Sorrow also sings

A Glyph Warrior Novel

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*Dedication*

Prefix

The world ending wasn't what people expected. They knew global warming was an issue, though they thought it would get hotter and people would scorch. The scientists knew better. They knew that everything was connected. People had become complacent in their blinkered world. In even the most conservative model the scientists predicted a world thrown into chaos and anarchy like never known before.

What they predicted came true. First came food shortages and economic break down that cascaded through countries at an alarming rate. Any currency pretty much turned to fancy toilet paper and whole governments crumbled as the basis of their own little worlds disappeared. War descended as people thought they could do a better job or were just plain greedy and wanted what the former leaders had.

Then there were refugees. Fleeing ahead of war, famine and drought. This all put pressure on countries and nationalism reared its ugly head in the worst way. Wars erupted in almost every country, leaving nowhere to hide from the turmoil.

And like a fierce fire the war and chaos burnt itself out. Eventually.

When the ashes fell and the world took a sigh of exhaustion. The people were finally able to build some semblance of society. Some scientists had managed to create a weather machine that created stable weather in localized areas. Instead of selling it, they gave it to what was left of the world.

This was the start of the city states. And life went on.

Chapter One

*A storm raged outside. The small home, the pack of humans had taken over, was well suited for dealing with the inclement weather. It was half buried in the earth and had a sod roof for insulation. Other buildings in the area had been dismantled and used to reinforce the one still standing building in the old community.*

*Because a community it was. They all mostly lived in the large living area and the rest of the rooms was crammed with whatever sleeping arrangements they could manage. There was a room off to the side that held what few animals they had and a hydroponics unit that only gave them enough fruit and veg that they didn’t have to worry about scurvy.*

*Degu knew it wouldn’t last though. There were just too many of them and not enough food for the winter. He had known starvation in his time and he wasn’t looking forward to another harsh winter.*

*He stared at the boarded over windows on the leeward side of the house. He could hear the hiss of snow on the wood. He tensed as he readied to stand.*

*But before he could Lobo, his brother, patted him on his back and asked, “Why so serious Degu? Life is good.”*

*Degu shook his head, “Winter is going to be hard this year.”*

*Lobo laughed, “Man, Degu you sound like an old man. You are ten, enjoy your life. Besides Vaquero has a plan. Once the snow sets in everyone will be stuck in their homes. Their outbuildings will be easy pickings.”*

*Degu shook his head at his brother’s optimism. He himself was almost old enough to go out on the raids. There were very few adults in their group and as soon as they were capable of killing someone they were given a weapon and went out on raids.*

*Vaquero had walked in a few years ago and he had swept through to leadership in a charismatic wave. He had kept them alive so far but he had also lost a lot of them as well. Usually the adults. There were now six children to every adult.*

*Degu pursed his lips and didn’t say anything to his brother. Lobo was a dreamer and always so hopeful about the future. He knew better. The raiding last year had been costly. They had lost five of their number and the pickings had been slim.*

*Ever since the cities started putting up shields against the weather, communities that had been struggling for years in the unpredictable weather had moved and abandoned their outposts. Before people had survived by spreading out and not over using the land. Now communities could only survive by banding together inside the weather shields.*

*He knew the people in this place didn’t have that option. They were labelled as criminals and no city would take them in.*

*Vaquero approached them. He patted Lobo on his shoulder and said, “Can you check on the windows in the east wing. One of the others said there was a crack in the glass. We might need to board it up like the others.”*

*Lobo bobbed his head and left. Vaquero looked at Degu with warm eyes and asked, “How old are you now Degu?”*

*“Ten, sir.” He answered solemnly.*

*Vaquero grinned at him as he said, “Oh, there is no need to be so formal with me, Degu. I am your friend.”*

*He placed his hand on his shoulder but Degu didn’t like the touch. Vaquero had been keeping them alive for years. And ever since him and his brother had stumbled on the group years ago after their parents had died they really didn’t have many options. He owed this man and it seemed wrong to brush off his casual touch.*

Ramon hesitated at the door of the engineering workshop Hal had tucked in the corner of the large warehouse she used as a home. He was nervous but he wouldn’t admit that to anyone. Let alone to the woman he had come here to see.

The woman broke into his thoughts when she said, “I was wondering when you would get the guts to come here.”

Hal didn’t look up at Ramon who stood in the doorway when she spoke, obviously still absorbed by the work on her desk.

He had actually been there a while procrastinating, but either she had been absorbed in her work or she had been waiting for him to speak.

Ramon shrugged as he said, “I come here all the time.”

Usually for dinner with Agent Harold. They both knew this was different though.

She snorted at his very obvious evasion, “I mean for a tattoo.” she turned in her chair to look at him, “That is why you came to find me, isn't it?”

He shrugged. He was different from the young fool that had come here almost a year ago. Then he had been a punk who had used a badge to hide from his real life. He had known the undercover work wasn’t good for him but it had been easier than dealing with all the shadows in his past.

Agent Harold had changed him. Made him realize there was a way back from the darkness he had thought was in his blood and in his soul. Now, he knew, he didn’t have to be that fool everyone thought he was to hide what he really was.

He shook off those thoughts. Just being here in the same room as Hal was eroding his confidence in the changes he had made. He shook off his thoughts.

“I'm ready. Buff me up.” Ramon said too casually.

She flicked a hand toward him to indicate for him to wait and she turned to pick up something, “I don't get many guinea pigs. Are you willing to sign up for the whole deal?”

He shrugged, “I was ready the first time I asked. I had heard rumors.”

She turned sharply and looked at him with a raised eyebrow, “That is interesting. I never did find out how you found me in the first place. It wasn’t like I was going around and advertising that I needed a test subject for my glyphs.”

He gave her one of his signature cocky grin and tucked his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels, “I have ears in interesting places. They hear things that no one else does.”

She waved it off and said, “Warren translated a word for me. He says it is speed. I didn't understand how to incorporate it into the human system without more data, but once he helped me with that I realized what it could do. So, you up for speed?”

Ramon didn’t understand how the glyphs worked. What he did know was that a long time ago Warren had this book of really old words. He had translated some of them. Hal had been his friend at the time and dying from cancer. She had seen something in the language and figured out that she could fix herself with one of the words.

That was the pink glyph on her cheek. With her pale skin, it was hardly even visible. It looked beautiful though when he took the time to pick it out. The curves of the letters intricate and exotic. The glyph had cured her of cancer, but for all the other words she needed a guinea pig.

He had heard word that she had been looking for someone of a calm disposition. One that had the right EM fields apparently but that piece of information hadn’t reached him when he had come here the first time. But he knew she needed someone.

Ramon had hoped that would be him. But he had brought Misha with him as he had known if he was rejected the most zen person he knew was Misha. He had been right and Hal had put glyphs on Misha. One was a vivid blue one on his chest that made him super strong. That was the glyph that he wanted.

“Why can't you give me the others first?” he shamelessly begged.

She shook her head and headed towards her tattoo parlor, “The glyphs all interact with each other. I need to see what speed does on its own to the EM field generated by your body. I spent years waiting for one calm enough to try the first one on. I now know more about the effects as I can observe other aura's much better than my own.”

She motioned him into the parlor, “Your aura is calmer but you still have issues. I now know that the global effect of the glyph shouldn't adversely affect you. Don't worry, you are in good hands and once it has settled, we can add in all the rest. I think I have come up with an order that shortens the time between glyphs. Mmm, I wonder. No, no. I’ll leave that for later though I'm starting to think it should be the first one.”

He realized she was talking to herself at that stage as she was working with the gear on her tattoo tray and completely ignoring him. She flicked her hand gracefully towards him and said, “Please take off your pants.”

He stood shocked by her words for a moment. Though once the meaning of the words settled in his head he couldn’t help himself. He laughed. The last time someone said that to him was so different from this situation he couldn’t help but see the humor in her demand.

She frowned at him. He shook his head to indicate that he wasn’t laughing at her.

He also went for his belt so she wouldn’t think that he had changed his mind about getting a glyph. He dropped his pants and asked, “Anything else?”

His voice was light, but he dreaded that she would ask more. He might seem like a casual person, but he did not like to be naked around others.

She shook her head and said, “I need access to the back of your legs. That should be it.”

She motioned to the chair and he lay down hiding his relief. Her hand on the back of his leg was firm and there was not even a trace of intimacy in her touch.

He relaxed a little and tucked his arm under his head, “I heard stories that you used to be a doctor up on the Hill.”

The buzz of the ink gun was soft and didn’t stop their conversation. When she spoke her voice sounded distracted. Just as he had hoped. He had noticed that artists and other dedicated people seemed to be easily distracted when they were working in their fields.

“Yeah, Bioware though. Never got into the medical side of it all. I just add things to people. Though Warren managed to get the board to ratify my PhD. So, technically I am now a doctor.”

He kept her talking as he didn’t usually get her on his own. Misha was often by her side and he understood his friend’s need to always be close to her, but it did make it difficult to bring up topics he didn’t want to share with him.

“Rumor had it you were probably the best but that you died. Cancer, I heard.”

She snorted, “Warren told me people thought I was dead. Good. I didn’t want them hassling me.”

There was no need for her to spell out who they were. She had come from the rarefied echelons of the Academic world. They were the ruling class of the city. They weren’t known for their empathy to the general masses. He knew a little more about the whole ordeal than others did. He decided to push a little as he said.

“Oh, yeah, that is right. Your father robbed the University blind before he took what he could and disappeared overseas. Do you know where your dear old daddy is?”

Her voice was deceptively casual as she answered, “Mmm, he is researching some cybernetic implant thingy.” He noticed it was all vague enough that he still didn’t know where the old dean of the University was. She continued in the same casual tones, “Not very promising, but there are some rich buggers that will throw money at anything. My dad is good enough that he can milk it for all the money he can and produce nothing in the end. But of course he will be gone by then. What about your parents?”

The question side swiped him. The needle stopped and she leaned in closer to him and said, “Wow, that spiked your EM fields something fierce. You all right there? Do you want to talk about it?”

Harold had insisted that he go to counselling to help him deal with his past and to make him a better agent. Apparently, suicide was always a problem with new recruits that shrink sessions were standard.

So, he recognized that this was something that he would need to talk about. But probably not with Hal. He tested his own emotions though and said, “I don’t remember my parents. I was abandoned when I was a child. My brother raised me.”

He left it at that as speaking about his brother was still difficult and he hadn’t even brought him up with his councillor yet.

Hal nodded and her head disappeared from his view. His words must have been enough to settle his aura as she went back to her work.

After a long moment of silence Hal said, “I used to work for the Mission.”

His heart skipped a beat. Not many people knew about the Mission. They were a group of foster parents that took in kids that wandered into the city without any parents.

The city had strict rules on children moving to the city and they had to have a means of support before they were let inside the weather shield. Usually, this meant that a guardian had to look after them.

The Mission was set up to fool the city council into thinking that all the children that came to the city were only coming to see family and then stayed.

He had been a Mission kid. He had known she had worked for the Mission as it had been one of the other Mission kids that had told him about her and her Bioware skills that were going to waste. He hadn’t known about the glyph tattoos, but another of the Mission kids had told him she had bought a tattoo chair and he had used that as a way to get to her.

What did surprise him was that she knew he was a Mission kid. He turned his head so he could look at her. She glanced up and seemed to understand his unspoken question as she said, “That first time. It was written all over you as much as the undercover cop thing. I haven’t told anyone. Not even Misha.”

He relaxed and Hal finished up with the glyph that ran down the calves of both of his legs. They were quite pretty and he twisted his legs to have a look.

They were an orange brown color like henna except that it shifted and glimmered so he wasn’t sure what exactly the color was. They blended and worked with his dark skin color.

Hal finished packing up her gear and said, “Are you free now?”

He picked up his pants and put them on, “Why?”

She put something into a box, “I need this delivered to someone on University Hill. It is important it gets to her and I believe that someone might try to stop this from getting to her if it isn’t under some kind of guard. As an agent, people tend to think twice about taking you on. Hopefully that will be all that is needed to stop any attempt.”

He shrugged. He didn’t have anything to do that afternoon as it was his day off and going back to his lonely apartment wasn’t a pleasant thought.

Hal placed the box in his hands, “She is a doctor on the hill. She will be working in the University lab. Her name is Freya. She is blonde and quite tall. She isn’t your usual skinny model type. Make sure you give it to the right person. Like I said I think someone will try to intercept this.”

He was trying to visualize the girl that Hal described, but all he could imagine was those old female athletes from the Olympics they ran on late night TV. The ones that threw metal balls over their shoulders.

If Hal wanted him to be cautious, she couldn’t have described the woman any better.

Freya looked up when someone walked past the glass wall of her lab. It was a handsome man. His dark hair a little too long. He walked liked someone who was dangerous though.

Her heart beat a little faster. Was this another one of Portland’s thugs? They hadn’t come into the lab yet, but she had seen them hanging around. She was scared one day they would do more than she stand around and watch her.

Her hands tightened on the edge of the table as the man came into the lab. He was carrying a small box and she wondered if it was a bomb or something equally dangerous.

He asked, “Are you Freya?” his voice was mellow with a hint of an accent.

Her knuckles were white on the edge of the table. She nodded her head slightly. He placed the box on the table and said, “Hal told me to bring this to you.”

Relief flooded her and she reached for the box. Her hands were not graceful and she tipped it off the edge as she reached for it. The man moved faster than she had thought anyone could and caught it. He had a strange look on his face as he put the box in her hands.

Freya asked, “Is that normal?” he shook his head.

He hesitated, then said, “Hal put one of her tattoos on me. I think it is not going well.”

He put up his hand and showed her that it was shaking, fast enough that his hand actually blurred. She caught his hand, but it still blurred.

She swore softly, “That is definitely not normal.” She guided him to a stool. This was something she could deal with.

She took vitals and tapped a finger thoughtfully against her lip as she thought, “This is way beyond my capabilities. But at least it isn’t dangerous. Your heart is fine.”

He shrugged and it was a little awkward as the shaking made him over compensate and he almost fell off the stool.

He gritted his teeth as he said, “Maybe if I stay still for a moment it will stop.”

She shrugged. It was possible. With his EM Fields settled, he might be able to take control of it again.

She started puttering around to keep her hands busy, “I didn’t get your name?”

His voice sounded strained, “I’m Ramon. I’m a City State Agent.”

That surprised her. He didn’t look like an agent. They were usually the dark broody type. Ramon looked dangerous but there was a joie de vive to him that flashed through if she watched him carefully.

She asked, “Are you a friend of Hal’s?”

He seemed distracted as he answered, “Of Misha’s actually. Are you really a doctor?” He motioned to the lab.

She nodded, “I’m working on a cure for Ambrosia.”

Though she wasn’t sure how long that would last. If Portland knew she was still working on it he might make his threat real and put her out of action. He certainly had the clout to make her grant money go away.

Her thoughts were brought back to the present when Ramon said, “So beauty and brains.”

She raised an eyebrow and asked, “Are you flirting with me?”

He grinned, showing white teeth in his tanned face, “Only if it will get me somewhere?” he said this all while he was holding himself as still as possible and was completely failing.

Obviously he was concentrating more on what his body was doing rather than on her. That gave her an idea and she surprised him when she leaned in and kissed him. She didn’t have much experience in kissing people as she had always felt out of place at the University and she found the people that lived in her parents’ neighborhood to be so myopic.

The last guy she had a crush on had been completely oblivious to her. But she knew she was a pretty girl and it would be no hardship for a guy to kiss her.

Ramon surprised her by returning the kiss warmly. His hand went to the nape of her neck and he tugged her closer so he could deepen the kiss. The surprise was quickly followed by fear. She wasn’t used to this kind of thing. And she never dealt with new things very well.

She stepped back and asked, “Did it work?”

His eyes searched her face and asked, “Did what work?”

She smiled and said, “The shaking. Has it stopped? I thought if your mind was dwelling on something else that you might be able to stop.”

She picked up one of his hands. It was still. She grinned, “See, all cured.”

He studied his hands for a long moment and sighed out, “Oh.”

She turned back to the box he had brought and said, “Thank you for bringing this. I don’t want anyone to know I’m still working on the cure so I can’t use my usual couriers.”

He frowned, “Why? I mean Hal hinted at something, but she never explains things very well.”

Freya grinned at that, “She can if she puts her mind to it. But one of the city councillors is behind the Ambrosia. If they find out what we are all doing, they can take us out.”

Ramon snorted, “They have been trying to take out Hal and Misha and they have failed miserably so far. Those two are bulletproof.”

From what Warren Nasser had said they really were bulletproof, but she was unsure what the Agent knew of the glyphs.

He also scared her a little, but she put on a smile and said, “Well, you should get back to Hal. She’ll want to hear about the shaking.”

He nodded and stood up from the stool, but he seemed unsure of himself.

He stammered, “Nice to meet you doctor.”

She was studying the contents of the box so barely noticed his sudden shyness. She really needed to get over her fear of strange men, “Call me Freya and it was a pleasure agent.”

“Yeah.” He answered softly.

When she looked up next he was gone. She blushed. She had done it again. She had fallen into her work and ignored him.

Her parents always railed on her that she would never find a man if she ignored people when something interesting distracted her to the point that she forgot that people existed.

Worse yet, the agent had been kind of cute. Dangerous but also cute.

Chapter Two

*Freya opened the window to the sounds of her parents arguing in the living room behind her. They always argued at home. When they were out they were all smiles. It was driving Freya up the wall as the arguments seemed so stupid to her.*

*She eased out of the window and pulled her bag out after her. She closed the window and trotted away. She could have left through the front door but that had meant going past her parents. She doubted they would have noticed her leaving but she wasn’t willing to be drawn into their argument either.*

*The library was open late. She usually went there when things got too bad at home. To the point her parents often picked her up from there when they found her no longer in her room. They had scolded her the first few times now they didn’t even bother.*

*The librarian greeted her quietly as she passed her desk. It was easy for Freya to disappear inside the books. She particularly liked the books about science. She hoped one day she could be a surgeon or a doctor of some sort. Maybe then she wouldn’t have to worry about people arguing around her. Cells and blood didn’t talk back. That would be safe.*

*There was a chime that told her that the library was closing soon. Her parents must still be arguing if they hadn’t noticed her missing yet. She wondered if one day they would completely forget about her.*

*Freya put away the books she had been reading and bobbed a head to the librarian as she left.*

*Outside it was raining. It usually rained at night. She liked it. The rain made everything clean and fresh again. Not that the air in the shield was bad.*

*The Charter was clear on that. Any vehicles had to be specially modified so they ran on clean energy. With the power from the shield no one used anything but electricity for transport or industry anymore. Though there were rations on power. You had be rich or powerful to have unlimited power. Most people had their stipend and never shelled out for the extra. So to own a car in the city was usually unheard of. It did mean that people tended to stay in their neighborhoods instead of wandering all around the city.*

*Freya skipped down the stairs thinking of where she could go next. She didn’t want to go home. Not if they were still arguing. She tapped her lip with a finger as she thought and with a smile decided to see if the stray dog that lived under the bridge had her puppies yet. There weren’t many animals inside the city so when she had seen the dog she had followed it to see if it had a home.*

*Once near the bridge she called out for the dog. It usually came to her call. Today it didn’t. She frowned and she looked into the shadowed depth under the bridge.*

*There were several old buildings that had fallen down near the bridge. Since the river didn’t flow much the buildings had been left in the mostly dry river bed. She would have to climb over one of the broken buildings to get to where the dog usually slept.*

*She wondered if she was having her puppies right then and that was why she hadn’t come. There was a niggling worry at the back of her head. There had been catchers out lately. Dogs were rare and rich people wanted them as pets. Did one of the catchers grab the dog? She hoped not as Freya had few friends didn’t like the thought of losing another one.*

*She crawled onto the old building. She could hear the skittering of loose rocks and rubble falling as she made her way. It was dark so she misjudged her step and instead of placing it on something solid she put it through a hole.*

*She yelped in genuine pain. She took a deep breath and tried to pull her leg free. Her shoe was stuck. She wriggled her foot and her leg and tried again.*

*It started slow enough, first the slide of the brick wall under her hand, then more. Her foot was free but now she was atop an avalanche of debris and rubble.*

*She scrambled to try keep her balance but loose bits were now hitting her on their way down. One hit her on her arm and she lost her balance and went down. Darkness reigned as copper tasting pain washed through her.*

Ramon stumbled into the courtyard. He was shaking again and he struggled to open the door as he couldn’t put in the code easily with his hands a blur. He did eventually make his way into the junkyard that was outside the warehouses. He put his hand on an old vehicle but it left a buzz in his arm. His knees started to buckle and he leant heavily on the vehicle.

He called out, “Hal.”

He pushed himself away from the old truck and took the few steps to the doorway.

She called back from inside the building, “What?”

He leaned against the doorway of the warehouse and yelled again, “Hal.”

His legs gave out and he shuddered as he went to the floor. He looked at his hands on the floor and they were still blurry. Her voice was much closer now when she said “What!”

He looked up and Hal was standing over him. She hissed, “Come along. We need to fix this.”

She caught his arm and dragged him to his feet. She asked, “How long has this been happening?”

He growled, “Since the Hill.”

She swore softly, “How did you get back then? That is over an hour journey on the bus.”

The concern in her voice was clear. He sighed and decided he wouldn’t take his frustration out on her, “Well, it wasn’t so bad when I got on the bus.”

He thought about the kiss that the doctor had given him. He wished she hadn’t been playing doctor and that the kiss was for real. But he also wasn’t surprised. He didn’t deserve a smart and beautiful girl like her. She certainly wasn’t anything like what Hal described.

She had pale skin and blue eyes. Blonde hair that was probably long but she had kept it in a braid down her back. He dreamed of untying the braid and running his fingers through it.

Hal tilted back on her heels and looked at him up and down, “Wow, what were you thinking of then? That left your EM field perfect. Keep thinking that and I’ll be able to fix this very quickly.”

She helped him to the tattoo chair. She muttered for a moment then said, “I should have put these on first. I think from now on I will. Everything seems better with them anyway.”

He asked, “What are putting on me now?”

She was already distracted by her work as she said, “Mmm the balance glyph. I’ve found it helps with the more unstable glyphs.”

He turned his head to look at her, “It did make me fast though.”

She grinned as she worked, “I wouldn’t have put it on you if I didn’t think it worked.”

She worked for a little while then said, “So, what are you thinking of? I can tell you are thinking of something good as your EM Field is calm.”

He grunted, “I don’t think I want to tell you. You will tell Misha and he will tease me.”

She laughed, “Who says Misha will tease you? I will.”

He rubbed his cheek on his arm as he thought about Freya.

He asked Hal, “Did you ever worry that you weren’t good enough for Misha?”

The ink gun stopped and she brought her face closer to his.

She was frowning, “I’ve never felt that I’ve ever had to measure myself against some imagined yard stick someone has in their mind. It is never a very good judge anyway. I think that might be why I don’t get on well with others but that is their problem and not mine.”

She went back to inking his skin but there was tension in the air. After a long moment of awkward silence Hal said, “Nothing in your past. Nothing in your blood or lineage makes you less human than anyone else and everyone deserves a good decent life. I don’t care what happened to you or what you think might be wrong with you. You deserve a good decent life.”

The ink gun stopped and she wiped his skin off. He turned to look at her, “It feels different. What exactly does this balance glyph do?”

She shrugged, “From what Warren says about the word and what Misha has told me from the reaction I think it is to help regulate the flow of your chi. Usually what happens is that the glyph collects power from you EM field and releases it slowly like the health one and the strength. They are constant. But there are glyphs that collect power and then release it suddenly. Well, it becomes difficult. There is this burst of power when it is kicked into action and it unbalances the other functions. I’m thinking the speed one works like this. The sudden burst when you need it. It would chew up too much power for it to be a constant thing.”

She flicked her hands as she thought it over. Eventually she motioned for him to get up, “I’ll figure it out. Tell me if anything else happens.”

He grinned at her, “Don’t worry I will be your faithful guinea pig and make sure that if I go crazy from the glyphs you will be the first one to know.”

She turned all serious and he remembered that some had gone crazy with the glyph. He winced and said, “Sorry, I didn’t mean it that way.”

She shook her head and waved off his concern, “No, I can already see that your EM field is balanced enough to deal with the glyphs. You won’t be going crazy.”

He wiggled his eyebrows and said in an effort to dissipate the tension in the room, “Well, you might just drive me crazy but I don’t think the glyphs will.”

She grinned but there was still a sadness in her “Oh, I consider that my mission, to drive you crazy. Now are you going to tell me what you were thinking about?”

He was glad that they were on an even footing again, “What are you offering?” he countered.

He could enjoy this. He didn’t have many friends and Misha was one of the few. He had been a little standoffish when the man had hooked up with this little hellion but he was starting to see what his friend saw in her.

“Mom?” Freya called as she opened the door.

“In here, sweetheart.” Her mother replied. Her voice was muffled as she was further in the house.

Freya went in to find her mother painting one of the spare rooms. She was leaning on a roller and had paint splatters on her face.

Her mother liked change. It still amazed her that her parents were still together. Freya would have thought she would get sick and tired of the fights and just leave.

She glanced over her shoulder at Freya and asked, “What brings you around, my dear? I never see you during the week. Has work been troubling you?”

One thing she could say for her mother was she had always supported her ambition to become a doctor.

Freya’s answer was distracted, “Work is fine. I think I might be close to a breakthrough. Someone managed to get me early samples of the drug. So now I’ll be able to map the development of the drug though the main component is still the same.”

She waved it off and said to her mother, “That isn’t why I came here. Today this guy came into work…”

Her mother squealed and interrupted her, “Oh, was he handsome? Oh, don’t tell me you did your usual and ignored him? You know that annoys men.”

Freya sighed, “I did. I didn’t mean to. He brought something interesting.” She threw up her arms and paced as she continued to explain, “He was so cute and interesting but mom he scared me a little as well. Should I pursue something with him or is it better that he thinks I’m an idiot who zones out?”

Her mother put her roller away and cleaned off her hands with a cloth and said, “Come have a cup of tea. We can talk.”

She followed her mother and they were quiet as her mother made some tea. It was a ritual they were long used to.

Into the silence Freya asked, “How can you want me to have a relationship when your relationship with dad is so… so, well, conflicted?”

Her mother placed the cups on the table and said, “What your father and I have is complicated but I wouldn’t wish it away. We have worked hard to stay together over the years and there is one thing I can say with every ounce of my body. Your father loves me. And I love your father terribly. We fight because he sometimes forgets that I love him just as much. That is mostly my fault but we love each other and love isn’t easy. I can wish that you will find a partnership that isn’t as fraught with conflict as mine.”

Freya took a sip of the tea as she thought, “Why do you argue so much if you love each other so much?”

Her mother sighed, “The truth is I made a mistake early in our marriage. I think it would have been fine if I could only forgive myself. You see your father forgave me years ago but I couldn’t forgive myself.”

She took a sip and then looked at Freya, “Don’t make mistakes lightly, sweetheart.”

She stared at her mother surprised by her confession and finally said, “I don’t think I’ll ever have a relationship, let alone mess it up by making mistakes.”

Her mother patted her hand, “Now tell me about this young man. Maybe we can find a way for you to get his attention back. Then he will see how awesome you are.”

Freya rolled her eyes, “It isn’t as simple as that, mom. I’m just so awkward with guys.”

Her mother waved that off and said “Nonsense. You are a beautiful girl and anyone would be lucky to have you.”

Freya sighed, “I don’t think it is my looks that are the problem, mom. I think guys get intimidated by me. Seriously, when they hear that I have two doctorates and that I managed to get those before I was twenty five they think that no matter how much money they earn they will never be able to compete with me.”

Her mother took another sip of her tea and said, “What about this guy that you met? What job does he have? Will he be intimidated by your brains?”

Freya rolled her eyes at the dramatic tone in her mother’s voice, “He is an Agent.”

Her mother grinned, “That is perfect. He is unlikely to be intimidated by you.”

Freya shook her head, “He is dangerous, mom.”

Her mother went suddenly serious, “What do you mean, dangerous?”

Freya shrugged as she wasn’t entirely sure, “I don’t know. There is just something about him that whenever he is about he makes me shiver all over.”

Her mother grinned and lost her serious tone. She leant forward and patted her hand as she said, “Oh, that is all right then. You kind of want that.”

“Mom!” Freya whined amused more than horrified by her mother’s matchmaking.

When her mother just grinned at her and wiggled her eyebrows she asked, “Mom?”

Her mother’s eyes twinkled as she spoke, “Well, just think. Some of the most important things you have done in your life have scared you. Remember your first day at University. But it sure was worth it. I think you will regret not finding out if you have something with this guy. If it gets too scary you can always pull back. Besides dangerous men can be fun.”

Freya sighed, “I still don’t know, mom. I was so awkward. He probably thinks I don’t like him.”

“Then you need to make sure the next time you see him to tell him that you like him.” Her mother advised.

Freya chewed on her lip as she admitted, “I will probably never see him again.”

Her mother sounded hopeful as she said, “Oh, do you at least have his number?”

Freya chuckled at her mother’s eagerness but answered, “Yes, Hal gave it to me. But you are not going to convince me to call him.”

Her mother turned and brought out some alcohol, “Maybe some liquid courage.”

Freya shook her head and said, “You know I can’t drink with my bioware.”

Her mother sighed dramatically but put away the alcohol.

Ramon dropped his keys into a bowl by the door. He unstrapped his weapon as he moved through the house and placed it in the lock up drawer.

He leaned against the kitchen counter and took a deep breath. His home always made him feel safe. Unfortunately, when he had been undercover he had rarely been here.

Ramon didn’t know much stability in his life. When he had come to the city as a young man he had gone to live with an old Spanish woman. He had been such an angry child that it hadn’t lasted much more than a year. He had spent the next few years of his life moving from foster home to foster home until he had fallen into the police academy.

The best thing that had happened to him. For the first time he could deal with his anger in a productive manner.

He poured himself a drink and moved to the balcony. He took in the fresh breeze that came from the fields. It wasn’t much of a breeze and was only there because of the heat of the buildings compared to the cooler fields.

The closest field was growing corn and made a soft shushing sound in the breeze. He had a couple traps in the field that he would check later.

Some idiot had brought rabbits into the city and now the farmers had trouble trying to control the small pests. But the rabbits did make a good stew so he didn’t mind that he could supplement his food with fresh meat. He didn’t have the space in his apartment for a hydroponics setup like he had seen in other people’s houses.

He did have tomatoes growing on his balcony and he picked a few of the ripened ones and went inside to make his meal.

His phone went and he grumbled as he answered it, “What?”

The voice on the other end was almost drowned out by the blaring of sirens, “Agent? Something has happened.”

She didn’t introduce herself but he could tell it was Freya. His heart jumped erratically. There was another voice on the other end as a man told her to stand back.

Ramon asked, “Where are you?”

She rattled off her address and he hung up. She probably hadn’t noticed as he had heard her talking to someone else on the other end of the phone. He didn’t need to know what was wrong yet. He knew no matter what it was he needed to be there.

Freya shivered as she watched the fire. The small cottage she had lived in was smouldering in parts. Fire was always treated expeditiously as it could damage the shield.

One of the firemen had placed a blanket around her shoulders but the chill that ran through her had nothing to do with temperature.

Ramon stopped next to her and asked, “Are you all right?”

She glanced at him and the man that stood behind him. She had seen Agent Harold before, though she had never spoken to him. She hadn’t even thought of calling him when she had come home to find her home on fire. Instead she had called Ramon. It was always to have dangerous people in your own corner when they were fighting for your side.

She looked at Ramon and without a word she wrapped her arms around his neck. She shuddered with her unshed tears. He closed his arms around her and said, “It is all right Freya. It will be fine.”

Agent Harold said softly, “We should get her out of here.”

She nodded against Ramon’s neck but she didn’t move. There was no way to save anything from her house. All the knick knacks that she had collected over the years were gone.

Ramon didn’t try to set her back so they could leave instead he slipped his arm under her legs and lifted her up against his chest. Her arms around his neck tightened but he didn’t seem to have any trouble carrying her large frame.

Agent Harold said, “They think it was an electrical fire but there is glass at the back. Someone broke into the house first.”

Ramon grumbled and she could feel it where she was pressed to his chest. The sound of commotion fell away as a door was closed behind them and Ramon sat down in a car seat with her still in his lap.

There was another door opened and she glanced up to see it was Agent Harold. She said softly, “Thank you for coming.”

Agent Harold grunted and Ramon smoothed a hand through her hair and she glanced at him. His voice was soft when he spoke, “It is our job.”

She deflated at that comment. Was he only here because he was an Agent for the city? She realized then that when she had called him she had wanted him. Just him.