

PERSONAL BEST

by Phaedra M. Weldon

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Prawns swam in oily butter sauce on her plate, bloated wood grubs with textures of old tires between her teeth and tongue. The garlic and lemon smell turned her stomach into knots and with it came the nausea she'd born during the three months since her miscarriage.

Pasha Banyon sipped her house wine—a local from the Hawkins Estates—in the hope the alcohol would cleanse her pallet. Anthony's Seaport was known throughout the city for its fine cuisine, but all the spice and garlic in the League couldn't ease away the bitter taste of failure that haunted her waking thoughts.



The dull murmur of conversation and clink of silverware and glass gave a cadence—like background to her husband's nasal tone. Not that she'd followed his present line of conversation for the past half-hour. Tonight was their third anniversary, a triumph that somehow, through the tragedies of the previous year, personally and politically, seemed bittersweet.

To the right of their table sat a family of four. Two children. The boy looked to be five and the girl even younger. Pasha rubbed the stem of her wineglass as she guessed the girl's age at two. Rosy cheeks, chestnut curls and a cherub smile to melt steel.

"Pash?"

With a blink she glanced from the little girl, who had now demonstrated the act gravity has upon a glass when knocked on its side, and firmly planted her dark brown gaze within her husband's green one. "Yes?"

"You haven't been listening to a word I've said." He held a fork in his right hand, his noteputer in his left. The Hawkins Estate distill-

ing inventory showed on the screen. The inventory meant nothing to her husband. He'd only worked there for six months, undercover with the Department of Military Justice. The why had ceased to interest Pasha months ago. He wasn't supposed to tell her, though she knew he would if she pressed.

But she had had other things to occupy her mind.

"Yes, I have." And this is the first time you have looked up from that damned device. What is so important about this assignment that you always ignore me?

"Pasha...I just asked you if you'd like coffee, and you nodded."

She arched her eyebrows as she focused on him, though part of her still followed the movements and voices of the children to her right. "Why is that odd? I enjoy coffee."

"No, you don't."

"Sam, I drink coffee. Every morning. Have for nearly six years, except for those few months while I was preg..." the words hung in her throat. As always, she was amazed at the level of emotion just a thought—a single detour from the daily miasma of intrepid ventures—could well forth behind her eyes. She blinked several times though the pressure of a swelling dam continued to build. "I drink coffee."

Her husband looked oddly perplexed. A crease split the pale skin between his thick, brown eyebrows as he set his fork on his plate with a small *tink*. "Pasha, you have never drunk coffee."

And here is only one of so many problems. She put her hands in her lap and took several breaths. Here was that opportunity, that moment of perfect insertion she dreamed of. And in her head was the speech, perfectly rehearsed in the shower, in the car, and while she shopped. She had his full attention.

She opened her mouth to speak...

He shrugged and looked back down at his meal as he retrieved his fork. His gaze returned to the noteputer.

Dismissed. Always dismissed.

"I've decided not to return to work." There. It was said. Quickly. But spoken aloud, as if the giving of voice cemented it in the great book of rote.

Sam arched his left eyebrow, an upward bend of brown. The crease between his eyes returned, but he kept the fork in his hand. "I thought we discussed this. Three months is proper for grieving, but you have to move on, get back into your life to—"

"No, you discussed it. And I agreed that after the..." Again the swelling of her throat came and the words choked. She reached out with a shaking hand and retrieved her wine. The simple act of a familiar, base movement rooted her firmly enough so she could regain control of her emotions. "I can't go back. It's not right that I go back; it's too soon. There hasn't been enough time for—"

"Too soon? Pash," he set the noteputer down and reached for her hand. "It's been three months since."

Too late—the emotion swelled and crashed against her eyes. She pulled her hand away and closed her eyes as the emotional tsunami threatened to push forward from her throat into a wail of grief. Shuddering, Pasha took several more breaths, trying every technique she'd learned in basic training to calm her overwhelming guilt.

"Look at yourself, Pasha," Sam's voice was calm, soft like a cat's purr in her ear, though she did not open her eyes. She couldn't. The tears would drown them both. "You need direction, and returning to work would do that. You could direct your grief there, in the war."

Pasha took a deep breath and opened her eyes. The little blond girl was now seated in her mother's lap. The little boy had discovered his plate of noodles and slurped them happily.

Sam was still focused on her. In the past three months, this was the longest she'd held his attention.

"My therapist..." she sniffed. *Breathe.* "Bridgette also suggested yesterday that I return to the unit. She believes it'll do me some good."

Before he could speak, she felt the need to beat him to the punch, to strike a first blow into whatever argument he planned on using to quell her misery. "I can't. Don't you see? I've never failed at anything in my life, Sam. Never. And now..." she swallowed, but kept her gaze fixed on his. "Failure is all I am. What good can I do, out there, when I can't even—" she stopped and put her hand again on her wineglass

Pasha had been the head of the team assigned with the Twenty-first Arcturan Guards. Only her unplanned pregnancy, though happy and thrilling at the time, had gained her a leave of absence. On the job she could patch together the most damaged of 'Mechs, hoversuits, even battle armor. Solving the problems of machine and circuitry was easy. Simple. But this...

"Bridgette is right." His tone changed. Gone was the quiet, understanding Sam. Now seated before her was the analytical Sam. The investigator. The one who discovered secrets and kept them. "You need to move on. It's time to build a bridge beyond your grief. Life—and me—are waiting for you on the other side."

Pasha felt the emotional tidal wave ease back to its box of pain. "How can I? How can I go on living my life when she—" swallowing, she forced herself to look into her husband's eyes, trying to find something to grab on to. "When she never took her first breath?"

"Pasha, that wasn't your fault."

"Sam—"

"Stop it. You need to put her behind you."

She sat still. "You're being unfair."

"Unfair?" Her husband of four years leaned toward her, his face set in a hard line of authority and confidence. "Pasha, our child miscarried in her third month. There was nothing you could do to stop that. It wasn't your fault, yet I've watched you slowly deteriorate from the inside ever since. You don't talk, you don't eat. I'm watching the woman I love fall apart and you claim *I'm* being unfair?" He set the notepad down. "Pasha, you are most alive when you're working on a 'Mech, when you have an entire tech crew working with machinery. I don't pretend to understand your ability with them, but I respect it."

Her eyes wide, Pasha sat in stunned silence, focusing on the man before her. She knew Sam had always been passionate. In bed. In his work. But never about her, or the things that she loved.

"If you don't return to the war, Pasha," Sam finally looked back at her, his green eyes searching her face, "then you sentence me to a hell I can't bear. Our daughter's dead, Pasha; don't kill yourself along with her."

An inner fire consumed Pasha's next words, searing them in her throat, preventing her from speaking. Then, abruptly, the murmur

of the restaurant ceased and the deafening quiet worked to pull her attention away from the man sitting across from her.

Pasha turned to her left, to the table on the other side of the family.

Her eyes widened as she placed a hand over her mouth to stifle a shout of recognition. She knew his regal bearing, his blond hair and stern Davion countenance.

Victor? Here?

Dining alone with a woman Pasha didn't recognize.

Sam reached out and touched her hand. She drew it away. "What is it?"

"What?" she looked up at him with furrowed brows.

"You're pale," he frowned. "As if you've seen a ghost."

Pasha tried to keep her gaze from flickering toward Victor and the woman, but failed. Sam looked in the couple's direction.

Sam dropped his fork. It clattered against the plate, sloshing white sauce over the screen of his noteputer. Pasha watched her husband, noted the way his gaze narrowed and darted about the room. His put his hand to his side and pulled out his wireless.

Pasha leaned toward him. Touched his hand. "What is it?"

"There aren't any guards. There's no security. Victor's in the open and I need to know why," Sam's jaw tensed. "And *how*."

She then realized then her husband's surprise had not come from seeing the Archon-Prince on Muphrid. "You *knew* he was here. That's why you were assigned to Muphrid, to the Hawkins Estate."

He glanced at her and gave a reluctant nod. "Someone has to watch him, Pasha. Of course, now that everyone's seen him, the secret's out. But he shouldn't be out in the open like this."

She glanced back again, careful not to stare. "You're right. He should be out on the front lines. Not hiding himself here, enjoying a meal as if there weren't men and women dying for his cause."

Sam clutched harder at his comm. "How can you say that? You don't know what he's been through. This is the first time he's ventured off the Estate in months. He's recuperating, same as you."

"Recuperating? From what?" She folded her arms over her chest, knowing her action was one of Sam's irritations. Though, today, he seemed to take little notice. "Certainly he's not had a miscarriage."

Sam's voice was flat. Emotionless. "Omi's death."

Damn.

Pasha looked back to Victor. She had nearly forgotten the news of Omi Kurita, so buried in her own hell as not to think of anyone else's. She narrowed her eyes at Victor, her thoughts ping-ponging through a miasma of their own, wondering quietly if his recent loss caused him nightmares, as her own emptiness had. Did the deposed Steiner-Davion feel anything—remorse, anger, sadness? Failure?

"Who is he with?"

"Isis Marik." Sam shook his head as he punched the call button and held it to his ear. "I'm sure she had something to do with him getting out, and with there being no security. *Damn it.*" He spoke softly into the wireless, not wanting to alert or alarm any of the patrons who had recognized Victor. Pasha was sure the person on the receiving end was happy for Sam's low tone as well, though his irritation and anger were no less volatile.

Pasha watched the woman, noted her chestnut brown hair and dark eyes. The woman's movements were poised, and languid. Self-assured. And her voice was controlled. Low.

Something welled up in Pasha. I have always thought of this man as my rock, someone that kept me sane through battle and loss. A man whose courage I deeply respected. And yet, here he is, dining in a restaurant with Isis Marik, when Omi lay cold and gone.

"Pasha?"

She looked back to Sam.

As if reading her thoughts, a trick he'd picked up over the years, her husband shook his head slowly. His wireless was tucked neatly away. His expression was less lined now, his tension eased, though not abated. "It's called moving on. Something you should consider."

Suddenly, the Archon-Prince pushed back from the table and stood up. "What gives you the right to use Omi against me like

this?" The timbre and volume of his voice drew the gazes of everyone in the room.

Isis said something in a low voice, her own gaze running over the audience created by her dinner companion.

Victor nodded to a few people, smiled woodenly, and sat back down. Pasha didn't know why the Prince was here on Muphrid. She couldn't understand why he was with someone else, since Omi Kurita's death was rumored to have destroyed him. The patrons remained quiet. No clink of silverware. No whisper. Only the low spoken words between the Prince and the Duchess. Not even the children spoke.

Pasha looked at Sam. He looked ready to bolt, his hand on the pistol concealed inside his suit jacket. In his many years with Department of Military Justice, she had never known him to carry a gun in public. His job rarely called for it. Until recently, it seemed. And she'd been too wrapped up in her own suffering to notice.

How much more had she missed between them?

Then, to her amazement, the Prince scooted his chair back and stood again. He addressed the group of patrons with an apology for his outburst. Then he moved with purpose and strength to the table of four and knelt down beside the small girl.

"He's good," Sam said with a slow smile on his face. "You'd never know how much pain he was in by looking at him."

She glared at Sam. "Pain? He's out in public with another woman, Sam."

But her husband was looking at something over her right shoulder. He nodded and smiled. "It's nice to see you outside of the Estate, Victor. Though we would have appreciated a heads-up."

"Sam," the Prince offered his hand. Sam stood and the two men shook warmly. "I'm afraid Isis is more than a little—" he shook his head as a slight smile pulled at the edge of his lips—"persuasive. Please don't be too angry with your people. I wasn't even aware there were no security detail until we arrived.."

Pasha watched in unabashed surprise. Her husband *knew* Victor. Personally.

Sam stood and offered Victor his chair. "Please, I must give my regards to Duchess Marik," and within seconds he was gone.

Pasha found herself sitting face to face with Victor Steiner-Davion. She not only felt every eye in the restaurant bore into her back, themselves leaning forward in their seats to listen to what the two would say, but she felt her Archon-Prince's stare as well.

"Pasha Banyon," he began and his voice was low, his gaze searching her face. "We missed your leadership, especially after all you did for us after Tikonov."

Feeling uncomfortable, and yet understanding her Prince's appreciation, she gave him a slight nod. "I—I only did what I could. So many 'Mechs were destroyed. I'm sorry we couldn't piece together more."

"No, no," Victor reached out and took her hand in his. "What you did was more than a miracle, Pasha. And we've missed your gift." He paused. "I was very sorry to hear of your tragedy."

She wanted to pull her hand away, ashamed that the Archon-Prince knew of her failure.

"Pasha," he would not release her hand, but placed his other hand over hers as well. "Look at me."

She couldn't.

Feeling his hand on her chin, she looked up into his face.

"Within us is the greatest of strengths. The sum of our experiences make us who we are." He released her chin and sighed. "Katherine has no real tragedy, no heartbreak to make her a great leader. She can't feel. She can't even regret, and that is her tragedy."

"But us—" Victor's voice caught. "We who have suffered and lost, we can take that experience, and transform it into strength." His expression shifted and he leaned forward. "Do you understand what I'm saying, Pasha?"

If she had not faced her own guilt and remorse in her mirror, if she had not stared down the face of tragedy, she might not have seen those same lines on Victor's face now. But they were there. He bore the scars of heartbreak.

And yet he continued on.

Here he was, in public, in a restaurant so the people could see him. He was changing his loss, his sadness, into strength, and giving that strength to others.

To her.

Her voice came out low, but strong. "We cannot allow those who do not feel to rule those who do."

Victor nodded. "We must fight for the future, for the benefit of those who come after. We need you, Pasha. We have a war to win."

He would not give up. Through his tragedy, when the world he loved had disappeared in the single death of his heart's strength, Victor would not give up.

Pasha felt overwhelming admiration for this man, this hero who would take back the title of Archon and lead the Inner Sphere back to peace. If Victor could do this, why couldn't she?

Pasha looked to her right, searching for Sam. He stood beside Isis, nodding as she spoke, but he was watching his wife. When she nodded to him, he smiled and smoothly turned his attention back to the daughter of Thomas Marik. The restaurant had returned to a slight semblance of normality with the clink of glass and china and the low hum of conversation.

She looked back to Victor. He appeared to be waiting for an answer. Pasha saluted him. "Senior Warrant Officer Pasha Banyon, reporting for duty when you need me, sir."

Victor gave her a somber nod of acknowledgement. He stood, but before he went, he turned back and said with great intensity, "Live for *her*. Live for *you*."

And he was gone, turning away, engaging the next table. But in his absence she didn't feel loss, but had somehow gained experience. Confidence. Her miscarriage still burned her heart, stung her eyes—but somehow she knew she'd get through it. She watched Victor a few seconds as he kept his own sadness and heartbreak inside, transmuted it into a shield to protect himself.

And his memory of Omi.

The pain never went away, only its frequency.

A hand on her shoulder caused Pasha to look away. She found herself looking into the warm and knowing face of Isis Marik. The woman smiled and squeezed Pasha's shoulder. Yet in that instant, she knew Isis had also suffered from the heart.

In a breath, the Duchess was gone, to stand just behind Victor as he spoke quietly to the young couple at the next table. Pasha noticed the way the young Duchess watched Victor, much like a teacher observing a student. Or a nurse, her patient.

Sam rejoined her and took her hand in his. "You okay?"

She nodded and looked up at him. "I think so. You?"

He nodded. "Other than losing a few years off of my life at seeing Victor out here...yeah, I'm fine."

She glanced back at their table and pulled him with her so they could sit back down.

Over her food she looked at Sam. He left his noteputer by his hand and returned her gaze. "I'm going to sign back up, Sam. I'm going to shoot for New Avalon—with Victor."

"Good. You're sure?"

She pursed her lips. "Yes. And I'll give the assignment my personal best, Sam. After all," she took up her wine and offered him a toast. "We have to end this war so that one day," she smiled, "we can try again to bring a daughter, or a son, into a safer world."

"Here, here," Sam said, and together, they toasted to the future of Victor Steiner-Davion.