

My Strength,
My Power,
My Love

by

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Dedication

Hey, Diana!
This one's for you!

Synergy—

When the sum of two objects together is greater than the sum of each part separately.

Chapter 1 Ceremony

The banging on the door startled her. “Hey, Grey! Move your ass, woman, or you’ll be late!” Persia opened the door and stuck her head into the cubicle. Spying her friend standing in front of the reflective glass, she motioned for Grey to come on. “Girl, you would be late to your own funeral!”

Sighing, Grey took one last look at herself in the white jumpsuit. White. For unmated. But not for too much longer. The realization sent chills through her body.

“Grey!”

“I’m coming, I’m coming!” she answered as she ran her fingers through her unruly hair. Today she could let it hang unbound and not tied back as she usually kept it when she was in training. The weather forecasters promised no wind today and mild temperatures, so it should be okay. Besides, there was little else she could do with it. Damn stuff was too thick to style. And the golden streak running from above her right eyebrow all the way to the ends was too noticeable to even think about hiding. Grey made a face in the glass. “All right. I’m ready.”

“Finally!” Persia groaned. She grabbed her friend’s hand, and together they jogged for the chambers where the ceremony was to take place.

The immense room was already swarming with people when they arrived. Grey couldn’t help but observe the people in their vari-colored jumpsuits. She especially noticed the conspicuous lack of green. Until last month, before she was blessed with her first menses which signaled her entrance into adulthood, she had worn the bright green jumpsuit. That part of her life was over now. She was a full-fledged Synergian. And it was time for her to find her union mate.

The Academy auditorium was almost filled to capacity. Persia led her over to a row of seats where Venn was already holding spots for them. “You took your damn time,” their brunette friend hissed, then added a smile to take the sting out of her words.

“Couldn’t help it,” Grey snapped back. “Computers must have gotten my measurements wrong. It’s too snug on top.” To prove her point, she tugged on the tight bodice. Her breasts felt like

they were encased in cloth cages.

The girls snickered. “Don’t worry about that,” Venn teased. “Boys like tight tops.”

Persia responded with an elbow to the young woman’s rib-cage. “Men, Cadet Varsi. Men. No more boys for us.” She got a nod of agreement from the others as an elderly gentleman climbed the podium and called for attention. The vast auditorium hushed.

As the Administrator began to welcome everyone to the ceremony, Grey’s eyes wandered around the room, seeing if she could spot anyone she knew. Of course she already knew all of the Academy graduates. She had been taking classes with them since they all were children. It wasn’t until each student reached that magical thirteenth birthday that the females were separated from the males.

Grey made a face. So many of the boys she’d played with and studied with had changed over the years. She wondered if she would be able to recognize any of them. Or if they looked anything like they had when they were children.

A quick jab in the ribs reminded her she was supposed to be paying attention. Shooting a deadly look at Persia, Grey settled back in her chair and obediently listened.

“... this very special day.” The Administrator beamed at the big crowd.

Probably delighted to get another group of us out of their hair.

“Within the hour this class will be allowed to mingle. And from there we hope and pray that each candidate will be able to find their Synergistic mate, thus granting us a larger and more forceful presence in the galaxy.”

Enthusiastic applause answered him, Grey and her friends among the supporting crowd. The attacks on their planet were becoming more frequent and more deadly. In the past two years alone there had been three different entities swooping down on their world, bent on conquest or domination. But the incredibly powerful army of Synergistically mated couples had been able to beat them back with few casualties.

Next to her, Grey overheard her friends conversing. “Think you’ll find your union today?” Venn whispered.

“I don’t really care if I do,” Persia murmured back. “I’m just looking forward to getting laid!”

Venn covered her mouth with her hand and giggled. Someone behind them made a shushing sound, and Grey stared down at her hands. For twenty, almost twenty-one years, she had been waiting for this day. Her parents had been overjoyed to discover the baby girl they had been blessed with carried the Synergistic gene. They had readily handed over their child to the Academy right after Grey’s third birthday. Just like all the other parents of Synergistic children had.

From that point on she had been taught and trained for this moment. For this time when she finally reached adulthood, and her body was ready to find that one special male who would complete her. A male whose body would meld with hers, and together they would become a force so new, so different, and so powerful that it would be used to help keep their world safe from invaders and other species bent on conquering and dominating their planet.

Then why wasn’t she more excited about the prospect of finding her union mate? Why didn’t she feel the same giggly effervescence as her friends did?

She tugged on the binding top. The white jumpsuit didn’t stretch or allow for any kind of leeway. She felt like it was keeping her from drawing a full breath of air. Furthermore, this place was stifling, keeping her from concentrating on what was going on. Her head was beginning to ache from

all the pomp and circumstance.

The body of graduates rose to their feet. Startled, Grey stood with them. The Administrator was showing them off. Twelve women and fifteen men made up this month's roster. With luck most of them eventually would find their mates, but in reality the odds were more like one in every three. Synergistic unions were not rare, but the odds of Grey finding that one male in this particular bunch of graduates were very slim. She would have a better chance once she was allowed to mingle with the earlier graduates now employed in the military. Or with the next several classes of graduates who would be joining them in the months to come.

If truth be told, she wanted to enjoy her new freedom a bit more before seeking her mate. Right now the majority of graduates had only one thought on their minds—the freedom to begin copulation.

Two dozen oversexed and horny graduates would no doubt lose their virginities today and tonight, and maybe a handful of them would find their Synergistic other halves.

The idea of lying beneath a sweaty male and hoping he was her destined other self was simply too unrealistic for her to imagine at this point. No matter what had been drilled into her throughout all her biology classes.

Her eyes swept the vast audience of friends and family who encircled the small group facing the podium. Somewhere out there were her mother and father and younger brother. They would be smiling and clapping, and accepting the accolades of their neighbors and friends. They came to visit her every now and then, when it was allowed. Yet, somehow, Grey never felt truly close to her parents.

It probably had to do with the fact that she didn't remember much of her infant years when she had lived with them.

The graduates were asked to sit, and the sound of over two dozen crisply clad bottoms taking their seat whispered in the warm afternoon.

Grey kept her eyes on the people standing on floor level, just beyond the graduates. She had no inclination to listen to the Administrator, who was currently describing to the audience the types of classes and physical training all Synergians underwent. She was more interested in the teachers and instructors standing over there, watching. She immediately located the one figure she had been seeking, and when her eyes locked on him, she felt her entire body go on high alert.

Rowe Maine stood with his hands behind his back. His dark red jumpsuit stood out among the rest like a beacon. But it did little to disguise the fact that the man had been carved from the roughest stone. His shoulders and thick neck could have been sculpted from any woman's fantasy. His chest was wide but not overly muscular like some of the younger men often sought during their workouts. Slim hips, a flat stomach, and powerful thighs filled out the lower portion of his suit. Grey licked her lips and tried to control the fluttering feeling inside her chest cavity. By the gods, he was the most wonderful thing she had ever set eyes on. Too bad he was one of the Unmatched.

"...want you to meet each of our graduates." The Administrator stepped to one side, and the student body rose to their feet once more. Persia poked her in the ribs and hissed for her to move her ass. Numb, Grey followed the row ahead of them, keenly aware of the thousands of eyes watching.

They marched up to the podium and waited their turn to be called. Again, Grey searched the small group of teachers who remained at floor level. Amid the deep purple suits of the couples who had found their Synergistic mates, Rowe's blood-colored suit was easy to spot. Seeing the hard look

that he wore like a mask, she felt her heart soften. The poor man.

“...Grey Dansis.”

Persia gave her a shove forward. Grey stumbled slightly, but she quickly regained her footing and walked toward the podium. Her eyes sought the red-clad figure once more, but this time the look on his face had changed. His eyes were drilling into her, through skin and muscle and bone, all the way into the very center of her being.

Grey felt a flash of lightning explode inside her stomach. Streaks of pure heat raced outward, sizzling to the tips of her fingers, her toes, and the roots of her hair. His dark eyes bored further into her, until she was certain he could read her every thought and feel every emotion.

She saw his eyebrows lift, almost as if he was surprised by her reaction. His arms lowered until his hands perched on his hips. And Rowe Maine slowly let his gaze take in her whole body.

This is wrong. It was wrong on so many levels. The feelings she was experiencing were the kind that she and everyone in her class had been taught would come from her mate. Her Synergistic other half. Her other soul, as the teachers often referred to it. They had said that her body would let her know who it was compatible to. A look, a touch, a taste, or maybe the simple sound of his voice would fire off rockets in her head and between her legs. All she had to do was listen and wait for that magical reaction to consume her. That would be how she would know she had found her other self. Their first kiss would confirm their beliefs, and the sexual part, their first consummation, would cement those feelings. And then they would be able to discover what kind of power and potential they produced from their union.

She caught a gesture off to one side. Obediently Grey stepped down off the podium and returned to her seat. But the fiery rush of heat that made her skin break out in sweat still lay beneath the surface like a thin blanket.

Ever since that first day she had seen Rowe Maine, she had been feeling this incredible sense of warmth and excitement surging through her. At the time she had no idea what it meant, or why she was having these wonderful reactions. Not until her instructor began class with the rudiments of sex and sexual fulfillment.

“Before you ever touch, your body will tell you he’s the one.” The woman, Karrel, was a well-known Synergian. She and her mate, Tonn, had fought in the last three major wars, earning several commendations. Together the couple could shoot fireballs from their hands. Huge, swirling, condensed masses of heat and gas so powerful and intense they would melt the skin off any invading aircraft or ship. Grey had never seen them in action, but vids of their exploits, along with vids of many of the other Synergistic couples, were shown to them on a daily basis.

Tyven had raised her hand. “What if you think he’s the one, but he’s not?” she’d questioned the woman and her mate. So few males were allowed into the female populace. Only those men who were already unionized, those who had lost their mates, or those deemed Unmatched were granted access into the segregated classrooms and dorms.

Tonn had smiled, as if they had been asked that question countless times before. Grey bet they had. “Then he’s not the one, and all you have to show for it is a very nice sexual meeting.”

A very nice sexual meeting. Grey winced. That was the payoff, she told herself as she looked around at the graduating class. Everyone could go off and have gods know how many liaisons from now until they found their true mates, and all without condemnation or guilt. A true union mate was only solidified upon consummation. Until then, it was speculation or guess that brought two people

together to see if they were compatible.

But for some unexplainable reason, having the absolute freedom to screw any Synergian male that crossed her path was not something she planned to do, or looked forward to. No, she wanted to be absolutely dead-on certain that the man she gave her body to was Him, and only Him. Call her stuck-up. Prude. Deviant. Grey Dansis did not want to be any man's conquest or lazy afternoon bedmate.

The Administrator announced them all as graduates, signaling the group to rise to resounding applause. Persia and Venn hugged each other then turned to include her in their congratulations. At that point the instructors and teachers ventured toward the group to help herd them into the antechamber where family and friends could share a drink and edibles for the next hour or two. And after that, after the Academy closed its doors to the outside world once again...

Sighing loudly, Grey followed along behind her friends. Behind her she could hear several of the male graduates boasting over how many females they could lay between now and tomorrow's dawn. She frowned. One of them wouldn't be her, she almost said aloud. No, sir. Not her.

A flash of red at the corner of her eye caught her attention. Almost instantly her heart jumped into her throat. The palms of her hands went clammy, and she wiped them on the thighs of her jumpsuit. He was following the crowd, watching from the fringes. She desperately wanted to turn her head to look at him, but there was no reason why she should. After all Master Maine was off limits.

Unmated. That, and the fact that he was one of their top instructors at the Academy, gave him every right to mingle among the female populace now.

The thought of the man's non-approachable status dug sharp pinpricks of pain inside her, puzzling her even further. Why the hell should I care? Why do I get these feelings whenever I look at him? Why?

Why?

Digging her fingernails into the palms of her hands did not assuage the pain, but at least she could drop her eyes and follow the rest of the crowd in silence. It was going to be a helluva long afternoon. Grey hoped the reception wouldn't last too long. All she wanted to do at this moment was go back to her little apartment and sink her nose into a good literary vid. She would even be willing to tackle another one of Master Corr's tactical manuals if that was what it took to pass the night in peace.

But she had little hope of getting a good night's sleep. Not with two dozen ultra-horny graduates ready to "seek" their union mates on their first evening of sexual permissiveness.

Shaking her head with reluctant acceptance, Grey lifted her head and began to search the room for sight of her parents.

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