking Darkness nodded his head. "We will find her. Rock Wall will hold you all in until we return."

Uadon barricaded up all doors and windows while they went looking for a witness.

Pleska called nocturnal insects and spoke with one, asking for tracking assistance. In exchange for a grape, the scorpion agreed to lead them to the hatch that the podders had taken.

Devnin chuckled. "I don't know how I feel about your bribing informants."

Pleska snorted, and they followed the direction of the insect's tracking until they were in the garden and the upturned soil gave them a clear direction into the ground.

\* \* \* \*

Rowen was tired of being shoved.

“I don’t understand what you want.”

One of the grubby young men pushed her further down the tunnels. “We have a sick plant and we need you to heal it.”

“Why didn’t you apply to the greenhouse?” She had an idea of what was going on, but she was going to play stupid as long as she could. If she could slow the process, someone might come to help.

“The greenhouse isn’t a suitable environment for this baby. We love her and we don’t want to let her out of our sight.”

That told her that there was a

distinct emotional element around the plant she was heading toward. Emotional attachments to plants were dangerous when you needed something from them, and these young men were dangerous.

She wrinkled her nose. The young men also hadn't bathed recently and the tunnel they marched her through was soft mud instead of polished stone.

She had shucked her first high-heeled shoe when they entered the tunnel and the second one twenty minutes later.

Her feet were only too happy to be on soft soil instead of in the



torturous shoes. The scent of tree and vine was getting thicker in the air as she stumbled along.

The narrow tunnel opened suddenly and she gasped at what she saw. Two dozen young folk were lying on the ground, licking at some bright yellow pods.

The tree that produced that pod was the centre of the cavern.

It had low, gnarled roots that protruded above the ground, an ashy grey trunk and glossy leaves that were losing their gloss. The pods that were carefully collected were splotchy but that colouration was unnatural. She could tell that

this was a tree in distress.

They shoved her forward and she tripped on the edge of her gown, landing hard on her arm.

She hissed and rolled over, examining the gash in her skin.

“Get up and fix it.”

Rowen looked at the two young men with their large pupils and fists clenched. She slowly got to her feet and stumbled to the tree. She leaned against it and closed her eyes. “How long has it been sick?”

They shook their heads. “We don’t know. The buzz lasts less and less now.”

Rowen winced and turned to

touch the tree. She heard the sound of a weapon warming up.

“If you hurt the tree, we will kill you.”

Rowen winced and pressed her palms to the bark, blood streaming down her arm to puddle at the roots. Her pain must have gotten through, because the tree began to sway. The pods tightened and regained their yellow colour. The leaves began to shine, and to Rowen’s shock, vines crept around her to lift her upward into the spreading fingers of the branches.

She heard cries of distress and new voices that were not stunned

and strung out. She tried to look through the branches, but she was cocooned safely in vines, leaves and wood. This plant wanted to protect her. It was nice that she had someone to stand between her and danger, as it took some of the loneliness away.

There was a fight in the room before all fell silent.

“Lady Nakkua?”

She shifted, a little lightheaded. “In the tree. It pulled me up here and I can’t get down.”

To her surprise, tendrils of darkness came up into the tree and carefully eased her protection away

before lifting her and bringing her softly down into the arms of a man in body armour. "Hello."

"You are wounded?"

She chuckled and leaned against him. "Yes. I fell and my kind has too many blood-carrying systems on the surface and thin skin. It is a sucky survival mechanism."

"You are Lady Nakkua?"

She smiled and yawned in his arms. "That is what they tell me. I prefer to be just Rowen."

"You repair plants?"

"I heal and encourage plants. It is a compulsion more than a talent. Irudan is heaven."

He was carrying her through the tunnels and his hands were very careful.

She was surprised by his next question. "Where is your husband?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Probably doing something important or something."

"Why wouldn't he be there?"

She opened her eyes a slit and looked at the empty faceplate. "Ask his parents."

He chuckled. "He might have his reasons."

"He probably does. I don't care. I am enjoying the plants." Blackness

fought her mind for supremacy and she fought back.

With a short upward hike, they broke the surface again and the air was clear of dirt and filled with night-blooming flowers.

Another man came up to them and spoke quickly to the one holding her. She was dazed enough to notice the burnished orange of the other man's uniform.

"Fire Fall says that your wound needs to be cauterized. It does not seem to be clotting."

She nodded. "That sounds right. I feel like I am draining away."

He knelt on the ground and

lowered her while the other male examined the slash down her arm.

“Hello, Lady Nakkua. I am Fire Fall and I will be causing you pain today.”

“Go for it.” She dug her free hand into the turf and held on while Fire Fall examined her wound before he drew a line of fire down her skin.

She gasped, arched and passed out, only to wake up seconds later to scream her head off.

\* \* \* \*

With a med kit over his shoulder and Lady Nakkua in his arms, he gestured for Uadon to remove the



block from the manor.

Walking Darkness headed toward the count and countess. "We have found her. She was battered and injured but she will survive. Where can I put her?"

Countess Akadeel gave the woman a pitying look. "Her room is in the manor at the top of the stairs on the left. The gold suite."

He nodded and walked the short distance to the manor, and from there, toward the stairs that he had pelted down as a child.

His wife weighed no more than a feather and her skin was chalky. Fire Fall had given him a list of

medical treatments and they all began with getting her out of her gown.

Walking Darkness set her on her bed and removed his gloves and helmet. He turned her gently and opened her gown and the undergarments that let the strapless creation hang so perfectly on her. Her feet were stained with soil and he smiled at the clue she had left them at the split path of the tunnels. Two shoes had sped up their retrieval.

He went to the lav and brought back a basin and towels. With care, he wiped the blood off her skin

before moving on to the dirt. Her body was a map of the evening and he kicked himself for not being there with her. They may have a marriage of convenience, but she didn't need to be alone.

Once she was clean, he administered the supplemental shots for blood production and he covered her with a sheet. He couldn't do anything about the mud and leaves in her hair. The bots would take care of the sheets in the morning. Once the medical attention was finished, he looked around.

His mother's touch was

everywhere. The gowns in the wardrobe were definitely her choices, as were the deadly shoes. He suspected that if his wife had a choice, it would have been gardening boots all the time.

There was something odd leaning against the wall and he peeled back the fabric cover. She hadn't been shopping for interior design items. His parents had only set up her accounts that morning.

He leaned back in surprise at the image on the canvas. Seeing his own body occupied with that of his proxy wife was a bit of a surprise. He crouched in front of the image

and analyzed the curve of her shoulder, the expression on his face. He knew the portrait style as well. Guardians all over the Imperium had been lining up to get their image under Rhoda's brush. It seemed that she had offered this portrait to Rowen the moment she had agreed to the match.

He ran his finger over the curve of her lips on the image. If he had seen this first, tonight might not have happened.

She stirred and hissed on the bed. He was at her side in a moment, holding her down and murmuring softly. "Easy, miss. You have had

quite the evening.”

She struggled against the pain.  
“Who are you?”

“Walking Darkness. A Guardian of Irudan. We had to find you in the tunnels. It was not an easy thing and you were injured. Your wound was healed, but it took fire to stop the bleeding so you will have to head to the medical centre in the morning to remove the blisters. For tonight, you are safe in your rooms.”

She looked up at him with dazed eyes in a leaf green that surprised him. There were stars around her pupils, and she focussed on him

with difficulty. "Thank you, Guardian. Is the tree all right?"

He smiled. "It will be returned to the research area and the podders will have to move to their next sprout."

"How many are there?" She tried to sit up but he held her down.

"It is not your concern. We will deal with them as they appear."

"How did they know who I am and what I am doing? The only people who know are the academics and the tunnel had to have been crafted the moment I arrived." She lifted her left arm and hissed. "Nasty."

“The healers can remove the mark.”

“I am more concerned with the blisters rupturing while I am at work tomorrow. Scars don't bother me.”

He tried to look casual. “I am certain your husband objects.”

She snorted. “He is doing whatever he is doing and I am doing whatever I am doing. The two need never meet. I would rather be useful than worrying about my appearance to please someone else. Lady Akadeel is the exception. She is scary.” She smiled at him, belying her statement.



He had to admire her aplomb. Without thinking about it, he leaned in and pressed his lips to hers. It was like kissing a flower petal spiked with heat.

She froze in shock and then tensed, lifting her good arm. The blow that she administered to his jaw was unexpected and knocked him off the bed and to the floor.

Rowen sat up and glared at him. "I may have been a damsel in distress and you my knight in armour, but I am not going to go any further than *thank you*. I am married by whatever means and manner. Feel free to show yourself

out.”

He fought the urge to grin. He was sure she wouldn't appreciate it. “As you wish, Lady Nakkua, but I will see you again. There is the matter of the deposition that you must make for the peacekeepers. I will see you tomorrow or later today. Get some rest, Lady Nakkua, it has been lovely meeting you.”

# Chapter Six

The moment she asked about where to find medical treatment for the burn scar, Lady Akadeel was summoned.

Rowen sat in a corner with the waitresses milling around and bringing her cup after cup of tea. Rowen had braided her hair into a thick cable that rested on her left breast and her standard gardening gear was her preferred clothing choice of the day.

It wasn't Lady Akadeel that came through the door. Two hooded

Guardians, one in black and one in shades of flames, came to her.

“Lady Nakkua, we are here to escort you to a healer.”

The one in flames bowed. “My apologies for the scarring, but it is my only party trick. Fire Fall, at your service. You might remember my companion Walking Darkness from last evening?”

She twisted her lips and inclined her head. “I seem to recall his medical attention and I am delighted to see him again.”

Walking Darkness bowed. “If you are ready, Lady Nakkua?”

She rose to her feet and waved

her bruised right hand. "Show me the way and I will follow."

Fire Fall stood next to her while Walking Darkness led the way. "I thought you only suffered a gash last night."

"Ah, I must have hit my hand on something during the events of the evening." She smiled and shrugged innocently.

"Right. Please, this way."

They walked with her out and down to the tubes. The private tube pod was waiting, and the moment that they stepped into it and settled, it slipped onto the track and they were zipping through the

darkness.

She sat between the two Guardians with her fingers laced together.

Walking Darkness lifted her hand. "How did you do this?"

"I must have hit a rock last night." She flicked her gaze toward his face.

His eyes widened. "My jaw did that?"

Fire Fall leaned over and chuckled. "You hit him?"

"I have no idea what I hit. I woke up with the bruise."

Fire Fall whipped out a data pad. "What species are you again?"

She looked at him with surprise.  
“Terran. Why?”

“I have got to get myself a Terran. The Irudan women are far too caught up with the hero business. I want a woman who will put me in my place when I get out of line.”

Rowen laughed. “Seriously?”

“Of course. Once you gain the status of Guardian and are on a few news vids, the women of the Irudan come flocking to you at every public gathering in search of a husband. Even if they don't know who you are, they know what you are and that causes weird

situations. Walking Darkness can tell you about some of the scrapes he has been in. Women hide in the oddest places when they see him and try to catch a glimpse of his face or other bits.”

“What good would that do?”

“If they could confirm his identity, they could force him into marriage. Blackmail.”

“Wow. Why does it matter?”

Rowen kept her attention on Fire Fall. She could almost feel Walking Darkness’s gaze on her.

“Family is everything here on Irudan. Being an unwed Guardian is a social disparity. The older you



get, the more folk watch you. Once a Guardian is married, they no longer have a reason to hide themselves. It is a peculiar situation. A wife makes them unattractive to the opposite sex.”

“I see. Well, that explains why a Guardian would do it, but with your knowledge of the Irudan, why would an ordinary man do it?” Rowen waited for the answer, but their pod came to a halt and was lifted from the tracks.

Fire Fall lifted her by her elbow and helped her leave the pod. Walking Darkness didn't say a word and his hands were clenched.

They walked her through the open underground spaces and to a very elegant medical facility.

The receptionist smiled brightly at the two Guardians. Rowen smirked that she was finally invisible. Her height had always made moving in society awkward, but here, she was average in most ways aside from skin tone.

Walking Darkness stepped forward. "Lady Nakkua has an appointment with Healer Wyfin."

The receptionist leaned forward and pressed her breasts together in invitation. Rowen was amazed at the blatant move. The woman

didn't know anything about Walking Darkness aside from his status as a Guardian. At least Rowen knew that he was a helluva kisser.

The receptionist inhaled sharply. "The healer is occupied. Perhaps we could have a chat while she waits?"

Walking Darkness sent a tendril of shadows over to the com unit and his voice became harsh. "Call him."

The receptionist sat back and she pouted.

Leaving Walking Darkness to negotiate her time with a healer,

she caressed the plant on the edge of the countertop. With Fire Fall at her heels, she wandered through the waiting room, ignoring the other patients. She encouraged all the plants she touched until a young man came up to her.

“Are you in much pain, miss?”

“As much as can be expected.”

“Who are you here to see, miss?”

She looked back toward the counter where the receptionist was in full flirt once again. “I am supposed to be seeing Healer Wyfin but the receptionist won’t let us through until Walking Darkness agrees to see her socially.

Apparently my pain doesn't rate." She chuckled.

The man stiffened his shoulders and walked to the reception desk, standing behind the woman who was telling Walking Darkness that she would let the lady have her appointment if he would take her for tea during her break.

The young man tapped her on the shoulder and said, "Summon a replacement. Your services are no longer required. The lady in question has second-degree burns and a broken hand, and that is merely what is initially visible. Withholding treatment for your sex

life is not the mandate of this practice.”

The woman began to shake, and she reached for the com, asking another woman to come to the front desk.

The young man smiled at Rowen. “Please come this way, Lady Nakkua.”

“Um, thank you, but I didn’t want to get her fired.”

“She made the choice to forget that her first duty is to the patient. I am Healer Wyfin, by the way.”

“I would greet you properly but...” she shrugged.

“I understand. Come this way

and we will soon have you sorted out.”

Fire Fall was on her heels and Walking Darkness was immediately behind them.

“Would you like them in the room? The Guardians, I mean.”

“Certainly. It will not make a difference to me.” She smiled and flexed her right hand.

She sat down in a medical chamber unlike anything she had ever seen. It was more of a spa than cold and sterile than she had anticipated.

“I will need you to put on an exam gown so that I can do a full

workup. They are off to the side there behind that curtain." He smiled brightly and went to wash his hands.

She was less than enthusiastic about the full workup, but she stripped out of her gardening clothing and slid into the gown that tied on the sides. The entire gown was designed to be peeled apart to view her skin and then replaced to hide it again. It wasn't a bad design as long as you weren't in a hurry.

With her braid down her back, she tiptoed out in bare feet. Fire Fall and Walking Darkness were watching her, as was Healer Wyfin.



“So, are all medical facilities like this?” She settled on her back with her arms relaxed.

Wyfin shook his head. “Most use machines for diagnostics. I am one of the few contact healers on Irudan. Your injuries as a side effect of your kidnapping gained you today’s appointment.”

He cupped her right hand in his and he smiled. “Not broken, just bruised. Do you always turn this colour?”

“When I have impacted something with unsupported flesh, yes.” She wrinkled her nose.

She held her breath as his fingers

slowly stroked her skin and the colour shifted until it was healthy once again. "That wasn't too bad."

He grinned and moved his chair around to the other side of the exam bed. "This will be more of a challenge. What cut you?"

Rowen sighed. "In all honesty, the gouge was caused by the tree with the yellow pods. It was so thirsty for minerals that when my arm came into contact with it, it ripped through my skin. I watered it with my blood for a bit, and when the Guardians arrived, the tree tried to apologize by pulling me up and out of harm's way."

He was stroking the skin of her inner arm slowly, and each stroke removed another layer of blistering and scarring.

“I was fading in and out when Walking Darkness scooped me out of the tree and Fire Fall cauterized the wound. After that, I passed out. I must have hit my right hand somewhere in between.”

It took twenty minutes to fix her arm, and after ten, she was having a problem. Every soft stroke of his fingers sent spasms through her sex. She wrinkled her nose and squirmed.

He threw her a wink. “Half of

one percent of patients have that reaction.”

“It is just the matter of being touched, I think. My body takes everything as foreplay.”

Walking Darkness shifted forward but Fire Fall pulled him back.

The moment that the arm was healed, he began a slow pass over her body, his palms half an inch from her. He found something on her knee and he flipped the gown panel aside to heal the bruise and abrasion she didn't know she had.

When her front was checked out, he asked her to turn over and he

opened the panel of her gown. He hesitated. "Has someone removed your family markings?"

"My what?"

"When you marry here, there is usually a ceremony where you get markings from your husband's family. You are saying that that didn't happen?"

"Um, no. My people don't mark themselves when they marry. They wear a band and that is sufficient."

The healer nodded. "Right. I just rarely see a woman with skin so smooth and unmarred, and never do I see it in a married woman."

"Consider today an education,

Healer Wyfin.”

“I am doing so, Lady Nakkua.”  
His voice indicated his smile.

He healed a patch on her backside where she had struck the tree and then she was done.

“You are finished, Lady Nakkua. Feel free to resume your clothing.”

She pushed herself back to her feet and zipped back around the screen. She was out of the gown and back in her gardening suit in seconds. The boots took a few moments longer, but when she was out, she flexed her hands and smiled.

“Right, so we can be on our

way?" She smiled at Wyfin.

"Just pay at the front desk and you are good. Come back if you need anything, Lady Nakkua."

He took her hand and raised it to his lips.

A flash of shadow parted their skin and pushed them away from each other.

Healer Wyfin blushed a deep olive. "Apologies. That was beyond the scope of treatment."

Walking Darkness took her gently by the shoulders and headed for the door.

She didn't have a chance to say goodbye. She was marched to the

lobby and she paid her bill with a thumbprint and ocular scan.

After that, they were on the way to the private pods.

Fire Fall smiled, "You have a lovely spine, Lady Nakkua. Is it true that you haven't been touched?"

"Not in the last few years. Amongst my own kind, I am too tall and too obsessed with plants. A bit of experimenting just after puberty was the extent of it."

Walking Darkness paused and turned his hood toward her. "You are very forthright about these matters."



“Why not? They don’t matter. I can be aroused with a touch. So can most folk that I know.”

Fire Fall paused and laughed. “Valid point.”

They were in the pod when she finally asked Fire Fall, “Do the ladies really have tattoos covering their backs?”

He nodded. “It shows the change in allegiance from birth family to husband. The artists come along to the wedding and the bride is marked in front of witnesses.”

“Ouch.”

Walking Darkness spoke. “It doesn’t hurt an Irudan woman. Our

skin is thicker than yours.”

She turned toward him. “Your body language said you wanted to hit the healer. Why?”

He looked at her with eyes lost in shadows, and he slowly pulled up the cuff of his suit up to expose an intricate band on his forearm.

“That looks like...that is just like...” She extended her own and matched the pattern. She stared into his hood and then punched him in the shoulder. “You jackass!”

Fire Fall chuckled. “Lady Nakkua, you really have to stop hitting him.”

She learned that. Tendrils of

shadow that managed to have the compression of a gravity field bound her.

“I am requesting your discretion on this, Rowen.”

She narrowed her eyes at him and struggled against him. “Bite me.”

# Chapter Seven

Back at the manor, Fire Fall suddenly decided he needed to get something to eat while Walking Darkness escorted her to the depths of the maze.

He flipped back his cowl the moment they were alone and pulled down the fabric that covered him from cheekbones to neckline. "Lady Nakkua."

She scowled and fought against the bands still around her. "Lord Nakkua."

He sighed. "Please, you are still

fighting. If you relax and promise not to hit me again, I will release you."

Rowen grumped but finally nodded. "I won't hit you."

He let the shadows slip from her, but there was a lot more contact against her than she was expecting.

She took a cautious step back. "So, why did you need a fake wife?"

He stepped forward. "You are not a fake wife, you are a real one; this was just supposed to be a cold bed so I could concentrate on being a Guardian. That fell flat the moment that you set foot on this

world.”

Rowen pursed her lips. “What do you want from me?”

“An opportunity to court you. If you don’t wish to share a bed with me, I will understand, but I would like the chance to earn your trust and your affection.”

She held up her palms. “Wait. Are you saying what I think you are saying?”

“I would like the opportunity to seduce my wife. Yes.”

Rowen was stunned. This was not what she had signed up for.

He grabbed her wrist and he brought her right palm to his lips.

A shiver ran up her arm, across her breast and below her navel.

She cleared her throat. "Uh, seduce me?"

"Indeed. I would like to call on you during my free time and yours. I would accompany you to the events my mother plans and stand at your side. Perhaps we could even dance."

His eyes still held shadows in them, and he trailed his lips down her inner wrist. The shivering became more intense as he went.

"I don't know how to dance. I had to turn away all requests...was it only last night?" Her voice was

throaty and breathless.

“I can teach you. It is a simple matter when there is trust. Shall I show you?”

She swallowed. He had spoken with his mouth against her skin. She could feel the words and they echoed in her body.

“I think you are pretty good at the seduction thing.”

She felt him smile against her skin and shadows spun around them to ensure privacy.

He caught her in his arms and pulled her body flush with his. To her surprise, he began to murmur instructions in low tones for how



easy it was to dance on Irudan.

Her mind was spinning with the feel of him. He was solidly built and smelled of soap and midnight when everything was cool and dark.

“You are giving away your identity and your courtship, Skorin, if I may call you that?”

“I do not care. You are here, we are married, you have met local society and it is acceptable that they now know who and what I am, and who you are by default.”

He moved with her in elaborate patterns that left her dizzy and clinging to him. She held tight, and

when he stopped, she was breathless, disoriented and clutching his chest. He kissed her, holding the back of her head where the braid began.

She parted her lips and invited him inside, moaning when the hot slide of his tongue entered her. His other hand pressed her hips into the obvious erection below his waist and she rocked against him.

He lifted her and held her tight until there was only fabric between them as he rocked her harder and faster.

The friction and heat built to an insurmountable wave, and then,

she felt a cool entry to her body that thickened suddenly and she groaned in his arms, clinging to him while her body shook.

She moaned as he helped her lower her leg and his kisses became soothing instead of savage.

His hand still supported her and she was glad. She needed it.

Rowen pressed her forehead to his chest with her cheeks scarlet.

“Dance instruction?”

“I am a multi-tasker when it comes to dealing with a woman I want. That woman now and forever is you. You are the one I need to convince.”

“This isn’t what I signed up for when I came to Irudan. I just wanted to spend time in the gardens.”

“I want you to do that as well. There will be nothing changed except my attentions during your free time and at the events you are required to attend. Even as a full husband, I respect your occupation, and in fact, I still have one of my own that will require odd hours and late nights. Neither of us can give up what we are for the other and the courtship will simply get us moving in the odd rhythm together.”

The idea of moving in rhythm with his was tempting. That brought a thought to bear. "Did you uncover that portrait?"

His cheeks darkened. "I did. Rhoda of Yacaro does excellent work. She is one of your kind with a talent for seeing a person's perfect match or destiny. She puts a higher priority on working with your species to get you settled in the Imperium. It is a dangerous place for a woman alone. I believe that she is seeking out likely matches for you."

"So, your back really has all that stuff on it?"

“It does indeed. That is a Nakkua family mark. I got it when I was seventeen.” His hands were now cradling her with care.

She shivered in his grip and slowly eased away. “That was interesting and all, but when and where I do have to give a deposition for what happened last night?”

He caressed her cheek and sighed. “Fire Fall will take it. So, what is your answer?”

“Answer?”

“Will you let me seduce you?”

She gathered her self-control and she heard herself saying, “I will let

you try.”

His smile was slow and wicked. “That is all I desire, well, not all, but it is a start.”

The shadows retracted and he pulled the covering over his face and raised his hood.

“When are you going to come out as Skorin?”

“When I am ready. I have been in this cowl for several years. It is my safety net.”

Rowen blinked when he was back as Walking Darkness. “I think I get it. All I know is that I have a greenhouse full of plants that need my attention and you have to do

whatever it is that you Guardians do.”

His eyes wrinkled as he smiled. “I have never been dismissed before. It is an interesting feeling.”

“You are not being dismissed, you are being postponed. Last night, a bunch of drugged-out young adults hauled me along, and I came in contact with their tree. That tree was never supposed to exist and it knows it. I need to be around other plain old plants that just want to grow and fruit.”

“The tree will be returned to the medical researchers if it hasn’t been already. It was supposed to be an



oral sedative, but it altered itself into a hallucinogen. It will be taken care of by the best of gardeners.” He turned and put his arm around her, walking her out of the maze.

“I am beginning to guess that I am the best of gardeners. There doesn’t seem to be another horticultural talent on Irudan.”

“Talents are fairly sparse in our population. I only know of twelve and four of us are Guardians.”

“So my being here is unusual?”

“Very. You are the only talented alien who has ever applied for a place on Irudan. They jumped at the chance and quickly scrambled

to find someone to be your husband. I was lucky that my rank was higher than that of the next applicant.”

She paused and looked at him. “There was more than one?”

“Twenty-seven. There were twenty-seven men lined up if I didn’t speak up, so I did.”

Her mind spun. “Why?”

“What do you mean?”

She shook her head and continued walking, following the path of dented grasses that had led her in.

He grabbed her arm and stopped her. “What did you mean, why?”

“I am nothing extraordinary. I mean, I am tall for my species but nothing special. At home, I couldn’t find one male to be interested, let alone twenty-seven.”

He tapped her nose with his finger. “Twenty-eight. You are lovely, soft, with bright eyes and a passion for your work. That denotes a possible passion elsewhere if a man can gain your attention.”

“That is stupid logic.”

“Masculine logic. It doesn’t have to make sense to you.” She could tell he was smiling again.

He escorted her out and to the greenhouse. When the warmth and

scents of green and growing things wrapped around her, she relaxed.

“Have a good day, Rowen Nakkua. Fire Fall will be here later to take your deposition.” He bowed and left her.

After staring at the space where he had been, she headed in, grabbed her apron and data pad, working her way through the list of plants on the sick and dying roster. It was a good way to spend her day.

Fire Fall was brought out to her by a fawning intern. Rowen gave her an amused look, and the girl shrugged and walked away, swaying her hips in blatant

invitation as she went.

Rowen wiped her hands clean and grinned. "Where did you want to do this?"

"You mean the deposition, right? Because I think Walking Darkness would have something to say otherwise."

She snickered. "Of course I mean the deposition."

"Outside in the gardens. Perhaps over tea?"

Rowen smiled. "Good. I don't think I have eaten today so that might not be a bad idea."

She updated the documents as to plant status and led the way

through the maze of green until she filed her data pad and hung up her apron. She scrubbed her hands and dried them, turning back to Fire Fall. "Let's go."

He kept silent as they walked through the gardens to the teahouse. When they had ordered and the stares around them had accepted his presence, he leaned back. "Are you ready to tell me what happened and how?"

She grinned as the server returned with their food. She was getting used to the Irudan cuisine and now knew not to order dinner for breakfast or breakfast for tea.

“Why are you smiling, Lady Nakkua?”

“I am wondering how you are going to eat while wearing that mask.”

He slid his hand up his collar and caught the thin fabric, shoving it upward before he took a sandwich and took a bite.

He mumbled around the food, “Now, I have the recorder set. Tell me what happened last night.”

She told him about the ball, about dodging the dancing and finally slipping out for some air in the garden. When she returned, the half-dozen podders were waiting

for her. Three grabbed her and hauled her out into the gardens and from there into the tunnel.

They had muttered about her fixing the tree the entire time, and when she came into the cavern, she knew what they meant. The tree was wrong. It was sick and it was frustrated and that illness was coming into the pods, twisting the intoxicating experience into something that would eventually kill.

She had been shoved, she had fallen and then the Guardians had arrived. The moment the Guardians came, the tree reached out with



vines and pulled her up into the cradle of its boughs until Walking Darkness lifted her out.

Rowen recounted the pain, but she had lost track of the podders at that point. She lost track of everything a moment later.

“I woke up in my bed with Walking Darkness administering the final medical intervention needed for the evening before leaving.”

Fire Fall nodded and turned off his recorder. It was mounted into a brooch on the front of his cloak, and he turned it off with the lightest touch.

He grinned and filled his teacup. "And you left out your punching Walking Darkness in the jaw. I saw the bruise you left on him. Why did you hit him?"

She was halfway through a sandwich. "He didn't tell you?"

"Nope. He came back and he couldn't stop grinning, which is rather unlike him. He is not normally a cheerful man."

"I hadn't noticed. He seems to be constantly laughing at me."

"He is delighted by everything that you are and all that you are not. I am delighted as well. He needs someone to remind him that

there is more to life than duty and honour.”

She sipped her tea. “Because once he is involved, you will be the last man standing?”

“Because once he admits he has a wife, I will be free to find my own. I have no illusions about living life for the Guardians. I want hot nights and sweaty sheets with a woman who lets me risk my life and come home to her.” He smiled and shrugged.

“That is a tall order.”

“That is why Guardians hide their features. Women and men fling themselves at the danger and

forget the stress. We are trying to protect them from themselves.”

“Drug cartels trying to get themselves the newest designer plant, scientists stealing new creations, plants out of controls, illegal tapping of resources and the regular thieving and terrorism that goes on in any society.”

“Exactly. These are daily occurrences for us. We need to test a woman before we are sure she is the right one.”

“So? I have been tested?” She leaned back and sipped her tea.

“The fact that you were willing to defend your marriage without even

meeting your husband was your test. An Irudan woman would have tried what she could with a Guardian at her disposal in private. Your punch proved your fidelity and to a man you didn't know." He chuckled. "It must have been a solid hit too. We don't bruise easily."

Rowen shrugged her shoulders. "I did what I could with what I had at my disposal."

Fire Fall cackled and reached for another sandwich. "And you did well."

# Chapter Eight

Akadeel arrived the following morning. "I am here to help you choose your next outfit."

Rowen squinted at her through sleepy eyes. "You mean pick it yourself."

"Something like that."

Rowen stood back and let her in, scrubbing at her neck. "Why the early visit, Countess?"

"We are attending a dinner party this evening. Skorin has volunteered to escort you, so I want you to make a good impression. Go

take a shower, dear.”

Rowen nodded and wandered into the lav. She called out, “Why a good impression?”

The countess called out cheerfully. “I want grandchildren, dearest.”

Rowen was so shocked that she forgot to undress before she stepped into the solar rain.

She stumbled out again, stripped and walked back into the shower for a better blast of cleaning.

Wearing the loose robe around her, she returned to find her mother-in-law in a whirlwind of chaos.

“Ah, there you are.” Akadeel held the dresses up one by one and nodded. “This one.”

The dress was black with a wide gold cincher around the waist. While Rowen held it against her, Countess Akadeel found the matching shoes, the laced-up undergarment and the jewels that Rowen had refused to wear on the previous event.

“Wear that. Skorin will meet you here at sunset to escort you. Be polite. I don’t know why he changed his position as to meeting you, but it is apparent that he wants to.”



Rowen gave her a serious look. "Really? You can't imagine?"

Akadeel gave her a serene smile. "He has chosen that occupation, so when he is out and about, we pretend not to know him. You have never met with Skorin and that is on public record."

Rowen blushed. "Right. This is complicated. Well, can I go to work as per normal?"

"I will send a girl here at four to pin up your hair and do your makeup. If you want to get a full day in, you should get out there now." Akadeel inclined her head.

Rowen took the hint and grabbed

a suit and some boots, returning to the bathing room to get dressed. She braided her hair, wrapped it in a knot and left to find breakfast while the countess looked for the perfect place to hang the portrait.

The minutes dragged by and her work wasn't up to her personal standards, but she got through to four and headed over to the manor house after she had filed her daily activities.

The young woman met her on the staircase, took one look and nodded. "We are going to be pressed for time, miss. Scrub up, I will be waiting."

Rowen laughed and did as she was told. While Hismi worked on her hair, Rowen soaked the soil out of her hands.

Five minutes before sunset, she was dressed, standing in her evening heels and draped in enough jewelry to buy a moon. She breathed in and out carefully.

“Well, Lady Nakkua, I have done all I can. It was a good thing that the countess warned me of your peculiar skin tone. I would have been stumped if I hadn’t prepared.”

“Thank you, Hismi.” She smiled and the young woman left her alone and skipped down the stairs.

With a deep, calming breath, Rowen walked down the stairs and into the gardens.

She walked through the fountains of flowers and the thick, lush grass.

“I thought I might find you here.”

She turned and tried not to bite her lip. The tunic he was wearing made his shoulders even wider. The polished boots and tight trousers were definitely eye catching.

“Skorin, I presume?” She remained where she was. If she pivoted, she would dig into the turf with her heels.

“Rowen, I presume?” His jaw was wide, lips were firm and there was a smile in his olive green eyes.

“You are correct. Thank you for your invitation to Irudan.”

“If you wish to repay me, will you dance with me this evening?”

Rowen smiled. “Yes. A dance will be a good start. Is that all you want?”

“For bringing you here? Yes. We will negotiate on everything else. Shall we?”

He offered her his arm, and she stepped forward, getting a look at the sharp blade of his nose in profile.

“You look different in normal clothing.”

He smiled and looked down at her. “In what way?”

“Like you are holding back. It is as if you are not yourself.”

“You are perceptive.”

The Nakkua skimmer was waiting for them and Skorin helped her inside. They were up and away in seconds, spending half an hour in travel before landing in the forecourt of an elegant home.

When he escorted her inside, they were announced as, “Lord and Lady Nakkua.”

The occupants of the ballroom

paused and applauded as they entered arm in arm. Akadeel and Drimal came to greet them, kissing them each on the cheek.

Drimal whispered, "Well done, Rowen."

She wanted to tell him that she hadn't done anything, but they were swept along in the social whirl with everyone wanting to meet the happy, new couple.

Throughout the evening, she stuck to Skorin's side and he did most of the talking. It was a relief. She had minimal skills for small talk.

The dancing started at the same

time as the buffet. She looked longingly at the doorway to the food as Skorin led her to the dance floor.

“You owe me this, Rowen.” He smiled, but there was tension around the corner of his mouth.

“It is hard to be out and about like this, isn’t it? If you like, we can leave and get something to eat at the commissary.” She looked up at him with hopeful eyes.

“Oh no. If I have to be here, you have to be here, and according to my mother, *we* have to be here.” He swung her into his arms and he began to sway to the music,



mimicking the short dance of the previous afternoon.

She turned and twisted in his arms as they blended with the other dancers. Her skirts swirled around them both and she relaxed into the music.

The beat picked up and the music got faster. They spun, met, parted and collided over and over as fewer dancers were on the floor.

A wild laughter started in Rowen's throat, and she held tight, moving when he shifted toward her and coming in close when he moved back. The musicians played faster and faster. When Rowen

spotted the blurs of other dancers, she noted that it was a competition for who could keep going the longest.

She was up for the challenge and they kept dancing. When the final couple spun out, a cheer went up. Skorin pulled her in and she thudded against his chest, her heart racing and sweat on her skin. He kissed her in front of one and all in the room and another wave of cheers went up.

She was bent backward, and she held on tight as he slid his tongue into her mouth and kissed her savagely in front of Irudan society.

She clutched at his shoulders and held tight as she returned the passion, with an intensity that made his hands clench on her waist.

Akadeel and Drimal parted and escorted them off the dance floor in different directions.

Drimal was laughing as he steered Rowen to the buffet. "I don't think that polite society was prepared for that much pent-up sexuality."

Rowen blushed. "I don't get out much."

It seemed that it was the funniest thing her father-in-law had ever

heard.

She piled her plate with a few choice dainties and waited for his chuckles to ease. When they did, she swallowed and asked, "Where did the countess take Skorin?"

"The way she was talking, she was going to shove him head first into a fountain."

Drimal got his own plate, and they took a position at a small table with a bottle of wine between them. "Well done, Rowen. I haven't seen dancing like that since Akadeel and I were courting."

"I have no idea what I was doing, but my clothing is still on, so that is

something.” She grinned and raised her glass.

“You do tend to look on the bright side, don’t you?” Drimal was giving her an analyzing look.

“I try to. With plants, it is immediate need running into future planning. You have to know what you want it to become before you place it. With men, I have no idea. They are like weeds. They always pop up where you least expect them.”

Drimal laughed again as they were joined by Akadeel and Skorin.

Skorin’s eyes were still hot, but the rest of him seemed to have

calmed. Rowen poured wine for her husband and his mother before topping up Drimal's.

A servant brought another carafe to their table, and as the lowest-ranked individual there, she poured for herself last.

The wine was stronger than what she normally drank, so she paced herself. When Skorin asked her to dance again and she got to her feet, she realised that she hadn't kept to the proper pace.

"Oh, dear. I don't think I can do that again. I am a little dizzy." She whispered it to him as they walked back to the dance floor.

“This is a slow one, I promise. Are you feeling well?”

“Yes, I am just a lightweight when it comes to drinking. While plant compounds don’t directly affect me, yeasts and alcohol knock me on my butt.” She giggled quietly.

They arrived at the dance floor and took their place amongst the swaying partners.

“That is good to know.”

“How did you get the night off?”

“I simply took the night off. Easy. I am owed more than four months of time off. One night will not destroy the world.” He smiled, but

there was a tightness in his eyes.

“If you want to return to wherever you live, you are welcome to it. I can find my own way home once I locate a tube station.”

His hands tightened on her waist. “You are not going home without me.”

“Then, we are at an impasse. You want to be somewhere else and so do I.” She stroked the side of his neck with her fingers as they swayed around the room.

He shivered at her light touch. “What I would really like is to be somewhere with you and in



complete privacy.”

She leaned forward until she was pressed against him, from breast to thigh. “That sounds like fun.”

His gaze burned. “I believe we could make that happen if you are willing to travel in an unorthodox manner.”

“I am if you are. How do we escape?”

He grinned and steered her off the dance floor, into the night.

Once they were away from the people and no one was around, he wrapped her tightly in his arms and shadows formed around them. They lifted from the ground, and

she held onto him as tightly as he did to her while he took them who-knew-where.

# Chapter Nine

“What is this place?” Rowen looked around with wide eyes; her mind catalogued the different plants and inhaled the intoxicating scents of hundreds of species of flowers.

“We are at the Nakkua formal gardens. They are secure and private. This is the guest house.” He smiled and walked her toward a structure nearly invisible in the tangle of vines that covered it.

She fought laughter as he let shadows flare around him.

“What is amusing?” He opened

the door with tendrils of shadows.

“An entire world to choose from and you bring me to your parents’ house? It is a funny thing to a human. Trust me.”

He pulled her to him and kissed her again, one hand stroking over her breast and hip while the other held her to him. Suddenly, funny wasn’t funny anymore.

She clawed at his shirt and wrapped her legs around his waist as he moved them into the guesthouse. She heard fabric tear and skin greeted her eager hands.

He cursed and pressed her to the cool surface of the wall, pulling up

the frothing edge of her skirts until his crotch pressed against hers. He shifted and freed himself from his trousers.

She wanted to see, but when his fingers tore the seam of her undergarment in two, she got distracted again. She arched her head back as he fitted the head of his cock to her and eased into her.

She pressed her fingers into his shoulders, clawing as he slowly moved inside her. He thrust into her slowly at first and then with more force as he began to bite at her neck, shoulders and the tops of her breasts.

She moaned, cried out and rocked against him as his hips pinned her to the wall.

He snarled and held her as they savagely came together.

Tension was building and she clawed at his hands, he used shadows to pin them to either side of her head, and the long, thick slide of his cock brought her closer and closer to the edge.

She screamed and her voice echoed off the walls of the guesthouse.

He groaned and shuddered inside her, resting his head on the wall next to hers.

They remained there, panting and resetting themselves until he lifted his head and looked down at her with shame. "I am so sorry."

She blinked. "For what?"

He leaned back. "I didn't hurt you?"

She chuckled and flexed her channel around him causing a jerk inside her, and he thrust his hips forward. "Hurt is not the word I would use. You satisfied an ache, does that count?"

He blinked. "I thought—you bruise so easily."

She smiled. "And yet, I was using my hand normally. I may colour

but that doesn't mean I don't enjoy...vigorous activity?"

His smiled lit up the interior. Her eyes were used to the darkness by now.

"Uh, Skorin, can you let my arms go?"

He chuckled and pulled her against him with his shadows. "I don't think I will be letting you go any time soon."

He dropped her on the bed and flipped her to her stomach, unlacing her gown with incredible speed. When it came loose, she squawked as he picked her up and dropped her to her back, pulling



the fabric free of her and discarding it to one side before he removed the shreds of his own shirt. He had to sit down to free himself of the boots and trousers, but after a few short, sharp tears, he had parted ways with the fabric.

She watched as he crawled over her, his body blocking what little light there was. She leaned up and nipped at his lower lip, drawing him into another kiss that grew out of control in seconds.

They rolled across the bedding, and his hands moved over her with rough attention. Her breasts ached, and she gasped when he explored

with his mouth, his teeth rasping at her nipples in turn until her heart pounded and her sex ached.

She could feel how wet she was getting and didn't fight it. Skorin moved up her body and once again fitted himself to her. This time, he thrust in hard and fast, moving past the resistance at her opening and sliding in to the hilt.

The darkness gave her a boldness she would otherwise have hesitated to use. She thrust her hips up to meet his, and they began to roll across the bedding.

When she was on top, he ran his hands up and down her spine,

cupping her hips and pulling her tight to him as he pumped upward. She clutched at him when he added a third option to their tumbling and he elevated them both in a column of twisting shadows.

With nothing to push against, she had to let his shadows do the work. She felt tendrils wrapping her body, and a moment later, her wrists were pinned behind her back and she was being controlled and positioned above him as he knelt on the bed.

He suckled ferociously at one breast then the other, his shadows slid in a cool caress across her flesh

as he moved from side to side.

The lightest of touches around her sex mocked the pounding of his hips, and when she flinched at the contact on her clit, all was lost.

She screamed out, arching against her restraints and gritting her teeth. He withdrew from her before the pulsing of her aftershocks had ceased, and he released her arms, turned her to her hands and knees, and thrust into her furiously until she felt his teeth against her neck once again.

Her body clasped his again in a strange wave of sensation as the mini-climax sent her senses up and

then down again.

Despite needing to bear his weight, she collapsed with a groan onto the bedding, taking him with her.

He landed on her with a thud and immediately asked, "Are you injured?"

She chuckled. "No. I just don't have a mobile muscle in my body. Thanks for asking. I am just going to lie here and listen to my body purring for a while. You can do as you like."

He pressed a kiss to the back of her neck, and she smiled, squirming into the firm mattress under her.

He slipped out of her, pressing soft kisses down her spine to the curve of her buttocks and back up again. "I have noted that you don't panic when the shadows restrain you."

She smiled and squirmed again. "Of course not. I trust you."

He rolled her to her back, wrecking her nice warm nest. Rowen scowled at him.

"Why do you trust me?" He looked at her with an intensity that said he was hanging on her words.

"You offered me a place I very much wanted to have, you rescued me as you would any citizen of

Irudan and you asked me if you were allowed to seduce me. There has been no subterfuge in you except when you didn't mention that I would have to become a bit of a socialite and your mother would run my wardrobe."

He smiled. "Can you blame me? You would have run. I am surprised; it takes nerves of steel to deal with my mother."

"She isn't so bad. You just have to let her know where you stand. Since I didn't care about the clothing, I didn't mind her bullying me. When I did mind about dancing with strangers, she made

my excuses for me on that first night. She has been very supportive but she knows when to drop a subject.”

“That is not my experience.” He grinned.

“Of course not. She is your mother.” She reached up with leaden arms and draped them around his neck.

He pulled back and helped her sit up. She grumbled but he pulled her into his lap.

He caressed her back with an open hand. “Will you enjoy getting the family mark, Lady Nakkua?”

She chuckled. “I wonder how my



skin will take to it.”

He paused. “I hadn’t thought about that. I will have the artist come and do a test on your skin in different inks if you have no objection.”

Rowen smiled. “I will try that. If I can go three weeks without a reaction, I will welcome the Nakkua mark.”

“Fair enough. What would you like to do in the meantime?” He nuzzled at her neck.

She chuckled. “I would like to either sleep here or in my own bed. Your mother got me up before dawn to rummage through my

wardrobe.”

He cradled her in his arms and held her against his chest. To her surprise, she felt herself nodding off and she let the feel and heat of him carry her to dreamland.

A tickling at her nose woke her. She batted at it but the cool shadow merely moved around to tickle her ear. She opened her eyes and glowered at Skorin. “Good morning.”

He grinned and kissed her swiftly, “Good morning.”

He tumbled her to her back and bracketed her between his hands. “Apparently, my destination was

not quite secret enough. That or the nine years' growth that our activities put on the vines gave us away."

She blushed. "How do you know?"

"My mother left us clothing. She has been in your closet again. Oh, and she brought breakfast."

He kissed her again, starting slowly and increasing in ferocity as his head moved against hers. She gasped and wrapped her left leg around his hips, pulling him down toward her. The wilder he became, the more she rose to meet him.

Finally, he pulled away with a

groan. "I have gotten a call. I need breakfast and then I have to leave you. My parents will have their driver take you home."

She chuckled and looked around. "Is there a solar shower in here? I am a little sticky."

"Through that door. I will lay out breakfast before I leave."

She gave him a peck on the cheek and patted his butt as she got to her feet. "Go save the world. I am going to have a shower, get dressed and find the driver."

He grinned. "The skimmer is out front."

She wrinkled her nose. "Enough."

Go and be a Guardian. I will be a gardener. We will get along fine.”

“You are serious. You really don’t mind.”

Rowen put her hands on his shoulders and she stared into his eyes. “I really don’t mind. Now, get your naked butt out there and fight some crime.”

He laughed and shadows covered him, the dark whirlwind blew the door open and closed it neatly behind him.

Sighing at the weird-on-parade that her life had become, Rowen headed for the bathroom. She just had to get the cum off her thighs

and she would be ready to face the day.

# Chapter Ten

For the first time since she had arrived, she was glad that the greenhouse was her place of business. Her thighs weren't up for the flexing and standing that would be required out in the gardens.

Liah came up to her, "So, you and Skorin left the party early last night."

Rowen gave her a sideways glance. "Did we? Akadeel got me up so early that I was tired."

Liah touched Rowen's neck. "You seem to have some abrasions here."

Rowen immediately flashed back to the scrape of Skorin's teeth against her. Her nipples still ached, as did the skin over her ribs. He was a nibbler and she had no complaints. "Do I? Must be my shampoo."

Liah snorted. "You use solar showers."

Rowen gave her a bland look. "Sunburn? My species does get it."

Liah threw her hands up. "Fine. How do you like your husband?"

"He has an excellent sense of humour. I do love a man with a quick wit."

Liah gave up. "How is this pallet



of plants from the research centre?”

Rowen looked back at her work. “Twenty-five percent of them are wrong. Their adaptations don’t match and they will die unless I am with them all day every day. I am guessing they are experiments.”

“That isn’t for us to know. Just do a status report and do what you can for the poor dears. If they become repeat patients, we will do a consult with the researchers. For now, first aid and life support is all you can do.” Liah patted her shoulder.

“I was guessing as much.” She frowned. “What time is it?”

Liah chuckled. "Quitting time. Ilo and I would like you to join us for dinner."

Rowen finished assessing the plants in front of her. "I would like to, but last night was a little more of an exertion than I had expected. That dancing left me a little sore. I respectfully decline."

"Well done. I reserve the right to invite you again."

Rowen grinned. "Thank you. Any other night but tonight."

She finished up her paperwork, moved the pallet for pickup on the evening research-plant retrieval and headed out.

It was funny how her mind thought in Terran terms of paperwork when no paper was involved. At night, she plugged in her data pad before she left for home and it downloaded all of her findings written in a language she hadn't even heard of a month ago. She had been given Nyal Common as well as some High Nyal while she had been at the moon base; the downloads had not been comfortable, but she was glad for them.

Every little bit of normal that she could squeeze into her life was welcome. Tonight, she was going to

call home, her new com unit had been installed while she was at work. She had two codes that she wanted to try, Lori and home.

She headed back across the grounds, her feet made no sound on the grass as she approached the manor. The thought of being able to communicate with her own people was dizzying. The unit was a gift from Drimal, as he had told her the first night they met, "No one should be so cut off from their world that they cannot call home."

Humming to herself, she pelted up the stairs, took a shower, put on a robe and dug out the call digits

that she had been given for Lori. The com told her it would be twenty minutes for a connection, so she went to her small food dispenser and grabbed a snack. She pulled up the local news and watched the Guardians work to rescue victims of a wild fire. Fire Fall was calling the blaze to him while a woman moved the local insects and another man put up a wall of stone. Walking Darkness was in the woods, lifting humans and animals alike out of the smoke-filled areas.

With slight relief, she noted that Walking Darkness was wearing his

armour again. She didn't want him singeing his bits. She liked his bits. She wanted to take advantage of their existence as frequently as he would allow.

The com chimed and she quickly swivelled to stare at the screen. A face appeared but it wasn't the one she wanted.

"Terran Moon Base com centre. How may I direct your call?"

Rowen rubbed the back of her neck. "I am calling for Lori Hathaway, trainee."

"Just a moment." The woman looked down and then looked up again. "She is in combat training.

May I ask who is calling?"

Rowen straightened. "I am her aunt. Lady Rowen Hathaway Nakkua of Irudan, born of the Alliance Protectorate of Terra."

The woman finally focussed on her. "Rowen? Just a moment."

It took three minutes before Lori's face was on the screen. "Aunty! I am so glad to see you. You look amazing."

Rowen blushed. "It is agreeing with me, though remembering to use English is hard. Once you use the languages, they get in there and want to jump out of your mouth."

Lori was beaming. "How are the

gardens?"

Rowen sighed and smiled, gushing on the gardens, some of the plants she had seen and totally skating around that initial abduction. She checked in on Lori with her training and Lori was enjoying working with the Minder. When she was sent out and about, she was going to be formidable.

"As all Hathaway women truly are." Lori straightened and sounded pompous.

"Your mother fought hard to get you that name. She married your dad when you were three hours old but refused to put his name on the



birth certificate. You were doomed to be a Hathaway from the moment you got started." Rowen smiled.

"I know. It is a story I never get tired of, Aunty. The clock at home puts this in the middle of the night, so if you sync that up with where you are, you might be able to use that fancy com in a few hours. I have to head back for Minder training. I have your code. I will call you next week."

Lori blew her a kiss, and when Rowen waved back, she disconnected the call.

Cool air blew through her room and she looked around to see

Walking Darkness eating her snack. "Hey. I thought you were supposed to protect and serve or something."

He gulped down water and smiled when he emptied the glass. "Firefighting is hot work." Skorin got an intense look in his eyes and he focussed on her. "Speaking of hot..."

He didn't have to lunge for her. Bands of shadow wrapped around her and lifted her off her feet, opening her robe and pulling her toward him.

She smacked into his armour and it made her look around. "Where is your helmet?"

He shifted with her fastened to him and the object was sitting on the counter.

Cool slithers of shadows were coiling around her legs and slipping between them. She jumped when the delicate tendrils eased inside.

He was watching her reaction, and to her embarrassment, he pulled her away from him and held her suspended while the shadows fucked her. Her hands clenched into fists and she arched and twisted when the shadows circled her breasts and tightened.

She moaned low, throwing her head back and shuddering as her

body clenched on the touch that wasn't there. He continued to stroke her until she hung limply in the grasp of his shadows.

Rowen shuddered and she was very glad that she had finished her com call. This could have been embarrassing, not to mention giving Lori unrealistic sexual expectations of aliens.

He gently set her down on the bed and leaned over her for a thorough kiss. "I have to return to base for some paperwork, but I will return later tonight. May I?"

She shivered at the sensuality in his tone. "Yes, you may, but if you

open the window, close it behind you. Anyone in the courtyard could have heard that.”

He chuckled and stroked her hip. “You are vocal; I have to admit that I enjoy it.”

She sighed. “Go and do your paperwork.”

He kissed her once more, nipped the tip of one breast and he put his helmet and gloves back on. Shadows surrounded him and he left her rooms the same way he had entered.

He was barely out the window before there was a knock. She sat up and tied her robe, trying to

ignore the throbbing of her body.

She looked at the door monitor and asked, "Who is it?"

"I am the tattoo artist, Lady Nakkua. My name is Devnin."

Rowen opened the door. "Please, come in. Pardon my lack of dress. It was a long and hot day."

He smiled. "It will make my job easier. If you don't mind, I don't mind."

She cocked her head. She knew that voice, and when she looked closely at him, she jerked in surprise. It was Fire Fall. Fine. If he could tattoo, she wouldn't complain.

“Where would you like the sampling to be done?”

“What would be the best match for my back?”

To her amusement, he blushed. “I have researched your species. Under your breasts would be the best match. It is close to a lymph system, sensitive skin, ribs, muscle and fat. A microcosm in a small space. If it goes wrong, a contact healer can flush it from your system if he tries.”

“Are you going to be able to do this, Devnin? I have no idea what position you would want me in.”

He sighed. “Lie on your back,

hold your breast with your opposite hand and tell me when you are ready. Do you have a preferred design?"

She smiled and darted to her bag, pulling out a diagram of the Terran solar system. "Here you go. This should give you enough material to do several samples, and if they all are accepted, it is a marking that I would enjoy."

"Well thought out. Fine, you get situated and I will prepare my samples."

She got settled and held her breast up and out of the way as requested. It was indeed a modest



pose. No nipple was visible and only the curve of her breast was obvious.

He cleaned her skin and began his work with a steady hand.

She jumped when he started but soon gave in to the hot kiss of the ink. It took two hours because he had to stop and change units for each mineral. When he was done, she was sore but the image was adorable and made her tear up. "Perfect. Thanks, Fire Fall."

He jerked in surprise. "You knew?"

"You have a fascinating mouth and a distinctive voice. I am not

good with people but even I could manage that." She smiled.

He put the small regenerator into his kit. "Skorin was right. You do seem very alert to your surroundings. In turn, you will also meet Pleska and her husband Uadon. They are curious to meet you in a normal social setting, so be prepared. I think you might have some visitors to the reveal of your family marking when it is done."

"It will be hard to explain to my own family, but my sister has many a stupider thing on her body, so she can't really talk. Will you be doing the larger marking?"

He smiled. "Would you like me to? It is a long procedure."

"I think I would." She gave him a hug. "I know you have his back, but thank you."

Devnin shook his head with amazement. "I have got to order one like you."

"Ah, Devnin, there aren't any like me. All Terrans are individuals. You deal with them as they come."

"I look forward to one coming for me." He winked when she blushed at the double entendre.

He took his kit and left, leaving her with a throbbing torso and an amused smile at the thought of a

human woman dealing with this Guardian. She knew that it happened, but it wasn't something that came easily. She wanted her damned gardening time.

# Chapter Eleven

She felt a tickling at her nose and batted at it but cool air was all that met her swatting. A delicate stroke between her eyebrows and she frowned and turned to see Skorin in her bed.

He wasn't wearing armour; he was wearing shadows and nothing else.

She opened her mouth to tell him off, but his lips brushing against her in a building frenzy that overwhelmed her.

His shadows were all over her,

touching, arousing and creeping inside her. Her senses rioted, unsure of whether the sensations were invasive or welcome. When rhythmic pressure on her clit began, she sided with welcome and blanked her mind.

She reached between them and grasped his cock, stroking it and learning the shape that she still couldn't see.

Rowen could barely wrap her fingers all the way around it, but she stroked it from base to tip with a light caress that got tighter when shadows tied her hand around him.

It was like having sex with a man

who had a hundred hands.

He rolled until she was above him and eased her hand from his cock and behind her back, lashing her wrists together at the base of her spine.

She shivered as he lifted her up and placed her on him as he sat up. He made a small noise in his throat and her arms were released from her back and instead gently eased over her head where they were tied again with shadows.

She heard him whisper, "Perfect."

His fingers delved between her thighs where the shadowy foreplay

had rendered her wet and welcoming. When he found what he sought, he lifted her onto his cock and he eased her down, shuddering as her heat clasped him.

He didn't move inside her; he leaned forward and used his mouth on her breasts. When he licked at the healed tattoo under her breast, she felt herself flex around him. When he did it again, she reacted in the same way until she was contracting around him to the slow lapping of his tongue.

She clenched her hands together and her nails dug into her palms as tension coiled in her belly.



Skorin growled and he scraped his teeth across her nipples again as his hips pumped upward and he shuddered.

Pressure on her clit and the sharp pain sent her into a strange climax that shook her body from head to toe in endless waves until she slumped against the shadows holding her.

Dazed, she felt the shadows lower her arms around his neck and she rested her head against his shoulder. He stroked her back slowly, and she heard low murmurs as he remained inside her with her body collapsed to his.

She finally heard, "You respond so well to being restrained. Why is that?"

She smiled against his chest. "It is nice to not have to make a decision on something. I don't have to wonder what you want, so it becomes a more relaxed experience for me and I can concentrate on what I feel. It is a first for me. My life is usually marked by having to make decisions. This is a nice break."

He chuckled. "It is refreshing for me to not have to engage in a slow seduction. Your body is very good at telling me when you are ready."

She stroked the hair at the base of his neck and blushed. "Well, you seem to be paying attention."

"We are going to have to work out your living situation. I don't like having you so far from me."

She leaned back and gave him a narrow-eyed look. "If you are thinking of telling me that I have to leave my job because you want me closer, you are in for a fight."

He blinked and he gave her a slow smile. "How about a personal skimmer?"

"How about a Riot Runner?"

Skorin laughed. "How do you know about those?"

“I did my research. I used to drive something similar on Earth.”

He stroked her back slowly. “I will look into it and see what Irudan will give you a license for.”

“It had better be a Riot Runner or I am going to start working late and locking my windows.” She bit his chest lightly.

“Threats. I like it. Would you mind living at the base?” His fingers began to work out elaborate patterns on her skin.

“I wouldn’t, but I think your mother would be ticked if she couldn’t grab me for social events.”

He sighed. “You are right. I

suppose you would only be able to attend events I was available for. What a pity.”

She chuckled. “You make it sound so tempting.”

“I am here to lure you into temptation. It is my duty as your husband.”

She leaned back and blinked. “Are you really? I thought it was just for show.”

He snorted. “That is what I thought until I met you. How could I let a woman with such a green touch slip through my fingers? My Irudan roots would not let that happen.”

She chuckled. "So, you want me for my touch?"

Skorin smiled. "I do."

Rowen leaned back against him. "I suppose it would make it easier for Devnin to do my tattoo."

"He told me that you recognized him by his mouth."

"And voice. It was the combination that tipped me off." She chuckled.

"Should I be jealous?"

"That I can recognize another Guardian? I think that would be a good thing. At least I know you when you creep into my bed at night."

Skorin pressed a kiss to her temple. "I am not used to feeling protective."

"The term you are looking for is possessive, but you are my legal husband and I will not break that contract."

"Am I simply a contract to you?" There was something plaintive in his tone.

She leaned back and stared into his eyes. "No, but it is where we started, the base that we stand on. Everything we are now and will become in the future rests on that base."

"So, from here we move

forward?" Amusement was in his gaze. He tipped her to her back and remained inside her as he slowly rocked his hips.

"Forward, back and forth, up and down. The base is still the same. I am for you as you are for me. That is all."

"I will have to publicly announce my identity if you are going to be travelling to and from the base."

She lifted her knees and arched her hips into his. "Whatever. Get me a personal vehicle and I will follow you anywhere."

He lifted her hands with his and pinned them over her head.



“Promise?”

“Well, as long as I can still live most of my life in the gardens. I need to work with plants, Skorin.” It was surreal to have a serious conversation while he held her down and thrust into her.

“You will work with plants, Rowen Nakkua. I promise.” He twisted against her and began to thrust in earnest.

With the promise made and immediate matters taken care of, Rowen let him send her senses soaring with shadows moving and snapping around them as the frenzy grew.

For her first week on a new world, Rowen was impressed on how well she had adapted to the alien society. All she needed now was to find a way to convince Akadeel that evening gowns were not a wardrobe necessity and life would be on the way to perfect.

# Author's Note

I made Rowen a gardener because as of writing this, my yard has still not appeared for the snow. I hate gardening personally, but when you can't grow or see anything green, you really miss it.

Skorin was all about my love for the silence of the evening. I often work until false dawn, so now, my brain begins sparking at sundown. It makes things tricky when it involves going out with friends.

The next book is *Lady* and Devnin will get the Terran he ordered, and she will freeze him in place. She's my eternal winter but can the cheerful and gregarious Fire Fall thaw her out?

Thanks for reading,

Viola Grace

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# About the Author

Viola Grace was born in Manitoba, Canada where she still resides today. She really likes it there. She has no pets and can barely keep sea monkeys alive for a reasonable amount of time. Her line of day job tends to be analytical which leaves her mind hopping to weave stories. No co-worker is safe from her character analysis. In keeping with busy hands are happy hands, her hobbies have included cross-stitch,

needlepoint, quilting, costuming, cake decorating, baking, cooking, metal work, beading, sculpting, painting, doll making, henna tattoos, chain mail, and a few others that have been forgotten. It is quite often that these hobbies make their way into her tales.

Viola's fetishes include boots and corsetry, and her greatest weakness is her uncontrollable blush. Her writing actively pursues the Happily Ever After that so rarely occurs in nature. It is an admirable thing and something that we should all strive for. To find one that we truly like, as well as love.