

CHAPTER ONE

“We need you to come back. Bianca’s dead.”

That was how it started for me. A few words, and Misao Smith’s familiar voice.

Bianca’s dead.

I stood there, staring at my hand set while those words sank through brain and blood to tangle around my guts. Behind me, the noise from Allie’s twenty-fifth birthday dinner kept on. We were holding it on our glassed-in balcony. Outside, Lake Superior’s turbulent waters were as iron grey as the low blanket of clouds overhead. Allie sat at the head of the confetti littered table, laughing in that odd, hiccoughing way she’s had ever since she was four while Jo and Dale gave

each other shit about...something.

Any second now, David was going to tell the two of them to calm down. Then they'd start giving the old man shit for treating them like they were all still four.

I hadn't switched the screen on. I remember being vaguely grateful for the oversight. This way, my family wouldn't see who interrupted Allie's day.

Bianca's dead.

I hadn't seen Bianca for over three decades, but I hadn't forgotten her for a single day. She was my first mentor in the Guardians, and my best friend for my entire service.

"Terese?" asked Misao coolly.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm still here." Mostly. Part of me stood beside Bianca, seeing her toss her

hair back over her shoulder, like she did when she was getting serious. Nothing could convince her to cut that hair, even though it constantly got in her way.

Bianca's dead.

"How...?"

"I can't tell you on this set." Misao's voice was flat, final, and annoyed.

I pinched the bridge of my nose hard, trying to get the pain to focus me. My hand started to twitch. In another second I'd be shaking. The happy family noises all fell away. David and the kids had noticed something was wrong.

I could hear Misao let out a long sigh, the sound of strained patience. "Will you come in?"

The thousand things I could say flashed through my mind. Misao, it's my kid's birthday, for God's sake! What happened? Tell me what happened! No! I'm done with this. I promised them all I was done!

Silence behind me. Silence on the hand set.

"Tomorrow," I said.

"There's no..."

But I switched off and turned away. My whole family was staring at me.

My family. My life and heart distributed among four separate lives. Dark, intense Allie; home tonight for the family celebration and out tomorrow with her friends doing things I suspect I wouldn't want to know about: Jo, our middle child, had dyed herself white to stand out in our

little crowd: Dale, my youngest, my son, the earth-brown image of his father with his father's eyes set in his handsome, young face.

David stood up and walked round the table.

“What's happened? Who was that?”

I couldn't answer. I just held out the set and he saw the name. He sucked in his breath sharply. Behind us, all the kids cast glances at each other. There gets to be a kind of telepathy in a family. There are words you stop needing to say. In ours they were “the Guardians.”

“They want me to go in tomorrow,” I said.

“Are you?”

I nodded.

“Terese...” He drew my name out into a warning.

I tried to dismiss it. “Misao won’t let me alone until I hear them out, David. The sooner I do, the sooner I can tell him to... bugger off.” My voice was far weaker than I wanted it to be, a fact which David did not miss.

“What else did he say?”

I met his gaze, oddly helpless. “Bianca.”

He saw the tears at the corner of my eyes, and he knew the rest. David folded me in his arms and rested his hand on the back of my head. I closed my eyes, breathing in his scent, willing myself to sink into his warmth and remain solidly in the safe, whole present. But my mind wouldn’t let go. I kept

seeing Bianca: dark, stout, stubborn, Bianca, with her gleaming eyes. Smart, fast, ruthless, fearless. Canny in ways I couldn't begin to match. Where had she been deployed? I didn't know. I'd lost track. When the hell had I started losing track?

"Come on." David kissed the top of my head. "We haven't cut the cake yet."

"Right. Right." I wiped at my eyes and attempted to smile at my children, none of whom smiled back. I sat down at our table and handed Allie the knife. But the party was really over, and we all knew it.

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Four in the morning. I couldn't sleep and I was back in the dining room. We turned off the noise filters at night, so I could hear

Lake Superior's waves rushing up to the shore. The late November wind muttered out there, piling up the heavy clouds. The weight of the air told me snow rode on the back of that wind. The moon had gone down, and the windows were utterly black. I could see myself clearly; a faded ghost in a satin robe wavering in the depths of the black glass. I smiled grimly at the thought. By rights, I should have been a ghost by now.

I rubbed behind my ear; the very bottom of the curve between my skull and my neck. There was nothing but smooth skin there now, but I still carried the harsh memory of the wound and the pain, where they'd cut out my Companion.

The Companion is the tool and back-up each field officer in the Guardians is given just in case they are captured in a war zone. The

Companion is a friend, a reminder, a helper and, if you're extremely unlucky, he or she is the witness to your death.

They are also one of the few secrets the Guardians actually keep. I should say kept. They're certainly not a secret anymore.

During the Redeemer Uprising four decades ago, I was captured. I was tossed in a dark cell and dragged out on occasion so I could be made to experience a lot of pain. My captors managed to detect my Companion and when they did, they cut it out of me, quickly, brutally. Then they tossed me back into the dark.

It was Bianca who rescued me. She pulled me out of that black hole.

She saved my life.

That's what made this so bad. Bianca was dead, and not only was I not there to save her, I didn't even know she had been in danger.

The sound of Dale's snoring cut through all my heavy thoughts, accompanied by the soft breathing of the heat pump. Something beeped in the kitchen. In the living room, something else pinged in answer.

Night noises. Home noises.

This wasn't the first place David and I lived together, or even the third. We'd bumped up against each other occasionally over the years before we both married in the middle of what you could call unsettled times in our lives. We were well into our second centuries, then -- that time when most people had officially launched from their

second families and were starting to build their third. David had left his birth family and tried a marriage family, but it hadn't gone anywhere and he hadn't tried again. I was trying to create something I could call normality as fast as I could. He found me fascinating, in a wounded-bird kind of way. I found him wonderful, in a life-line kind of way. It was mutual need that passed for love, and we got married.

Under those conditions, we moved around a lot. Bangkok. Moscow. San Francisco. We had an apartment up the Adas Apaba cable for awhile, and then there was the year down in Marianas. It was there, we, or rather I, hit bottom literally as well as figuratively. David threatened to leave, which finally got me into the kind of treatment, both mental and physical, that I'd been refusing for years.

When I got out, we found this place in the middle of Lake Superior. Whitecap was a new, small town on a new, small island. We both craved peace and quiet, but we believed it was just for a little while.

Instead, that desire broadened and deepened. Against the odds, our tumult turned into real love, for this place and for each other. We built and added and accumulated and stored. We found out which restaurants we both liked and where the good doctors and stylists were. There were more exciting places to be, and some even more beautiful, but we were settled. Settled enough that the morning the house-doc put up the flag that I was carrying our first child, we did nothing but celebrate.

I heard a step on the bare floor and straightened, instantly alert. Some instincts

do not go away. David's reflection moved to join mine in the black glass, getting closer, until I could feel his warmth against my skin.

"Do you think it's because of the Erasmus System?" His breath stirred my hair. Picking conversations back up, even after hours of silence, is something he's always done.

"It's got to be. That's the only one I'm doing analysis on right now."

We were silent for awhile. There was only one question in his solemn eyes, and I waited for him to ask it.

"Why are they calling you in? You could give them all your current analysis over the set."

"I don't know." What I didn't say was how

much it scared me that Misao had called at all. If the Guardians were calling in thirty year retirees it meant one of the dozen hot spots I knew about, plus any new ones I might not, was close to exploding into actual war.

War. The ancient, perverse, pervasive nightmare we'd banished from the solar system with the Pax Solaris, the Common Cause Covenant, and the Laws of Humanity. I'd dedicated my life to preventing its return as human beings spread themselves out into the living galaxy. The effort nearly took my sanity and my life. I'd tried to retire, to enjoy the peace I'd helped to keep, and now it had come down to find me. I looked up at the clouds, and wondered what was behind them.

"You could refuse," said David. I didn't

even have to respond to that. David's mouth twisted up. Distaste, or just frustration? I couldn't tell, and that bothered me.

"I'm sorry, David." Sorry for being what I was. Sorry for not having worked harder to crush that last little stone in my heart that still had the word DUTY carved on it. It hurt, that stone, and I wanted it gone.

I faced David, putting my back to the darkness outside the house and inside my own thoughts. I had to tilt my head far back to look into his eyes and my chest constricted.

"Maybe it was always borrowed time anyway," I murmured. "Maybe we should just be grateful for what we've had."

"Don't say that," he whispered fiercely. "We

did not borrow our life together. We earned it. We fought for it.”

He wrapped me in his arms and I leaned against him so my ear pressed against his heart. It beat in a soft, steady counterpoint to the rhythm of the waves outside.

“Come back to bed,” he breathed in my ear.

“If I haven’t slept by now, I’m not going to.”

“So we won’t sleep. Come back to bed.”

I let him steer me back to our room, past the sounds of our sleeping offspring. I let him thumb the privacy screen into place, turning the threshold opaque and sound-proof, and come to me. I let him peel my robe slowly off my shoulders and send it whispering down to the floor so we could be skin-to-

skin with the sound of the wind and the waves all around us. I let him stroke me and touch me until I didn't care what was waiting on the other side of night's darkness, as long as I had this moment now and David's warmth beneath my hands.

And in the end, I did sleep.